Dare to Trust the Joys There Are

by JackofSomeTrades

Summary

Following *The Kiss That You Deserve*, Illya begins to extricate himself from the KGB. But when things go wrong the whole team must decide how far they will go to save each other.

(Note for Miss Fisher readers - Phryne appears as a cameo appearance in Chapter 9 and is referenced in 10-12, so this fic is TMFU focused. Also, it's set in the 1960s and characters have aged accordingly... not the usual Miss Fisher fare, I'm afraid!)

Notes

I've finally written enough of this beast to start posting. I can't promise that I'll be able to post regularly, but I have at least sketched the whole thing out, so hopefully it won't go wildly out of control and I should be able to keep chipping away at it. I may have been a little over ambitious, so please be kind!

This is definitely the final part of this not-so-little trilogy, so thank you in advance to anyone who sticks with it. I would recommend you read *Kiss* first, because some stuff may not make sense otherwise.

Comments are always welcome - please feed the writer. Also please let me know if you spot anything very obviously wrong, I'll be mortified if I spot a glaring error / inconsistency.
months down the line.

Oh - this whole fic is a heap more angsty than Kiss was. Sorry - I promise it pretty much works out in the end!
Is it so small a thing,
To have enjoy’d the sun,
To have lived light in the spring.
To have loved, to have thought, to have done,
To have advanced true friends, and beat down baffling foes.

That we must feign a bliss
Of doubtful future date,
And while we dream on this
Lose all our present state,
And relegate to worlds yet distant our repose?

But thou, because thou hear’st
Men scoff at Heaven and Fate;
Because the gods thou fear’st
Fail to make blest thy state,
Tremblest, and wilt not dare to trust the joys there are.
(Matthew Arnold)

Buenos Aires, November 1965

It’s already oppressively hot as he wakes, heartbeat slow and in time with the lazy thrum of the fan overhead. They’ve been in South America for a month, but his body – stubborn as ever – is resisting the adjustment to summer.

He keeps his eyes closed for a while longer, letting his other senses ease into the day first. It’s a luxury, this gentle drift into consciousness, and one that only ever occurs in the brief hiatus between missions – days that Solo steals for them between the interminable rounds of briefing, preparation, execution and debriefing that have made up the last couple of years.

One hand flexes on warm skin and he breathes in slow and deep as Gaby stirs slightly in his arms. He always wakes like this when he’s able to share her bed – one hand always in contact, back curled protectively around hers. She seems unfeasibly small like this. Sleep relaxes her form, robs her of her usual dancer’s poise and emphasises her vulnerability.

Still, he’s learned that she can kick like a mule in her sleep, tossing and turning in a strange dance which caught him out the first few times they tried it. He doesn’t remember waking last night though, which either suggests that she’s less restless or that his unconscious body has got better at learning the steps.

He finally opens his eyes, and the additional input of information makes him suspect it’s the latter, given that someone has kicked off all the sheets during the stifling night.

She’s still fast asleep and he’s reluctant to wake her, reluctant to do anything that disturbs his freedom to watch her like this, unguarded and himself unobserved. Freedom. It’s a word he is unused to applying to himself. It is used so widely, so imprecisely, so much can be comprehended
There is a trite Western maxim, *live each day as if it is your last*. A thing said only by the ignorant or the wilfully stupid, for he’s lived like that for years, free indeed – free of hope or expectation of a future. And now he has been bold enough to ask for a future, it comes with a heavy price, one that he must start paying well in advance of receipt, making a down payment towards it every time he must stifle the words *I love you* on his lips.

For he cannot tell the woman asleep in his arms that he loves her, cannot plan a future with her while his own is so uncertain. He lives on shifting sands, stepping lightly in the vain hope of firmer ground. The only way out lies across an abyss, beyond which exists a world he sees only dimly and does not dare to sharpen with his imagination.

His fingers have started tapping on Gaby’s hip and she shifts, dragging him back out of his mental shadows. She rolls into him, eyes opening and immediately frowning at the light. His hand slides over her as she moves, settling across her stomach, spanning the distance between the two lines of paler skin that mark the boundaries of her bikini top and briefs.

She stretches slightly, pressing into his hand, soft and yielding and his train of thought scatters entirely, brain suddenly starved of oxygen as his blood rushes elsewhere. In over a year of stolen mornings together, he has never quite adjusted to the sight of Gaby in bed, the time when he feels she is most truly his, rather than the accomplished spy he has to share with the rest of the world.

“I like these.”

Her frown deepens. “My tan lines?”

“Mhm-hmm.”

He slowly and deliberately presses a kiss to her collarbone, where the ghost of her strapline clings. She tastes of that indefinable smell he associates with her now, a smell he’d know anywhere, intensified by the thin film of sweat on her skin. He follows the pale line down towards its logical conclusion, laying kisses in lines across her breastbone as the line begins to widen.

“So you don’t like the bikini, but you do like the tan lines?” she asks acidly.

He shrugs and answers between kisses. “I like bikini well enough, just not as item for wearing in public.”

He hoists himself over her and shuffles down the bed, shins dangling precariously off the end. One day, he swears, he’ll own a bed which is long enough for him.

“And if we are not in public, I prefer you like this.”

She huffs a sigh, exasperated. “But if I sunbathe naked, how will I get the tan lines?”

He considers the idea of Gaby stretched out naked on a sunlounger by a deserted pool.

“I will manage without them,” he decides. “Perhaps just kiss all of you instead.”

She rolls her eyes, but lets him continue. He knows her body well by now, can feel it beginning to tense in anticipation as he traces concentric circles of kisses around one pale breast, starting low and spiralling in. He catches the small inhale she makes when his nose brushes her nipple on one rotation, enjoys the louder gasp as he completes his coverage.
The stuttering rhythm of her breath accompanies his pilgrimage around the other side, before he slides down yet further to start mapping her bikini bottoms.

“It would – seem a shame to – deny you the tan lines though,” she murmurs and he hums his agreement, making her squirm.

How will he give them up, these snatched moments of intimacy? But give them up he must – every successful mission brings him closer to the abyss. The spinning top is wobbling precariously, time is running out and yet he cannot drag himself from her, cannot keep himself from falling into her bed at every opportunity, carelessly living each of these days as if another will inevitably follow.

She sighs his name and his heart breaks and heals all at once, aching in a way he never thought possible without physical injury.

“Illya – please,” she gasps, and it brings him back to her for the second time that morning. It is a powerful force, desire. A few of her moans in his ears, the taste of her on his tongue, the feel of her skin under his fingers – it takes so little to lose his worry in his lust for her. Her body tenses, bucks slightly, and his fear mutates into an urgent need to be with her, to hold her as close as possible, to feel her nails scrape over his scarred shoulders and her heels press against his lower back.

She looks a little startled at the sudden change of pace and he whispers an apology in her ear as he pulls her to him. 

I need you, малютка. Now. Please.

She nods, biting her lip between her teeth as he tugs her hips into place. He is less careful than usual, but her head tips back as he presses down, breathing encouragement, fingers flexing on his arms. The last vestiges of his caution fall away, the blissful feeling of Gaby around him sweeping away the darkness.

He should have expected the knock on the door. The American has impeccable timing.

“Peril – I know you’re in there. Stop pestering Gaby. We’ll be late for breakfast.”

Gaby groans as he stills, dropping his forehead to rest on her collarbone.

“Go away, Cowboy,” he growls against her skin, and she giggles.

“Absolutely not. We discussed this last night – Buenos Aires is a fascinating city and we only have one day before we get whisked back for debrief. There’s no time to waste lying around in bed. Which is what you are doing, I presume? If I’m interrupting something, of course…”

He mutters threats of violence under his breath while Gaby takes up the cause.

“Come on, Solo. It’s not even 10 o’clock. Can’t you find a member of staff to amuse you for a while?”

“They’re all asleep.”

“All of them?”

There’s a short pause. “All the attractive ones.”

Ahah.

“Look, you have thirty seconds to make yourselves decent before I pick this lock. And frankly you should be grateful that I knocked first. One…”

He gives in and disentangles himself, padding across the room to shove a chair under the door
handle just as the lock clicks open.

“Hey!”

Gaby heaves a sigh and rolls off the bed, reaching for the little pills she’s been supplied with, no questions asked from Waverly. He hasn’t asked in too much detail, but they’ve removed the need for презервативы and he’s not about to complain about that.

Solo gives up jiggling the door handle and settles down to wait outside, placated now he knows they’re up and about. Illya rolls his eyes as he gathers up last night’s clothes. He’s brought this interruption on himself, to be fair. Ever since Geneva, when he foolishly mentioned how little he gets to see the cities he’s deployed in, Solo has taken it on himself to carve out a day or two after each mission to act as tour guide. It’s nice, he supposes – or at least it would be if the blasted Cowboy didn’t take it so damn seriously.

Half an hour later, the three of them troop out to breakfast at a carefully selected café. Both men know that if lives are not actually in danger, Gaby will not go further than half a mile without some form of caffeine in the mornings.

He wonders when they all learned each other’s habits so well. He could order for each of them without thinking; he knows that Solo will wait five minutes after finishing his coffee to light one of the slim cigarettes he loves, and will then blow the sweet, choking smoke at his face to irritate him; knows that Gaby will order something obscenely greasy but then eat only a third of it, playing with the rest until he offers to finish it for her simply to get her to stop.

They fall into their roles easily enough these days, the nicknames they have for each other so ingrained they’re second nature – far more lasting than the many, many names they’ve used temporarily on various missions. He’s comfortable in this life, in the man he is around them, and as the endorphins from his interrupted morning fade in the bright sunlight, the darkness edges back out of his subconscious. I don’t want to leave them.

For it’s not just Gaby that he loves, not just one person he’s forced to treat more lightly than he wishes. Although his feelings about Solo are far less simple to categorise. He unconsciously strokes the strap of his father’s watch. The master thief knew just how to inveigle his way past his defences. Save a man’s life a few times, return his most prized possession – who can resist that?

Of course, he remains an irritant, a jarringly foreign presence; the American charmer, imbued with all the arrogance and confidence of his nation. Master of all the things that Illya is not. And yet, he’s an outcast, another prisoner – quite literally. And he’s lonely.

That’s what really bonds the three of them together, the loneliness. They are all outcasts. None of them come with any ties, with family or friendships deeper than casual acquaintances. Solo’s network of contacts and associates don’t get to see the real man underneath the charm which keeps everyone at arm’s length. It’s because of the men, of course – something that used to bother Illya, but somehow no longer does.

He can’t remember when he first noticed it, the way Solo’s eyes drift towards the smart waiter as often as the pretty waitress, the smile he gives the barman, the unspoken communication with the bellboy. But one day, he sees Solo as a womaniser, and the next – it just makes sense. Solo likes
pretty things, all pretty things.

Of course, then he’d realised that at least half of Solo’s teasing was actually flirting. Two very awkward days had followed. Gaby had spent most of them trying not to cry with laughter.

“For heaven’s sake, Illya, mach kein Theater. You’re a very attractive man, and Solo likes to flirt with attractive people. It’s no different to how he is with me.”

She’d tipped her head to the side, considering. “Unless – do you want to do something about it?”

“What?! No – I – what?”

She’d smirked and patted him on the knee.

“Then stop fussing. If it’s bothering you, tell him to knock it off.” She shrugs, mischievous. “Personally, I rather like it.”

He’d fumed about that for the next few minutes, then thought about things properly, like the way he used to pull Natalia Nemtseva’s hair when he was six, and the strange internal glow that comes from the knowledge that he is thought worth looking at. It feels less awkward after that, and while he doesn’t examine the feeling too closely, he finds that he too would miss it, if Solo’s flirting stopped.

They’re on the move again, Solo wandering lightly down the street, an apparently carefree tourist. He plays this part superlatively – the cultured man of leisure, subject only to his own whims and desires.

Perhaps he’s drawing from experience. It occurred to him a while ago that, out of all of them, Solo is the only one to have tasted real freedom. For Gaby and himself, the relaxed grip of UNCLE is the closest they have ever been to it. But their relative freedom is still a prison sentence for Cowboy, a period of time to be endured as he buys his autonomy mission by mission from his own government.

He wonders when he stopped thinking of Solo as a criminal. The label refuses to stick to his Teflon charm. His subconscious keeps recasting his crimes as misdemeanours – pranks against the rich and powerful. He’d asked Solo once, how he felt about running missions for others, stealing what he is directed to steal.

“It’s better than prison,” he’d replied, more curtly than usual.

Typically, Solo had registered the hurt expression on Illya’s face even before he’d known he was making it.

“Particularly recently, of course. UNCLE has been a marked improvement – exotic locations, decent food, nice digs, new people – some prettier than others.”

He’d smiled, mollified. “And is only temporary.”

“Indeed – only three more years of suffering my presence, Peril, I promise.”

“What will you do, after? Go back to – Cattaraugus?” He struggles with the strange American name, still bemused that, according to Cowboy, New York State has its share of poor, rural counties.

“Christ no. Manhattan, I suppose – perhaps set myself up as a consultant for insurance firms
specialising in art collections. Work with galleries, private collectors to help keep their precious treasures on site.”

“Going straight?” he’d said wryly.

“I prefer to think of it as giving others the benefit of my wisdom, Peril. Can’t stomach the idea of getting caught and stuck with you again.”

He’d conceded the point. “Not consultant for government? Your FBI?”

“Absolutely not. No, in the future I want to work only for people who are seeking profit, not power.”

“Money is power, Cowboy.”

“Touché, Peril, but the aims of insurance firms are slightly smaller than world domination, at least.”

He tries not to dwell on the twist his heart gives as he imagines Solo at large in New York, charming his way through various meetings with businessmen in handmade suits, decorating his tasteful apartment with expensive knickknacks and beautiful people, hiding all his sadness under that smooth carapace, hard as the diamonds in the jewellery he covets.

He watches the two dark-haired figures ahead of him, laughing arm in arm as they wander past brightly coloured corrugated-iron houses. Gaby leans into Solo’s shoulder as he tells her about the local artist who created this place, Caminito, a few years earlier, transforming an abandoned street into a performance area, attracting poor artists and quickly creating a haven of colour and creativity in the barrio.

He sighs. Napoleon’s charm is too dangerous to be fraternal. It still nags at him, exactly how much Gaby is immune to their friend’s appeal. When he leaves, will the Cowboy comfort her? Will she go with him to New York and be the leading lady in his glittering cast of companions?

The thought eats away at him, even as he hopes it will come to pass. At least he will leave Gaby with someone to look out for her, someone who would die for her. If it can’t be him, then best it be someone he trusts – the only other person he trusts with her. And at least in New York, she will be far away from him, above suspicion, a threat to be briefly assessed by the chasing pack then abandoned as the hunt follows his trail away from them. How long will it be before he can see her again? When will the agency decide he and his secrets are no longer worth the resources to keep chasing him? One year? Five? Ten?

“Mein Gott Illya, stop looking as if we’re torturing you – this is meant to be fun.”

He hurries to catch up, trying to wipe the hangdog look off his face. But the afternoon sun can’t burn off his gloom. The die is cast. The intelligence they lifted from the operation against Fischer in Geneva has led them inexorably to this point, one mission away from the final piece of the jigsaw that Waverly is patiently building, the damning dossier of evidence that can be used by the UN to shut down THRUSH’s moneymen and arrest the main conspirators. The after effects, chasing down the little cells and operatives involved, will rumble on for years, but no-one expects the CIA and KGB to keep playing happy families for that.

Relations between the two countries have only worsened since Khrushchev’s fall from power just a month or so after Geneva. The party under Brezhnev and Kosygin is harsher, less lenient. It has made his predicament sharper. He is under more and more pressure to return to Moscow
permanently, THRUSH considered a low enough threat to leave to other interests, the wellspring of former Nazi intelligence run dry.

They’ve turned into a cemetery filled with ornate, picturesque tombs. Not to his taste, but somehow still heartbreaking beautiful. His partners have given up trying to get him involved in the sightseeing, so he wanders past the memorials aimlessly and alone. He should shake it off; apart from Waverly, no-one should have any knowledge of his plans. His position is as it has ever been, the loyal Party attack dog. But privately, the thought of the sort of work that he knows he will be asked to do on his return fills him with horror.

He sees now how fortunate he was to operate under the relative thaw of Khrushchev’s regime. He has known nothing else, graduating from the KGB academy in 1955, two years after the charismatic leader came to power and only a year before his Secret Speech. He has lived through a decade of relative leniency, which he had hoped signalled the end of the required initial harshness of Communism, the start of the triumph of Socialist ideals.

The naivety of this, the unbounded foolishness, was laid bare to him by the arrest of Sinyavsky and Daniel. He had thought the spectacle of show trials was behind them, this iron censorship of thought and feeling suited more to the Fascist and right wing regimes that still lingered in Spain and South America.

This underlying faith in socialism, strangely hard to break, bewilders his two avowedly liberal partners. It’s proved a substantial obstacle to Waverly’s attempts to find him an escape route. It would have been much easier were he just to defect. But though he is disillusioned, he is still proud, still Russian. He isn’t a traitor, he won’t give up his hoard of state secrets, and that poses something of a problem to the governments who might otherwise be sympathetic to his plight. There aren’t many governments willing to host a volatile ex-Soviet spy who won’t play ball.

The sun is dipping now, and even Solo’s enthusiasm for sightseeing is waning. They stop off at a local restaurant on the way back to the hotel and share a bottle or two of Malbec, Solo choosing the wine and continuing his attempt to educate Gaby and Illya in oenology.

It’s an idyllic scene, sun-drenched and carefree; Gaby teasing Solo for his solemn pronouncements on the bouquet of the wine, making up ever more ridiculous ways to describe the taste, “Notes of – petrol, I believe. Definitely higher octane, possibly 97.” Her hand slides on to his knee under the table during her fourth glass. He drinks more than he should, chasing their good mood, until on his third glass of wine he finally feels the dark cloud lift.

It’s the wine that means he doesn’t spot the warning signs as they roll back to the hotel, footsore and tipsy. Thankfully he heads to his room while Solo and Gaby roll straight through to the hotel bar, just enough in control to remember protocol, his regular call to check in.

Oleg is sitting quietly in the chair by the bed, patiently reading a file. He sobers instantly, forcing his fingers to lie still against his leg. “Товарищ.”

“Москва?”

“Да.”

He packs silently, efficiently, striving to keep his movements calm, his heartbeat acceptably slow. There is no reason to call him back now, no reason to come in person. Perhaps an emergency, an
urgent assignment? But he knows already from Oleg’s silence that it isn’t so. He feels a prickle of fear on his neck. Oleg is alone, but the sightlines from this window aren’t optimal and he senses the back up in the corridor, in the reception, in the street.

He stays silent as Oleg leads him down past the hotel bar. Solo spots him, brows quirk ing up in surprise and some alarm as he strides past. Gaby is facing away from him. He sees her start to turn at Solo’s expression, catches just the impression of her profile in his peripheral vision as he walks on by, failing to stop the twitching in his little finger.

At the airport, his fears are confirmed as Oleg nods him towards a private plane. He walks calmly up the plane steps towards the dark entrance, into the mouth of the beast. As he ducks inside, the last of the evening sunshine cuts off, and it’s as if he’s already behind bars. He feels himself slipping away as the rage bubbles up, flowing into the deep-carved channels of his soul. It’s a reservoir of hate he can never quite drain, which at times of high stress surges and pushes at his boundaries. Boundaries that are infinitely weaker without Gaby and Cowboy, that the agency deliberately kept paper thin. The plane door closes and he can feel the chill of winter before they’ve even taken off.

Chapter End Notes

презервативы = condoms, apparently.

Mach kein Theater = don’t fuss (idiomatic)

Товарищ = comrade
Москва = Moscow
Да = yes

The cemetery they end up in is La Recoleta. Caminito is in La Boca, and today is a tourist hotspot, so somewhat different to the small artist’s community of the 1960s.

Khrushchev became the leader of the USSR after Stalin died. The Secret Speech that Illya references was made in 1956 and distanced the regime from the extremes of Stalin’s purges. He led the USSR for over 10 years until he was forced out by Brezhnev in 1964. Khrushchev’s time in power was marked by a relative loosening of censorship. He abolished special tribunals by security agencies and held no major political trials. Which isn’t to say that he wasn’t harsh. An early assessment stated, “Political terror as an everyday method of government was replaced under Khrushchev by administrative means of repression.” So they didn’t send you to a gulag, but they could make you lose your job.

The rise of Brezhnev marked a partial return to the harsher repression of the Stalin era – although the purges thankfully were not revived. The arrest of the writers Sinyavsky and Daniel in September 1965 is considered the start of the increased repression. Sinyavsky and Daniel had published books critical of the Soviet Union in the West, using pseudonyms. They were put through a show trial in February 1966. By the mid-1970s, there were potentially as many as 10,000 political and religious prisoners across the Soviet Union, living in appalling conditions and suffering from malnutrition.
London, February 1966

He trails her into the elevator, too tired to argue. Gaby is practically vibrating with anger, so it’s easier to simply fall in line. As they are whisked up fourteen floors, she unwinds her scarf and tucks away her sunglasses, exposing the black eye and split lip. His ribs are aching – he would really rather have headed to the UNCLE apartment to clean up first, but there’s no stopping his partner when she’s in this sort of mood.

The elevator dings, and Gaby stalks out. It’s their first visit to this new headquarters – the whole building is new, a gleaming steel and concrete tower on the north bank of the Thames, just half a mile from Westminster. In his opinion, it’s far too obvious a location for an espionage agency base, but it’s not his decision and – as he’s already noted – he’s far too tired to argue.

“Why hello Miss Teller… Miss Teller? Miss Teller! He’s on a call!”

Gaby marches past Waverly’s secretary, leaving him to pacify the woman.

“Barbara – how lovely to see you again. And what a fetching scarf that is. We’re terribly sorry to disturb Mr Waverly but Gaby and I have some high priority information, won’t take a minute…” He tails off as he is sucked into Waverly’s office in Gaby’s wake.

Waverly is indeed on the phone, but it takes more than two unannounced visitors to rattle him. He raises a single, unhurried eyebrow, apologises gracefully in Russian to the receiver, and hangs up with an air of a headmaster giving his two naughtiest students his full attention.

Gabywhips out the dossier and slaps it down on the table.

“Here it is, sir,” she spits, “Here’s the damned final jigsaw piece. All the top brass of THRUSH and their links to the money and the arms wrapped up in a neat little bow for you. Don’t say we don’t deliver. At a fair cost, I might add – this shiner looked a hell of a lot worse two days ago. And as for Solo – they beat him black and bloody blue.”
He smiles weakly; it hasn’t been the most enjoyable week or two. It hasn’t been the most enjoyable month or two, come to that.

Waverly smiles gently. “How dedicated of you to come straight here. I admit we weren’t expecting you for an hour or so.”

Gaby ignores the subtle rebuke. “Don’t even get me started on Agent Carnarvon.”

“Oh yes, I was wondering what had happened to dear Freddie,” Waverly murmurs, completely unabashed.

“We left him in Cairo, and good riddance. Of all the lumbering, cackhanded, idiotic incompetents you could have stuck us with—“

Gaby is being unfair, really. Carnarvon is a perfectly adequate agent. He’s just not used to their fairly idiosyncratic operating methods. Even if their mission had gone perfectly to plan (which is something of a rarity anyway) he’s too short, too dark and too British to satisfy Gaby’s requirements for a third team member.

“– you should be damn grateful that Solo is able to think on his feet because otherwise the whole mission would have been for nothing. Now, we’ve delivered THRUSH for you, like you asked,” Gaby leans over Waverly’s desk, perilously close to insubordination, “So, where the hell is Illya?”

Waverly leans back in his chair, polishes his spectacles, gestures for them both to take a seat. Solo sinks into the armchair gratefully, if gingerly. Gaby just glowers.

“Illya is currently in detention in Siberia, at a facility for political prisoners near Tayshet. He is serving time at the pleasure of his former employers, suspected of treason.”

Waverly speaks slowly and clearly, as if he were doing no more than updating them on the weather forecast. He can’t tell if it’s some stiff upper lip quirk of the British aristocracy or if he’s trying to put on a brave face for his remaining agents.

Gaby goes white. “He’s in a gulag?”

“I’m terribly sorry I wasn’t able to tell you before. Initially his recall seemed as above board as his other visits behind the Curtain, and it’s been the devil’s own work to find out the exact state of play once it transpired that wasn’t the case.”

“How – how long have you known?” she asks, finally accepting the chair in front of the desk. “How long has he been there? What is going to happen to him? Why – why haven’t you done anything?!”

He realises he is gripping the arms of his chair so hard they’re creaking. Gaby is still able to interrogate her boss, which is good, because he’s finding it strangely difficult to breathe.

They’d suspected something was off, but with the KGB, it’s often hard to tell. They’d been losing interest in THRUSH rapidly as the renegade group was slowly taken apart by the UNCLE initiative. It was possible, if irritating, that they’d called Illya back to do a more urgent piece of dirty work while the rest of the team finished the job, and he’d wondered if they were going to ever let him come back. But Waverly’s news is worse than anything he’d feared. It wasn’t hard to guess that Peril was planning to end his employment with his agency after the events of the last year or so – after Gaby. He’d just assumed that Waverly and Illya would figure it out themselves, bring him in on a need-to-know basis. They’d been complacent. Waverly always seemed so calm, so competent. He still seems calm, the bastard.
“We’ve been trying to pinpoint our friend’s location for a while, and I’m afraid your rather determined interruption just now meant I had to break off discussions with a source.”

Gaby is on her feet within a second, pointing at the phone.

“Call him back. **Now.**”

Back outside the office, Barbara fusses around them both, sympathising with Gaby’s facial injuries and fetching tea and coffee until Gaby finally snaps at her. It’s the closest he’s ever seen her to tears as she methodically reduces Barbara’s kindly offered handkerchief to fragments in her hands.

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell us. He must have known for a month, perhaps since the end of last year. What – what was Waverly thinking?”

He shrugs. It’s less of a surprise to him. Gaby’s never had to experience how callous and brutal their line of work can be. Waverly’s avuncular style isn’t entirely a façade, but neither is he about to sacrifice a highly important mission, the culmination of years of work, because of concerns over the wellbeing of a useful but not irreplaceable asset.

“He’ll be ok, Gaby. Don’t worry too much. Peril’s tough as nails, and far too valuable to throw away entirely. They’re just punishing him – they’re not trying to kill him.”

It’s an unconvincing performance. She knows as well as he does that the KGB would far prefer Illya to be dead than a defector. To be brutally honest, he’s surprised that Peril’s still alive, that they went to the trouble of putting him in a camp. It’s a good sign – presumably they think he has intelligence on the CIA and the Security Service from his time in UNCLE, and having tried to beat it out of him are waiting to try again after leaving him to rot for a few months in Siberia.

Unless – unless they’ve finally decided to test whether Fischer’s nutty plans to create a superman worked on their agent? It’s a possibility, although an unlikely one. It’s been over a year since the Geneva mission, a year in which Illya has been beaten up plenty of times and has shown no signs of recovering any faster than you’d usually expect a stubborn, hard, infuriating Russian to do.

They sit in uncomfortable silence for a while longer, his left hand covering her right now that the handkerchief is so many wisps of cotton. She seems to have disappeared inside herself, but the defiance in her eyes is undimmed. If he were a betting man, he’d say she was making a plan. That suits him – he’s too tired to think straight, but he can at least work out who in his network could be of use, what favours he could call in.

He puts it down to the fatigue, but it’s only after Barbara waves them back in to Waverly’s office that it occurs to him; he hasn’t once considered not going to try and rescue Peril. That man is going to be the death of him.

She waits for the two of them to digest her proposal.

“You realise that this will be the end of UNCLE,” Waverly sighs.

“Isn’t it already?” asks Solo, acerbically.

Waverly grimaces, “Well, I had hoped…”
She isn’t even going to countenance that. “Without Illya, there is no UNCLE. For goodness sake – it’s not like the KGB are going to let you have another agent after this.”

Waverly smiles, “You’re right, my dear – but UNCLE is more than just our little operation. And that’s not quite what I meant. You and Solo are risking everything. If you are caught, both the British and American governments will claim to have no knowledge of you. They will give the Soviets carte blanche to do whatever they want with you, which will almost certainly involve dying brutally in Siberia. This is a near suicide mission that you’re describing. And even if you do succeed – well at the very least, Solo will be recalled to Washington and possibly sent back to prison, and you – well…”

“You can send me back to the Stasi. I don’t care.”

“We wouldn’t send you back, agent, but yes – the KGB could very well demand your extradition. And while we wouldn’t just agree to it, we would need to offer them something valuable.”

Waverly pinches the bridge of his nose, wincing. “There’s more than just Illya’s life at stake here. We can’t risk a further ramp up in hostilities.” He looks older than she remembers; old and weary.

Solo doesn’t just look weary. He’s so tired his skin is grey, and pain has etched lines in his normally smooth features. Through the haze of her fear and panic for Illya, she remembers that she’s not just playing with her own life. He meets her eye grimly and shrugs slightly, wincing as he does it.

“Prison wasn’t so bad,” he sighs gamely. “To be quite honest, it might be a nice rest after a stint in Siberia with Teller.”

She almost sags in relief. It’s not that she’s not scared – Christ, the thought of getting caught or handed over to either the KGB or the Stasi is terrifying – but she can’t possibly leave Illya behind. She won’t leave Illya behind. They’ll figure it out, the three of them. They always do.

Waverly sits back in his chair. “Well, I always liked the idea of early retirement,” he mutters. “Very well. Give me a couple of days to find out more.”

Tayshet, Siberia

Illya opens his eyes, closes them, and opens them again. The darkness is unrelenting. He lifts his hand and waves it in front of his face. His eyes don’t even register the movement. They’ve gone to a lot of trouble to make this cell as dark as possible. Dark and cold and silent. He knows from when they dragged him in that he’s on the western edge of the compound, but not so near the forest that he could hear the trees rustle or the wolves howl.

They’d beaten him in the snow before they went inside, spots of red staining the white ground. He must have passed out as they intended, waking in pitch darkness. He sits up gingerly then stands, slowly straightening up until his head bumps against the ceiling. He tries to lie down, head against the wall, slowly straightening his legs until his boots hit the far side. Next, he feels along the wall, finds the corner, tries the other direction and then diagonally. There is no way he can stand or lie flat in this place. Дерьмо.

More exploration tells him the walls are corrugated iron, which explains the cold, although there
must be some insulation for it to be this quiet. There’s a pail in the corner and a no-nonsense door with a grate for food and a hole to pass out the pail when he’s filled it. He recognises well-designed solitary confinement when he sees it. Or touches it, in this case. For most men, a day or two of this would drive them crazy. They know for him it will take longer. He’s been in similar confinements before, during training. How long will they leave him here for, to make it worth it? A week, maybe two? Not that he’ll ever know, exactly. It’s impossible to keep track of time in these places.

He thinks back, and calculates that it’s been about three months since he was escorted home from Buenos Aires. He must have spent at least six weeks in the first facility outside Moscow.

They start with torture the day after the plane lands. They do not question or accuse, which surprises him, but it transpires that this is more experimentation than torture – a few scientists double-checking that his dose of whatever Fischer gave him in Geneva didn’t give him any accelerated healing capabilities. They check this very thoroughly.

He learns a few things as well. The treatment tells him that they aren’t after urgent information and that they aren’t interested in keeping his goodwill. He is no longer considered a viable agent.

He expects them to shoot him at the end of their tests, but they eventually patch him up and leave him in a cell to lick his wounds.

After three days, they lead him to a simple interrogation room. Shackled to a plain desk, he waits until they bring in a photo and silently lay it down before him. It’s a picture of him and Gaby in Rio. They’re not touching, but it’s still a careless moment. His face is in shadow, looking away, hers tipped up towards him with an unmistakeable look in her eyes. Intense, steady, completely unprofessional. It takes his breath away, and he knows it’s why they are showing it to him – to confirm the other half of the attachment. He has never been good at concealing his emotions and there’s no way his face cannot change as he encounters, even here in this place, such a clear indication of her feelings.

He realises now how foolish he’s been, to think he could keep her safe by so perfunctorily pretending detachment. He should have left the team months ago, kept himself far away from her, insulating her properly from harm. He growls, and the smirk on his interlocutor’s face smacks of triumph. There is nothing he can say now to protect her, nothing he can do, and the red mist descends as he wrenches himself against his restraints.

This little piece of bear-baiting is only the start. Waverly’s careful investigations on his behalf haven’t quite been careful enough. They don’t know everything, but the KGB are experts at finding one small crack and forcing it into a fissure. They know enough to damn him.

Oleg visits once, observes quietly, even seems sad at the turn things have taken. He has no idea why. The man has been his handler for almost eight years and he’s never exhibited any signs of concern for his wellbeing before.

They get little out of him. He point-blank refuses to implicate Waverly, and he can truthfully tell them that Solo and Gaby are unconnected. It helps that they’re unimaginative interrogators. He helped write their playbook – you would think they would at least try some new ways to manoeuvre him into a corner. He visualises each of their strategies on a different coloured chessboard and tries to sacrifice as few of Waverly’s pawns as he can.

Eventually they move him to a more secure facility and spend another month trying to extract useful intelligence about the American and the British operations. He really should just give them what he knows – it’s nothing special – but they’ve pissed him off, so he makes them work for it. It’s
worth the extra scar tissue to see their frustration. And while it’s only delaying the inevitable, there’s a small part of him that, against all odds, hopes for a miracle, an opportunity, an opening. He’s surprisingly resilient – perhaps love really does conquer all.

Back in the cell, a miracle seems far away. He’s still alive, but about 2,500 miles further east. Further away from possible rescue and without regular interrogation opportunities – interviews he was using to confirm that Gaby is still safe. They dumped him in the camp a couple of weeks ago, along with about a hundred other political prisoners and enemies of the state.

He’s not quite sure why he’s still alive. Does someone, somewhere, think he might be useful in the future? It’s the most likely scenario – he’s useless as an agent, but possibly useful as bait or leverage, worth leaving alive in case they think of a new way to wring intelligence out of him. Maybe they just aren’t done punishing him yet, decided a quick bullet in the head was too clean an ending for his betrayal.

Technically, he’s in solitary for fighting. The camp rumour mill started churning the moment he arrived, and it didn’t take long for the inmates to transpose the faces of the agents that arrested them on to him. The first attempt was laughable – three of them cornering him outside the noisome lavatories with a flimsy shiv. He almost feels sorry for them, and goes as far as to drag their unconscious forms into the shithouse so they won’t freeze before they wake up.

The second attempt was more co-ordinated – ten men this time, better knives. It had become a bit of a brawl before the guards had waded in. The third attack was stealthy and tragic. They’d tried to sneak up on him in his sleep, and his instinctive reaction had resulted in one of them on the ground with his shiv in his neck.

That is why he is here. Men died in Tayshet from exposure or illness. Fighting is frowned upon – the last thing the guards want is for prisoners to practice ambushing people with homemade shivs. The men here are meant to be weak, exhausted and obedient. He clenches his hand into a fist. He’s done being obedient.

London

“How do you even know he’ll be in solitary confinement?” Solo points out, reasonably enough. “It seems a pretty big risk.”

“This whole operation is a big risk,” she points out, equally reasonably.

“Our sources suggest he’s been in solitary for four weeks of the six that he’s been there, so far.” Waverly smiles, wryly. “He keeps getting put in there for fighting.”

“Sounds like Peril.”

“Quite, Solo. Also bear in mind that a former KGB agent in a gulag full of political prisoners is not going to be particularly popular.”

“Fine, fine – so we can assume he’ll be in solitary. Ok then,” Solo turns back to the schematic in front of him, “so we get through the entrance during maintenance on the fancy new sensor and camera system and cut through the compound – a small matter of me managing to get through four locked doors in five minutes. Then I need to get Teller into the crawlspace in the older housing
blocks so she can stick a spanner in the searchlight mechanism to stop it swinging across the yard.”

“If this is the right model, I can adjust it so it swings part way, but not quite as far as the isolated solitary block,” she interjects. “Shouldn’t be so obvious, it’ll buy us more time.”

Solo nods. “Meanwhile I’ve somehow made it into the guards’ room in the western block and quietly knocked out the guy covering the cameras that cover that section of the yard before he raises an alarm – are we sure they only have one guy in there, by the way? Then I disable those cameras for good measure and rejoin Teller at the solitary confinement block. She’ll cut her way into Illya’s cell from the storeroom behind it. Then it’s just a simple scuttle across the dark yard, out of sight of the guard patrol, through the fence and into the woods where Teller will have stashed the car, and a day’s undetected drive down the back roads to Irkutsk.”

There’s a long pause, then Solo shrugs.

“Easy-peasy. My concern – well, one of my many, many concerns – is the timing of all this.” He turns to Waverly. “For example, the surveillance camera maintenance happens at a random time every week, you said.”

“Unfortunately so.”

“Bollocks.”

“Miss Teller?”

“Oh come on. Nothing decided by humans is actually random. I bet you anything that they’ve got a list of five to ten supposedly random times to change over the tape and they cycle through them. Solo, how are you doing with getting your contact into the camp? Once he’s on site, he can find out pretty quickly what the deal is.”

“Yuri? Oh that’s easy. Kuznetsov has already faked the correspondence both ways, and everyone’s bought it. Yuri was told by the commander at his current camp to prepare for a move in two weeks. I even managed to get him a promotion to senior guard supervisor, or whatever the Russian for that is. That’s the great thing about Soviet bureaucracy – everyone’s too scared to call each other out, so you can convince both sides of things quite easily.”

“Do you think he could do something to make the maintenance period last a little longer? Damage the new tape somehow? That gives us more wiggle room.”

Solo considers. “Perhaps – but we’re asking him for quite a lot now, what with switching the watch and everything. He owes me a lot, but his wife will kill me if he gets caught.”

“Well it’s all on you then, Fingers.”

“I hate that nickname, Teller.”

“I know, Süßer. I’ll have to think of a more Russian one when we’re on the train. On that note, how long does the route from East Berlin to Irkutsk take? Are you sure we can’t fly?”

“A plane would be too risky – taking a few trains confuses any suspicious eyes about your eventual end point. Plus flying is more expensive, which seriously reduces the number of plausible cover stories we can use.” Solo pauses. “Actually, Waverly, how are we paying for all of this? This is a lot of expense to hide on the official UNCLE accounts.”

“I have a slush fund. Of sorts.” Waverly concedes. “Which I have been saving for a rainy day. Or a
These meetings go on, refining and picking holes and rethinking and adjusting. It’s driving her slowly insane, but at least they keep her mind on the firmly practical. She’s almost herself during the planning sessions. Solo and Waverly help to keep the tone light and airy, as if they are planning just another hare-brained UNCLE escapade. It’s the evenings that she dreads. Solo keeps her company, mostly, but he’s no cheerier. They spend their time staring at the untouched alcohol in the featureless UNCLE flat in Chelsea, scared into sobriety. After the first couple of days, Solo puts an embargo on discussing the rescue plan after 10pm. It doesn’t help her sleep much better.

She doesn’t dream of Illya. Mostly she dreams of her father and Walter; vivid, unnatural dreams which jolt unpleasantly between extreme realism and utter fantasy. She wakes disoriented and guilt-ridden – for wishing she weren’t dreaming of them but of Illya, for not dreaming of Illya.

What wouldn’t she give to see Illya again in a dream, to feel his presence again. But her subconscious doesn’t let her off that easily. Only her conscious mind can conjure him, and her guilt and her fear infect her memories. All the best memories – him in her bed, in her arms, his rare laughter and his expressive eyes – are strangely thin and washed out.

Her visions of Illya’s state now, however, are in full and horrifying technicolour. The more she learns about his prison, the richer the picture of his condition gets in her imagination. And so this is how she spends her evenings – staring at the whisky bottle and the fire in the grate, visualising Illya’s life, mentally lacerating herself for not helping him sooner, for focusing on the blasted UNCLE mission, for blithely assuming he would be ok, that he would come back.

If she could look Solo in the eye, she’d see him doing the same thing. But neither one reaches out to comfort the other. That would be too easy. They’re both guilty, both at fault, and for that they both burn in their own separate hells.

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Tayshet

The fourth time he is put in the dark cell, the final flicker of hope goes out. If there’s any consolation to be found, it’s that this fresh torture is unplanned, completely unforeseen by the bastards in charge of his punishment. This isn’t a KGB special, it’s solely the work of the man whose grave he has just finished carving out of the frozen ground.

After a few days at the camp, some of the faces of his fellow inmates begin to ring faint bells. A few are regular troublemakers that he was sent to lean on back in the day, now fallen foul of the less tolerant men in charge. One, however, feels older. His face nags at him for weeks, a grey little man, probably still in his fifties but withered by the hardships he’s endured. He’s sure the man knows him as well – he feels him watching from across the yard. But unlike the others, he doesn’t sense fear from the little man. He senses sorrow.

It’s during his third stint in solitary that the face finally clicks, and the man is lucky that he’s not taken back to general population for another few days. If he’d been given any less time to cool down, he’d have killed the man the moment he was let out.

The man – Cherezov – used to work with his father. One of the ones who had started visiting his mother, afterwards. He’d used to pat him on the shoulder as he left, the patronising arsehole.
After this revelation, Illya starts watching the little man back, enjoying his every cough and wince in the cold spring air. How the mighty have fallen, the bastard now in the same position as his father was. He’s still tempted to go and make those coughs and winces a little more pronounced, but the air of complete dejection that follows the man around somehow sucks any joy out of the idea.

It takes a week for Cherezov to finally take his life in his hands and approach him in the yard.

“Kuryakin.”

“Cherezov.”

“So you do remember me?”

He jerks his head, briefly. “You had better have a good reason for coming over.”

The little bureaucrat squeaks and scuttles backwards a little.

“Yes, I – can, can we talk?”

He raises an eyebrow and makes the universal gesture for ‘what does it look like we’re doing’.

“I meant somewhere quieter. It’s – it’s about your father.”

“Say it here, say it fast and then get lost.”

The little man quavers for a moment.

“I wanted to apologise. For your father.”

His brow furrows. “Apologise for yourself. You obviously made the same mistakes – you’ve ended up in the same place.”

It’s Cherezov’s turn to look confused. “You still think he was guilty?”

It’s six words. Six words that turn his world upside down. It’s not like he never wondered before – he’s seen enough scapegoats to believe his government capable of it. But he’s seen the dossier himself – the KGB offered to show it to him.

His train of thought derails. They offered. It was just before graduation, as a sign of their commitment to him, their forgiveness for his family’s transgressions. To tie him to them. They had taken him aside, given him a dossier, told him to see for himself.

“Explain.”

“Your father – he had enemies. He criticised the wrong people. And he wrote this letter – it was foolish.”

He remembers the letter – it hadn’t explicitly mentioned the embezzlement, but it had clearly referred to his father’s guilt for some ongoing transgression, one that caused him to feel that he had betrayed his family, his party and his moral code for his own benefit. There had been no signs of forced confession. It was written clearly and consistently, almost a confession to a friend. It hadn’t been addressed to anyone. Along with some opaque financial statements, it had been enough to destroy him.

“The letter was in his own handwriting. I studied it myself.”
“Indeed. It was perfect, undoctored, damning. But out of context.” The little man’s face crumples. “He wasn’t embezzling money. He – he was having an affair.”

The air leaves his lungs. He can recall the exact wording of the letter, the shapes of the words on the page. He runs through it in his mind – there is nothing to contradict either the original accusation or Cherezov’s alternative.

“You lie.”

“It’s true.”

“Then why didn’t he prove it, bring forward the nanny or whoever he was screwing? It’s hardly like having a mistress was unusual. Without the letter, the financial statements are weak – they don’t directly match the embezzled fund withdrawals.”

The little man shakes his head, swallows painfully, eyes darting from side to side.

“Because – because…” he pauses and his eyes close, face scrunching in anticipation of a reaction. “He was having an affair with a man. With – with me.”

The blow doesn’t come. Externally, Illya is rooted to the spot. Internally, his world is collapsing. Great towers of firmly held conviction falling apart around him, castles cracking and melting away under one great wave that washes around him and drags away his foundations.

“You’re lying.”

Cherezov shakes his head. His whole body is shaking, eyes screwed shut.

“The letter – it was for you. For when you were older. He wanted to explain – he thought it was a sickness, a weakness. The others – they came to me, they knew. I don’t know how they knew. They – they made me tell them about the letter, about everything. Then they made me steal it.”

“You knew,” he growls. “You could – could have saved him. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was scared! And it wouldn’t have saved him. What we were, we would both have been condemned. And the financial records – they had already set him up as the scapegoat.”

“Who were they? Tell me.”

Cherezov blinks, gaping at him a little. And then he says four names.

They’re men he knows – mid-ranking Party officials. Oleg directly reports into one of them. They all climbed the greasy pole by pushing others down it; they all make appearances in his little stash of secrets. The blood pounding in his ears is making it difficult to think straight, red and black spots bleeding into the edges of his vision. The man is babbling at him, and he struggles to focus on the words.

“You – you don’t mind? About your father? What he was? What we – I loved him, you know. I – I’m sorry. I hated myself for it. I came to see you, after. You and your mother. I did what I could for you, gave her money, tried to protect her. I – she – she never knew, you know. She died thinking your father was normal – she never knew what aberrations we were.”

He has the man by the throat before he’s aware of it. It takes the guards around thirty seconds to get to him, time for the man’s face to go purple. He’s weaker now than he used to be, his arm beginning to shake uncontrollably, so it only takes one good hit on the back for him to drop his
prey.

The blows keep coming, forcing him to the ground. The cold seeps into his clothes, draining the red mist. His breathing slows and he begins to feel the pain blossoming in his arms and back as the adrenalin fades from his bloodstream. It’s this slight sliver of control that saves his life. His arms are protecting his neck and head, but under his forearm, he has just enough peripheral vision to see a knot of prisoners creeping in. They are really very close before he sees the dull shine of sharpened stone.

He twists and rolls at the last moment, not quite fast enough to avoid the spurt of blood from the guard’s neck from spraying across his arm. He looks up to see the other two guards frozen in astonishment, and it dawns on him that he wasn’t the intended victim of the attack. One of the men crouches and fumbles for the keys on the belt of the fallen guard while his friends close in around them all. There’s a shout from the guard tower on the other side of the yard, then all hell breaks loose.

As escape plots go, it’s ill-conceived at best. If they wanted a diversion, they should have created one of their own – one that would drag more guards to the yard while they attack an isolated knot nearer the perimeter. But these men are writers and activists, not trained agents, and they’re desperate. They see a chance and they take it.

These thoughts drift through his head as he’s dragged to the ground in the mêlée. He avoids some wild stabs and fists as the mob set upon the two remaining guards. He’s separated from Cherezov by more inmates, some of whom probably weren’t part of the plan anyway but are just so crazed that they can’t resist a chance at revenge.

The first shots ring out clear and sharp in the cold air.

Men start dropping all around him and he realises that the guards don’t care about restoring order, they’re making a point. Anyone who was anywhere near the attack is going to get shot and he and Cherezov were at ground sodding zero.

His legs act before his brain, collapsing to the floor to make him a smaller target. He flattens himself into the snow, inching his way towards another man’s body. He glances up at the guard tower, watches the line of guns begin to make another strafing pass across the yard. They swing towards him, his legs like lead, and he realises he’s going to die.

And then a shadow falls over him. Cherezov steps between him and the guns, a strangely beatific smile on his face as he spreads his arms, making himself a larger target. He stumbles as two rifle shots thud into his back. A third rips straight through him and grazes Illya’s cheek. He drops to a knee at the fourth shot. The fifth shoots harmlessly over everyone’s heads.

There’s a shout and the gunfire stops. He’s dimly aware of guards pouring into the yard. One of them grabs his arm and hauls him to his feet as Cherezov collapses into the snow, eyes glassy. He stumbles backwards, being tugged away from the scene.

He’s in shock, the events of the past five minutes robbing him of reason, because he thinks he hears the man dragging him away mutter something about Solo. He can’t stop staring at Cherezov’s body, lying spread-eagled in the red-spattered snow, and he trips several times over more bodies as he staggers out of the yard.

Chapter End Notes
The building I describe for the UNCLE headquarters in London is not the famous MI6 building, as seen in Skyfall – that’s on the south bank and is much newer. However, the high-rise I describe really does exist - Millbank, just across the river. It opened in 1966 and is now a listed property. Personally, I think it’s a bit of an eyesore, but the building’s opening date and the proximity to today’s MI6 HQ were too tempting for me to resist making it the UNCLE HQ. Mainly so that I could make a really nerdy in-joke about the fact the MI6 HQ is a tourist sight and explain it to you in the notes! (The current HQ of MI5, (formally the Security Service), is also only a few hundred metres away in Thames House, but this only opened in 1995. Prior to this, personnel were based across numerous locations.)

Süße = sweetie, a generic term of endearment.

There were two gulags near Tayshet in the early 20th century – prisoners were used to help build parts of the Baikal–Amur Mainline railway between the 1930s and 1950s, and Tayshet was the administrative centre of operations. But I’ve no idea if there was a base used in the 1960s for Russian political prisoners, or anything else about it.

Дерьмо = shit
Finding

Chapter Notes

Managed to get another chapter done and dusted - it's a little hasty and I'm not 100% satisfied with it, so please excuse any poor grammar, syntax and spelling.

I won't be able to update for another couple of weeks, however, because I'm off to Glastonbury this weekend, which doesn't exactly leave much time for writing!

One small warning, there is a scene that involves someone briefly being choked. It's in the middle of the chapter, if you want to prepare yourself for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

East Berlin, March 1966

The weather is suitably bleak as they cross the checkpoint, slate-grey skies to match the drab streets. She represses an involuntary shiver as the guard checks their impeccable paperwork and waves them through.

It’s strange to be back. She had never expected to return here, imagined it only as a nightmare, a worst-case scenario. And yet here she is, willingly walking back into the lion’s den for the sake of the man she was running from when she left. She savours the irony as she strolls through streets she hasn’t seen for almost three years in the company of the man that snatched her away.

Nothing seems to have changed; even the goods in the shops seem to be the same. She’s the only thing that is different. The woman that drove out of Walter’s garage that night is long gone. This place is no longer home.

When she’d started working for Waverly, he had advised her to slowly drift away from her existing friends. There hadn’t been many. The fear of being monitored, the lack of free speech, not knowing who might inform on you – the atmosphere in East Berlin hadn’t been conducive to forming close attachments. Still, the thought of Walter’s old crew in the garage brings a belated pang of nostalgia that slightly eases the tension in her limbs. Solo must feel her grip on his arm relax a little, because he sends her a reassuring smile.

They deliberately don’t pass anywhere near the garage, or any of her old haunts. They can’t risk her face being recognised. Their passes say they’re visiting an associate of Solo’s bland businessman cover and so they dutifully head to the appropriate restaurant and go through a complicated charade of waiting for him, asking to use the telephone, and then ‘discovering’ they’ve gone to the wrong establishment.

Cover duly reinforced, Solo efficiently loses them in the city, finally ducking in to a small, nondescript clothes shop. In the changing room, she comes face to face with her alter ego. To try and keep their expedition as quiet as possible, two people need to come back across the border to West Berlin tomorrow morning. It’s a hell of a risk for the couple they’re exchanging papers with, but no more than crashing a car into a side street and jumping off the roof had been.

She quickly changes clothes with the girl in silence. It’s safer for all concerned if they know as
little about each other as possible. She doesn’t even know if the dark-haired man taking Solo’s place is this woman’s partner or a complete stranger. She’s inclined to think the latter, given the body language between them as they leave for the hotel. Not that it matters. They look the part and they’re desperate to leave – one awkward night in a shared bed and a good performance at the border isn’t a high price for a new life, not when so many others have died in the attempt.

Her new clothes are rough, well-washed and itch. Apparently three years is long enough to get used to silk and Chanel. One of the shoes rubs as she and Solo set off to the train station. It doesn’t matter, really. Once they’re across the border with Poland, Solo has a contact who will give them new identities and a new wardrobe, then drive them to a completely new railway line.

She’ll become two more people before they finally end up on the Trans-Siberian railway, when her Russian will get put to the test. She can’t be an East German then – too obvious a marker. It’s about five days between Moscow and Irkutsk, five days that she spends in their sleeper carriage as much as possible, letting Solo do most of the talking.

What she does say is good practice for Irkutsk. It’s a surprisingly beautiful city, with a little collection of nineteenth century churches and museums in the town centre, offsetting the ugly industrial complexes on its outskirts. Solo has, predictably, done his research and insists that they spend a few hours appreciating the sights – a pretty eighteenth-century monastery and a wedding-cake of a cathedral, now in some disrepair and used as a bakery.

“Illya would have enjoyed this,” she whispers as they stare at it. He tenses slightly; she guesses he intended this little jaunt to be a pleasant interlude from the danger they’re in.

“It’s better he’s not with us yet,” he snarks. “He wouldn’t have let me lead the tour. He is the resident Soviet architect, after all.”

It’s the only time they’ve spoken directly of him since they passed the checkpoint in Berlin, and her heart seizes slightly. She pushes the emotion down before it overwhelms her in public.

“Я думаю, на сегодня уже достаточно игр,” she mutters, and turns away from the pretty domes and spires.

There was snow clinging to the ground when they arrived, but she can feel that spring is in the air. Over the week they spend there, the air gets noticeably warmer, and as they trudge back to their apartment, it can’t help but lift her spirits a little. To minimise suspicion, they divide and conquer their errands – Solo heading off to pick up the final communication from his camp contact, Yuri, while she’s sent into town to buy winter boots and clothes for all three of them. She tries not to let her voice shake as she gives Illya’s shoe size.

They go together to pick out a car, something nondescript but sturdy. This takes them three days – cars are as hard to come by in Siberia as they were in East Berlin, and stealing something that fits the bill and won’t be immediately missed is the hardest hurdle they’ve had to overcome so far. It ends up with Solo breaking them in to a garage and helping her carry out three hours of repairs on a rusting M-407, thankfully one of the variants with four-wheel drive.

They leave the car in the garage until the night before the mission, easing it out at dawn and only starting the engine when they’re actually on the road. She’s spent the last two weeks in a strange state of suspended reality, so focused on the mission that she’s been able to block out most of the panic for Illya. It’s only as she drives the long, empty road up to Tayshet that the tension begins to build, so that as the afternoon stretches on, her shoulders are aching from the strain of holding herself still.
“He’s definitely in solitary?” she asks as they get close.

“Yuri left me a note in town yesterday. I’d brace yourself – he’s been in there for almost a month now.”

“A month! Why?”

“Apparently he started a bit of a riot in the yard – got into an altercation with another prisoner, which turned into a mini revolt. Three guards and fourteen prisoners died.”

“Jesus.”

“Yuri managed to drag him out of there before one of the guards decided to just shoot him anyway. He’s been there ever since.”

Her fingers flex on the steering wheel, finally beginning to understand what Illya feels when he goes into one of his rages. She concentrates on her breathing for the rest of the drive, but it’s still not entirely even when Solo directs her to turn off the road into the forest.

They walk about half a kilometre to get to the edge of the camp, then skirt round the front. It’s still a few hours till darkness, but Solo chivvies her on, clearly looking for something amongst the trees. If Yuri has left some sort of marker, then it’s invisible to her. Eventually he stops and starts digging at a tree which, to her, seems completely identical to the one next to it.

“Solo, what are you doing?”

“Finding out exactly what time the maintenance will happen tonight.”

“Yuri didn’t say in his note?”

“He doesn’t get told until the day, but he said he’d slip out and leave something for us – ah, here it is.”

He pulls out a package wrapped in a rag and hands it to her. She unwraps it with chilly fingers. Inside is Illya’s father’s watch.

“Looks like those lifting skills I taught Yuri back in the day came in handy. He swapped this out for a replica about a week ago.”

It’s unwound, the hands stopped at 9 hours, 38 minutes and 30 seconds.

“Looks like we’ve got a few hours to wait,” Solo grins, smug as ever at his plans working out.

Her mind flicks back to Geneva, sitting in a car outside the THRUSH facility with Yael, slowly realising that Solo and Illya were in trouble. She’s been on many missions since then, but none of them have involved rescuing Illya. She remembers Waverly telling them to go in, her pretence at being calm and confident, Yael quiet and composed next to her. She takes a deep breath in and tries to find the same composure, but her heart is racing and her thoughts are scattered.

They flick back further, to a hotel room in Rome, as she prepares to betray two men who trust her. One of them lays a hand on her leg, finds that she’s shaking.

“You’re trembling.”

“That’s because I’m scared.”
Illya is close by, the closest she’s been to him for months. She takes a steadying breath, and finds the calm she needs. It’s going to be ok, Illya.

A sound brings him to his senses. He’s used to the dark now, knows his way around the cell as easily as if it were bathed in light. It’s the silence that he can’t adjust to. He knows that this time, he’s being kept in here for as long as it takes for him to break. He’s a troublemaker – too important to get rid of, too rebellious to keep quiet. Instead, they’re waiting for him to go slowly mad, to crumble under the weight of the silence and the dark and the guilt and the memories.

It’s working. He doesn’t know what to believe any more, what to think. He has no proof that Cherezov’s story is true, nothing to tell him who his father really was. He has felt disappointed and betrayed by his father for so long, through all his childish rages when he couldn’t understand why his life had been taken away from him, why he no longer had a father, why he had to be ashamed. His right hand rubs slowly at his bare left wrist. He finds himself doing it more and more, a new reflexive habit in the absence of the watch.

He had missed him so painfully, underneath it all. Why else would he cling to that watch? He had treasured it even while he steadily hated the man, through teenage years spent wishing he would die in that gulag for ruining them all, for slowly and surely killing his mother every time she passed out from vodka in the mean little kitchen after entertaining the generals at night.

She had been a beauty, his mother. His father had married relatively late, and had always joked that he was simply waiting for her. He had thought he must be like his father – he had never felt anything approaching love for a woman until he had been bewitched by Gaby in a matter of hours. But perhaps his father had never loved his mother, not in that way. He had sacrificed her wellbeing and ultimately her life for an affair with a man he could never have.

And yet, can he condemn his father for loving? The stern, remote man he has created from his memories – this is a fiction, a partial view. Perhaps he loved just as fiercely as his son does, a sudden burning passion that sweeps all before it. Is it unfair of him to ask a man to deny his own heart? He should never have acted on his feelings for Gaby, his weakness has undoubtedly put her in danger. But he couldn’t help himself. He is as guilty as his father – he is like his father, after all. If Cherezov’s confession is true. If.

Why did the man have to die? To tell him all this and then sacrifice himself? Why would he do that? Did he see the man he loved in his son’s face? Did it drive him to confess? Or did Cherezov do it to torture him? To leave him twisting himself in knots in the darkness, slowly driving himself mad from the guilt and the uncertainty and the grief?

He sleeps fitfully, shivering in the cold as winter clings to the land outside. When he does, he dreams often of his father, memories of his childhood that he thought were lost long ago. Memories of a big man laughing, swinging him around in a sunny garden, holding him up as he splashed and swallowed half of the lake when learning to swim.

So he dreams of his father, and then he sees him die, wasting away from frostbite and disease and malnutrition as everyone does here. He sees him die knowing that his lover betrayed him, that his son believes him a criminal, that his wife is forced to prostitute herself to keep them in food. At
least he dies before he finds out what a disappointment his son is – unstable, violent, a killer, broken and remoulded and trained to despise those childhood memories that now bubble up, unbidden, unwanted in the crushing silence.

Sometimes, his father’s face morphs into Cherezov’s sacrifice. His father, dressed in rough inmate’s clothes, stepping in front of those guns, smiling serenely at him as he accepts his fate. Even worse is when Cherezov arrives in those childhood memories, displacing his father in a confusing mess of wrongness that has him waking in a feverish sweat.

It’s a relief when he occasionally dreams of Gaby. Gaby and Solo, laughing at him as they wander down the street. He hurries to keep up with them, stretches out to touch Gaby’s hair as she flips it behind her in the sun. He thinks he may have broken a finger some days ago, slamming it into the wall as he reaches for her in his sleep. The silence begins to play tricks on you after a while. He thinks he can hear her voice more and more often. Her laugh echoing off the walls. Solo’s dry insults murmuring just out of his hearing range.

It’s the same now. He could swear that he hears their voices, bickering as usual. This could be it – perhaps this is the last ledge of sanity, crumbling beneath him and sending him into the abyss.

He can even hear what they’re saying now, these voices. Words that make no sense, that don’t map to any of his memories of them.

“Stop moving the torch, Teller.”

“I’m trying to show you where to look. I said to put the green wire on that terminal. Hang on – let me finish screwing on the nozzle and then I’ll do it. Look, here we go.”

“Watch what you’re doing with that thing!”

“It’s a blowtorch, Solo. I thought it went without saying not to stand in front of me.”

“It’s not like there’s much room in here.”

“It was your idea to go through the storeroom rather than just opening the cell door.”

“Fine, fine – get on with it, we’re short on time.”

His hand is on the wall as he frowns. He is sure he can hear them, voices muffled as if they are indeed on the other side of this wall. There’s a strange spitting noise as well, and under his fingers, the corrugated iron feels as if it’s heating up. At first he dismisses it as another hallucination, a reaction to the icy cold of the unheated room, but the heat continues to build until he has to wrench his hand back as the wall begins to glow.

He stares in astonishment as a neat square forms, smoke curling out the edges until finally the square falls in, spewing out smoking insulation material that he would stamp out with his thin boots if he weren’t transfixed by these developments. A bright light shines in, hurting his eyes so that he falls back against the opposite wall, almost knocking over the noisome pail in the corner.

“Illya? Oh my god, Illya.”

He still can’t see, the light still too much for him, but that voice – is he dreaming?

“Illya, it’s Gaby – come on, we have to go. Christ, you’re filthy.”

He just stares up at the light, all his senses overloaded, until a glove grabs his hand and he whips it
away on instinct, waiting for the hit.

“Slow down, Gaby. Illya, can you stand?”

It sounds like Cowboy, but then again, not. The voice is calm, concerned. Things that the Cowboy isn’t.

“Solo?” His voice rasps from disuse.

“Atta boy, Peril. Gaby, turn the torch around so he can see us.”

The light recedes, blessedly, illuminating the two figures in his cell. Until he sees their faces, he still doesn’t believe it’s real, but there they are, more vivid than any of his dreams. He hesitates, just for a moment more, until Gaby snaps.

“For God’s sake Illya, it’s us. We know you! You have a weakness for those posh French macarons and you think that Solo wears his waistcoats too tight –“

“Hey!”

“– and you have an unexpected ticklish patch behind your right ear.”

“Oh God. No, Gaby, I didn’t need to know that.”

And it’s them. So he pulls himself to his feet, ducking his head from habit and she’s hugging him, recoiling slightly at the smell, and Solo’s hand is at his back and a few minutes later he’s climbing into a dusty storeroom, being hustled down an empty corridor and out into the snow.

The cold hits him like an iron bar. He thought the cell was cold but this is biting, somehow worse than he ever remembers it. He shivers and coughs and suddenly a small hand is over his mouth, muffling it.

“Quiet, Illya. There are dogs.”

The dogs. Yes, he knows about the dogs. So he swallows the coughs that keep coming as they stumble across the snow, Solo dragging a sack behind them to cover their prints.

There’s something very wrong. He can feel it from the moment they get Illya out of the cell. Physically, Peril looks dreadful. Their giant has become gaunt and stooped. His face is almost obscured behind a matted mess of beard and hair, and under his rough, tattered clothes, he’s sporting a few new scars. But these are all superficial issues. They’ve got warmer clothes and better boots in the car, and if all goes to plan, in twenty-four hours he’ll be on a private plane with access to hot water and a razor.

No, it’s not his physical condition that’s worrying him. Something in Illya is broken. It’s the confusion in his eyes, the disorientation as he stares at them comprehendingly and barely returns Gaby’s fierce hug.

He watches the figure huddled in the backseat foot well. (A basic security measure, lord knows what they’ll do if they’re actually stopped. They can’t possibly ask their friend to get in the trunk after what he’s been through.)
Illya is curled into a ball, staring blankly at the back of Gaby’s seat. He’d expected to have trouble getting him into the car, into any sort of confined space, but Illya has barely registered the change of scene, hasn’t looked at the stars, hasn’t wanted to stop to breathe the fresh night air. He’s barely reacted to anything.

Gaby feels it too. Her fingers are gripping the steering wheel far too tightly for such a skilled driver. They should be elated – the mission has so far gone better than they could possibly have hoped for, but he can’t get rid of the nagging feeling that they may have been too late to save him.

An hour passes before Gaby turns off the back road into a lay-by to rest. It’s another 300 miles to Irkutsk, another six hours of driving, but it’s not yet midnight and they have until dawn to get to the airfield. They have time for a short stop to try to reach their friend inside the huddled wretch in the back seat.

“Illya, put these on. I’m afraid you can’t wash yet, but at least these clothes are warm and clean and the boots are good.”

Gaby’s talking to him as she would a frightened child, trying to reassure him, or possibly herself. He reaches into his inside pocket to retrieve the watch, polishing the face, winding it and setting it to the right time as she helps Peril into his new outfit. He hears a slight gasp as she gets his shirt off, and forces himself not to look. The Peril he knows, the man hopefully still in there, would hate to be pitied.

“You know, Peril, this is the second time I’ve had to retrieve this damn watch for you. You really need to be more careful with your possessions.”

His light tone falls flat as Illya stares blankly at the watch being held out to him. It hangs there in his hand for a long, painful moment before Peril’s fingers finally twitch and reach out to take it. Thank goodness he didn’t throw it at him as he had in Rome. That time, it had been in Peril’s possession for roughly two seconds before it was being fastened around his wrist. Now, the Russian just stares at it in his palm, running one thumb over the face and the leather strap a few times before slowly putting it in a pocket.

He meets Gaby’s eyes, sees his concern reflected back at him.

“Good, good,” he says carefully. “You can thank me later. Best be getting on. Illya, try and get some sleep. Gaby – do you want me to take the next shift or are you ok to drive?”

By the time they get to the airfield outside Irkutsk, his concern is deepening to near panic. Illya finally fell asleep in the back after another hundred miles, giving him and Gaby time to have a whispered conversation.

“Solo, how long do you think he’ll be like this? What did they do to him?”

“I’m not sure. On both questions. Perhaps after some sleep he’ll come back to himself a little more.”

“But his reaction to his watch – I thought for sure that would help. I don’t know what to do.”

“Patience, little chop shop girl.”

She’d winced at his unthinking use of one of Peril’s names for her. He’s doing a terrible job of reassuring her, but he’s as lost as she is. He’d given Illya the two things in the world that he thought would mentally bring him out of the gulag – Gaby and the watch – and so far, they’ve barely got a reaction at all.
Then Illya had started to dream. Thankfully they’d still been on a deserted back road, because the first scream caused him to swing the car across the road in alarm.

“Shit. Teller – shut him up. Even in the middle of Siberia, that’s going to draw some attention.”

She’d looked at him, eyes wide in fear for a moment before shaking herself out of it and climbing into the back.

“Ilya? Ilya – wake up. It’s Gaby, it’s me. Alles ist ok, you’re ok.”

He’d pulled the car over, slowing carefully on the slightly icy roads and turned around just in time to see her hesitantly put her hand out to touch Illya’s rigid shoulder.

“Wait – Gaby, don’t…”

Two seconds later, he’d been in the back with them, hauling Illya off her. Peril had his hands fastened around her throat, pressing her down into the seat.

“Peril! Peril, wake up – it’s Gaby, that’s Gaby. You’re not in the gulag. You’re hurting her.”

Even in his weakened state, the man had been terrifying. Solo was forcefully reminded of the reports of Kuryakin’s early psychotic rages. They’d tamed that at least, the KGB, channelling it into a resource to be drawn from when necessary. The Illya they knew might be a menace to furniture, but he’d never felt like that violence might be aimed at them.

It feels like an age, but in reality, Illya releases her in a matter of seconds. Gaby sits up coughing, and Illya pulls his hands back as if they’d been scalded before folding himself into as small a ball as he can.

“It’s ok, Ilya. It’s ok – I know you didn’t mean it,” she rasps, pushing for sainthood.

He’d slowly shifted back into the driver’s seat and put his hands back on the steering wheel, watching them shake as the adrenalin spike washes through his bloodstream. Gaby had crawled back through a few moments later, collapsing in the front seat.

“Are you hurt?”

“Just a shock and a bruise,” she mutters, voice already recovering. “Just drive.”

That had been the last thing anyone had said until they’d got to the airfield, and now, as dawn begins to break, there’s an uneasy tension as they cut through the fence and creep up to Hangar Four.

“So, Solo,” Gaby whispers, voice still tight and a little hoarse. “You never explained exactly how this plane escape was going to work.”

“Simple. The pilot works for the official Party plane fleet. He was tapped up about a year ago by the CIA. He feeds them with intelligence about the movements of Party grandees. But he’s getting restless – I’ve cut a deal with him to fly us out of here in return for safe passage to the USA.”

“Solo, you can’t promise him that!”

“I know. But we were in desperate straits. I’m hoping that Peril here is a sufficient prize for Sanders to play ball.”

Illya stirs. “America?” he rumbles.
“Not for you, Peril – sorry. They don’t trust you, I’m afraid. We’re heading to Canada first until we figure out exactly what the fallout from our little escapade means for us all.”

There’s no further reaction, and the awkward silence resumes as, right on schedule, a plane appears out of the twilight. All three of them tense slightly in anticipation as the plane lands smoothly and taxis towards them. But instead of rolling through to the hangars, it comes to a halt outside the small terminal building.

All his instincts start jangling.

“Solo – what’s he doing?”

“I don’t know. Wait here.”

He creeps closer, to the edge of the first hangar, and discreetly tries to wave at the cockpit. The plane door opens, rolling the steps down. This is crazy – it’s way out in the open. There’s no way the three of them can get to the plane from there. Something’s wrong.

At that moment, three cars roll into the parking lot on the other side of the terminal building. Someone rushes out to open the gate, allowing the cars to ease directly up to the plane. A pile of fur coated, richly dressed men climb out and head up the steps of the waiting plane. They’re weaving a little, a waft of vodka and cigar smoke faintly reaching his nose. The last one gestures expansively at his friend as they totter up the steps.

“Fantastic luck, really – the plane was already en route. Somehow the flight plan got confused and the plane came a day early. The pilot had already taken off when Silayev decided to cut the conference short. A happy coincidence. We can be back in Moscow tonight.”

The plane door slowly pulls up and the fuelling truck rolls on to the tarmac. He beats a careful retreat, mind whirring through the options. This had been the basket they’d put all their eggs in. Without the plane, they’re left in the middle of the largest landmass on Earth with a rusting car, a few rubles and an unstable fugitive.

The three of them creep back to the car after he explains their predicament, he and Gaby utterly dejected. They sit in the snow in silence for a while, until they hear the sound of the plane engines powering their ticket to safety into the air.

“Scheiße!” Gaby spits and kicks out at a pile of snow. “God-fucking-damn fucking plane.”

It startles Peril into the first proper reaction he’s had to them all night, sitting up and narrowing his eyes at her as she continues to swear a blue streak across both languages. She’s oblivious to his scrutiny as she vents all her frustration and fear at the frozen ground.

“малютка.”

The word brings her up short, head whipping round in amazement. Peril slowly shakes his head at her, the hint of a smile on his lips.

“Oh of course, Illya – it would be my temper that finally gets through to you. Christ, you’re infuriating!”

Peril shrugs very slightly then drops his eyes, coughs, and hunches back into himself again. Gaby watches him for a moment before nodding to herself and marching round to rummage for something in the car.
She’s back a few moments later, opening a map and spreading it on the hood of the car.

“Ok then. So we’re here – just west of Irkutsk. We can’t go north or west – that just takes us further into Siberia. If we go east, we have to get round Lake Baikal, and there’s nothing but more Siberia after that anyway. That leaves us with south. We’re about 200 miles from the Mongolian border – I say we head for that.”

“Mongolia?” He frowns, trying to get his tired brain to follow her reasoning. "It’s a Soviet satellite state. We get caught there, they’ll just hand us back to the Russians."

“So we don’t get caught. It’s sparsely populated, and their military and security presence is nothing like as developed as in the USSR. And, crucially, the only non-Soviet affiliated state in this whole damn region is China."

“Another communist state.”

“Yes, but one which is becoming increasingly hostile to the USSR.”

“Gaby – hostile to the USSR does not mean friendly to the West! And it’s another 500 miles further south. Across the damn Gobi Desert, no less! Where the hell are we going to get the petrol to get this damn rust bucket that far?"

He pauses as an awful thought hits him. “No, this car isn’t even going to get us over the border to Mongolia. They’ve probably been searching for us near Tayshet for hours already. It’s hardly a leap of genius to realise we’d have headed for Irkutsk – this place is going to be crawling with security forces within hours. Roadblocks, random searches, the whole shooting match. And we can’t take the train either. It’d be too easy for them to stop and search.”

“So we walk,” she shoots back.

“Walk? To China?”

Her chin juts out. “If we have to.”

He gestures wildly. “With what supplies? What equipment? What certainty that we’ll even find help when we get there?”

Her expression changes slightly.

“Gaby? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Waverly may have given me an emergency help button.”

“He what?!”

“He said not to use it if I’m in the USSR, and even then it would take a few days for help to arrive.”

“Now you’re telling me? What kind of help? What kind of emergency button?”

She huffs a sigh at him. “Firstly, there was no point telling you until I knew we might need it and even then not until there was a chance we could get out of Russia to use it. Secondly, I have no idea – he didn’t say. And thirdly – “

She pulls a thin chain out of her jacket. Illya’s old engagement ring is on the end of it. She prises the pearl off, and tips out a crystal oscillator.
“I’ve got all the parts for a radio transceiver on me in various forms. It’ll take me half an hour to have it up and running.”

He’s speechless. “Hang on – when we changed in East Berlin – that was a complete change of clothes. We walked out of there without any luggage. Do I want to know where you managed to put all this stuff?”

She shrugs, smiling slightly. “Least comfortable underwear I’ve ever worn.”

He can’t help but laugh. Even Illya snorts softly.

She rolls her eyes at them. “Oh for goodness sake. Some of it went in the girl’s skirt pocket as well. Now, can we please get going? I’d like to drive this car as far south as we can before we have to abandon it.”

It is 800 kilometres from Irkutsk to Ulanbaatar. He can’t remember learning this, but there it is, an undeniable fact lodged in his brain. Perhaps they plan to walk that far; he’s struggling to keep track of the situation. He knows they walked through the night, through the cold that sank into his bones, leeched the strength from his muscles so that his legs tremble with every step. The only reason he keeps going is that he cannot bear to tell Gaby that she’s going to have to leave him.

The cough is getting worse. He tries to suppress it, but it tears out of him anyway. Although it’s barely dawn, the cold is magically gone, replaced instead with a warming fire that radiates from within. His grip on current events, already shaky, appears to be getting worse. His heartbeat shouldn’t be this fast at this walking pace, and at this altitude, breathing should be easier.

He felt better a few hours ago. They had got quite a long way in the car. He’d sat in the back and stared at the changing landscape, his eyes slowly adjusting to daylight while Solo and Gaby manoeuvred them south. The cough had slowly got worse, but when they finally abandoned the vehicle, it hadn’t occurred to him that his difficulty thinking straight had any cause other than his long weeks without human contact.

It’s certainly part of his struggle. After so long with his demons, the experience of real people, particularly Solo and Gaby, had been overwhelming. His memories of the night of the escape are hazy, as if everything was happening behind thick glass. He hadn’t been able to process it, all the emotions – he’d barely processed the fact that he could see his own hands, the world outside. So he’d shut down, expecting every moment to wake up back in his cell, for it to be a hallucination.

He remembers Cowboy giving him the watch and now feels for it instinctively in his jacket pocket, in case that was a hallucination too. He can feel the shape of it under his fingers and it grounds him, helps him stumble on. He can’t wear it, not now. He hasn’t earned the right. All those years of hoarding it, feeling he was a good son by treasuring the memory of his father, despite the taint of shame. All the times he’d had to clean blood off the face and strap as he went about his work. Each time a sacrilege to his father’s memory.

“Извините отец,” he mutters to himself.

It had taken a dream to convince him that his rescue was real. He’d been back in the yard, watching his father get shot, getting attacked by prisoners, slowly falling to the snow, choking on his blood, and then he’d been yanked back to reality. He’d opened his eyes to find his hands round
Gaby’s neck.

He stumbles over a stone and falls to his knees. Solo is by his side a moment later, helping him up.

“Come on, Peril, just a few more miles. Then you can rest. I promise.”

He can’t move, just stays there, wheezing into the ground until Solo has to take a different tack.

“Up, Kuryakin. Move!”

His body responds to the order, dragging himself up and walking on, his head on fire. *He’d hurt her. Choked her.* He was broken, he wasn’t safe. Why were they still helping him? They should leave him. He’s no use to anyone – a killer, a murderer, a lunatic. It’s getting harder and harder to breathe. He stumbles again and falls, pressing his head to the ground to find relief.

The coughs overwhelm him, choking the air out of him until he’s dizzy and gags with the effort. His heart feels like it will burst from the pain. Distantly, he hears the others talking over his head.

“Shit. Shit! When did he get so bad?”

“He’s been hiding it, the stubborn arschloch. Goddammit, Illya.”

“He’s burning up. The fever must have spiked.”

“Can we carry him?”

“We can try – we need to get at least five more miles today. The border’s still too close. We need to get out of these hills and find somewhere with shelter for us to hide.”

“Will he be ok once we find a place to rest?”

“I don’t know, Gaby. It looks like pneumonia. If it’s bad, he’ll need antibiotics. Time for Waverly’s miracle, I think.”

That’s the last thing he hears before his mind finally, blessedly, goes blank.

Chapter End Notes

Я думаю, на сегодня уже достаточно игр = I think we’ve done enough playing for today.
Извините отец = I’m sorry, father.

The infrastructural, geographical and political references here should all be correct. I’m trying to get a balance between exposition in the dialogue and just assuming you all know about Sino-Soviet Cold War relations, Soviet railway infrastructure and Siberian geography. Which would be monumentally unfair, because I certainly didn’t until I researched this plot. (It’s stupidly ambitious, why am I doing this again?)

In brief – the Trans-Siberian railway does run from Moscow down to Irkutsk (and further), the Trans-Mongolian railway runs from Irkutsk down to Ulanbaatar (capital of Mongolia) and all the distances are basically correct too. There is even a small airport to the north-west of Irkutsk.
Mongolia really was a satellite state of the USSR, as was Kazakhstan, their other geographic possibility in the region. China began to pull away from the Soviet Union during the 1950s, a slow split that eventually sparked into small clashes along the borders. Wikipedia actually does a good précis of it (search for the Sino-Soviet split)

Theoretically, Gaby could construct a small radio and telegraph to transmit Morse code with a few key pieces of equipment. I’ve no idea how long range it would be (probably not very far), but frankly, if the film has Illya hiding a bug in a tiny ring, I’m going to allow Gaby to construct a radio to send long-range, unencrypted Morse code.

The Way Back is an account of Polish gulag prisoners who escaped and walked 4,000 miles to India, so the whole walking-to-China-from-Siberia idea is not as crazy as it sounds, by the by.
Breathing

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow update - it's been a hectic few weeks and my muse decided to take a vacation, which didn't help matters. But we got there in the end...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mongolia

It’s the hardest thing she’s ever done, but between them, she and Solo drag Illya’s unresponsive form seven more miles until darkness starts to fall. Keeping to the valleys that wind their way through the hilly landscape, they follow the river in the hope of finding some shelter. Finally, she makes out some strange, circular tents about a mile away. The path seems like it’s taunting them, always another few turns further until they finally stumble the final few yards in the gathering dusk.

Leaving Solo and Illya in a ditch, she quickly checks the camp; a small tent and two large ones, all completely deserted. The small tent appears to be a storeroom for supplies, animal feed and equipment. Of the large tents, one is clearly made for human habitation, with space for a fire, rich rugs lining the walls and a little shrine of carved and painted figures. She wanders around it absently, picking up clues where she can. The ribs of the tent are wood, and in the fading light, she can see the intricate paint work on the struts of the roof. The ashes in the central fireplace are cold to the touch, the metal pot above it empty, but there’s a large wooden thermos in the corner, mostly full and so heavy she can barely lift it. It’s indisputably a home; warm and inviting. Wrenching herself away, she goes to check the second tent, an enormous holding pen, full of hay and blessedly empty of livestock. She reports back to the ditch.

“Can we risk it, Solo?”

“We’re going to have to,” he wheezes, levering Illya out of the furrow. “The owner will probably be back soon, but we need shelter. I’m guessing it’s far enough into spring for him to leave his herd out on the hills, so hopefully he won’t notice three fugitives in his barn for the night.”

It’s an enormous risk, but they have few other options. With the last of their strength, they haul Illya into the tent. Solo deposits him in the hay and collapses next to him, sucking in air and massaging his cramping legs. She drops down next to Solo, the soles of her feet burning, arms on fire.

They lie like that for a couple of minutes before Solo heaves himself up and heads out to make a cold compress from a strip of his shirt and some water from the nearby stream.

She puts a hand to Illya’s forehead. He still has a high fever, his breathing shallow and irregular. There’s a thin sheen of sweat on his pale forehead, and his eyes are shifting under his eyelids, betraying the torment behind the outward unresponsiveness. She steels herself to keep checking him over, limbs and torso, in case there’s an injury they’ve missed from hauling him through the landscape. She rests her hand over his heart for a while, the fast, stuttering rhythm so different to the slow and steady beat that she’s used to. She breathes deeply, trying to regulate his heartbeat through sheer force of will to match her own.
Solo returns and takes her place with the compress. Slightly reluctantly, she switches to setting up the radio and transmitter. Her brain is foggy with fatigue, making her fingers clumsy. It takes her three tries to get it properly wired.

The transmission is unencrypted, completely open to anyone listening on that frequency, so she has to hope that whoever is listening is benevolent. She heads outside to send her desperate message, the little presses of her finger translating her panic into cold, emotionless dots and dashes – *SOS, pneu, medic.* She ends with their coordinates and repeats the whole message again, just in case.

As she packs up to go inside, there’s a movement in the corner of her vision. A man is watching her from the far side of the camp, his hands on the bridle of a small horse. In her tiredness and desperation, she hadn’t noticed him return, and she curses herself for this inattentiveness.

She freezes, even as her tired brain screams at her for this irrationality. The man makes no move either, perhaps surprised into immobility as well. They regard each other for a few minutes in a strange stalemate before Solo comes to check on her and walks into their staring match. He recovers much more quickly, and smoothly starts appealing to the man in Russian. There’s a long pause after his little speech, until the man finally nods quickly and moves across to the dark entrance of the other tent. She lets out a breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding.

A few minutes later, the man trots out again with a thermos of strange milky, salty tea, a little lantern and some of his rough woollen blankets, and she offers up a small prayer of thanks to whatever deity might be listening.

Over the next two days, Batbayar proves to be their saviour, a devout Buddhist who appears refreshingly unconcerned about the provenance of his strange guests. They explain they are on a long journey and one of their companions is sick, and this is the only explanation he requires in return for his hospitality.

His small herd of sheep and goats roam the local hills alongside the rest of the animals in his community. Most of the other herders pitch their round tents – *gers,* Batbayar calls them – close to each other, but Batbayar is something of a loner and prefers to have his evenings to himself. A few turns further and they would have run into a much larger encampment. A few weeks earlier, and they would have found nothing but grass. She gathers that this is the start of a sweeping transhumance, as nomads across the region move their herds from winter encampments on the plains up to higher pastures.

Clearly the pull of the exotic foreigners manages to overcome Batbayar’s natural introversion, because before long the three of them are established in his tent, Illya propped up on rugs in the corner. Solo has tried to explain the danger their host is putting himself in, managing to communicate with some Russian, hand gestures and a quickly expanding Mongolian vocabulary. It’s all in vain – Batbayar remains entirely dismissive of the risk. She adds it to the list of things for her to worry about, hoping desperately that they’re not about to destroy the life of a decent man.

But it seems that he knows what he’s doing. The gossip network of the nomads is more than a match for the local security forces. On the third day, Batbayar hurries into the *ger* and explains in his halting Russian that a patrol of men is searching all the nomadic tents in the area. Within half an hour, he hustles the three of them out to the woods to hide until the men are gone.

Through all of this, Illya is rarely lucid. He drifts in and out of feverish sleep, muttering nonsense phrases and names she does not know. She resends their coordinates and her message every two hours, trying to hold on to hope that Waverly has the power to send a miracle. By the time they heave Illya back into the tent after their sojourn in the woods, her hope is beginning to fade. Illya’s pulse is weaker now and without proper medication she doesn’t see how he can recover.
Are you about to lose another person, Gaby? What will you do if Illya dies? Will you bury him here, in these nameless Mongolian hills?

The treacherous little voice in her head is getting louder. She knows it’s her safety net, dipping her toe into the waters of grief before the gathering tidal wave breaks over her. But the thought of leaving him here and walking away after everything she and Solo have been through to get him back – it’s still too much for her to contemplate.

Night starts to fall and she lies down next to Illya, slipping her hand into his clammy one. Her other hand drifts to her throat and she swallows gently, experimentally. It’s still sore from Illya’s attack, although not exactly painful. Just a reminder, sometimes, when she swallows or speaks without thinking. Without a mirror, there’s no way for her to see how bruised it is. It’s easier this way. She tries not to imagine his finger marks on her, purple thumbprints pressing down on her windpipe.

She’s run through a series of excuses over the past three days – blaming the gulag, the fever, or the other prisoners; trying to find an acceptable reason for his actions, trying to rationalise why she isn’t angry or upset. The brutal truth is that she can’t seem to care. She’s too tired and drained to cope with what she should and shouldn’t be feeling. She recalls the incident with a strange detachment, inspects her memories of the fear and panic from behind a mental glass wall. Perhaps if they make it out of here it will finally hit her, how close her lover was to choking her.

But it wasn’t Illya. Whoever that was in the car wasn’t the man she fell in love with. A stranger had looked down at her in the dark, hands on her throat. His eyes had been glassy and empty, seeing only a threat, not a friend. Even when he’d woken up and pulled away, it hadn’t really been the man she knows. Perhaps that Illya, her Illya is gone forever, lying buried under the snow back in Siberia. Or perhaps – perhaps he will come back to her, if he would only wake up.

“Please, Illya, just stay with us a little longer. I promise, help is coming.”

Sweat has made spikes of his eyelashes, his cheekbones standing out starkly in his thin face, the blond fuzz of his straggly beard hiding his jawline. Desperation rises in her chest, regret for all the times she held herself aloof, pushed him away and hid her feelings.

“I love you, Illya,” she whispers, finally letting herself say it when it’s all too late. “I love you. Please, stay with me.”

His eyelids flutter slightly in the light of the little lantern, evidence that he’s still fighting somewhere in there. She presses a kiss to each one and it feels like she’s kissing him goodbye.

She’s about to blow out the lantern when she hears voices outside the ger.

“Solo – Solo – wake up! There’s someone here. We need to hide Illya.”

Her friend wakes with a start, confused, and she thinks for a second that she’s hearing things. But then – yes, she can hear Batbayar’s voice outside. He’s using Russian, and her fear goes up a notch. Solo hears it too. She can feel him tense in the shadows and the two of them quietly but frantically start covering Illya with blankets. They’re almost done, about to smother the light and crouch for attack, when she hears the visitor’s voice for the first time.

Solo stills in the same moment. It’s a familiar voice, the accented Russian hard to forget, but a voice she never expected to hear in the wilds of Outer Mongolia. She wavers in indecision until she sees Solo relax his stance just as Batbayar ushers in a small, dark girl with an enormous rucksack.

Solo is, as always, the first to react.
“Why Miss Dayan, you never cease to amaze.”

Yael smiles ruefully as she drops her pack to the ground.

“Nice to see you too, Solo.”

The relief breaks over her like a wave. She moves without thinking, throwing her arms around the Israeli spy and clinging to her like a lifebuoy in a stormy sea.

Yael’s arms slowly come up to embrace her lightly.

“Hello Gaby,” she says, voice carefully steady and somewhat muffled by Gaby’s hair. “Waverly said you needed some help?”

She nods into the Israeli’s shoulder, not trusting herself to speak.

Yael lets her stay like that for a few seconds longer before gently pushing her off and unbuckling the rucksack with quiet efficiency.

“Where is he?” she asks Solo.

He nods to the pile of rugs, and the three of them start uncovering Illya, Yael picking up the lantern and examining his sorry state.

“Did you bring antibiotics?” Solo asks, and Gaby’s heart catches in her chest for a second.

Yael’s lip curls. “Of course I did. Why else would I parachute into shetach nof patuach and wander around all day looking for you idiots?”

It’s less than five minutes later that she’s hooked up a crude intravenous drip, unveiling delicate syringes and packets of fluid from soft, sterile packing cases. Gaby does nothing to help, just sits by Illya and watches the precious penicillin slowly make its way into his veins.

She’s aware, dimly, of Solo and Yael having a conversation in the background as they unpack her rucksack and try to explain various items to Batbayar, but her eyes don’t leave Illya’s face as she searches for signs of the drugs taking effect. Finally, eventually, she thinks she feels his heart rate slow a little and his breathing ease. Solo comes across and gently peels her away from him.

“Sleep, Gaby. He’ll be ok without you watching him.”

She lies down but keeps staring at him anyway, right up until the point where her eyes close despite her best efforts, and she surrenders herself to sleep.

She isn’t sure how long she sleeps. It’s a deep slumber of complete exhaustion, and when she finally comes to groggily, sun is streaming through the ger entrance and on to her face. She lies there for a moment, breathing in and out, relishing the feeling of being rested for the first time in weeks. There are voices in the background, and she slowly tunes into the sound of bickering.

“Stop hovering, Florence, I know how to change a drip. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Please stop calling me that, Solo. And – no, not like that. For goodness sake, some rudimentary
field medical experience from twenty years ago does not make you an expert.”

She smiles. Illya is in good hands. She finally opens her eyes and rolls across to check on him. The difference is startling. The waxy whiteness is fading from his cheeks and his chest is finally rising and falling more evenly.

“Ah, Sleeping Beauty has arisen!” Solo teases.

“Chutspenik,” Yael mutters under her breath at him. She beckons Gaby over for a status update.

“Illya is doing well, in spite of Agent Solo’s insistence on helping. He’s had two courses of intensive antibiotics. I’m administering the final course now, and after that it is simply a matter of rehydration. In addition, he is suffering from mild malnutrition, so once he wakes, I will start him on vitamin supplements and some high-calorie meal supplements to speed his recovery.”

“When will he wake up?”

Yael shrugs. “Before the gulag – a day at most. Now, I’m not so sure. Perhaps tomorrow.”

Solo’s face turns solemn. “When will he be able to move, Yael? We’ve got a hell of a lot of ground to cover.”

The Israeli sighs. “We need to have a proper briefing. How much do you trust your host?”

“He hasn’t given us any cause for concern so far, but there’s a limit to how far we can trespass on his hospitality.”

Yael unfolds a large map, weighting the corners with her knees.

“Hopefully we won’t have to test those limits. We are here, close to Lake Khargal. We need to get to Erenhot, here.” Her finger trails over a vast expanse of the map, heading south-east to a point just on the other side of the Chinese border. “A direct route takes us quite close to Ulanbaatar, which I would rather avoid. Instead, we’ll hopefully cut straight south out of these hills and on to the steppe, before we turn east across the desert. I’d like to discuss the route with your friend, get his input.”

“What’s in Erenhot?” Gaby asks.

“Not much – it’s just a border town. But Waverly said if we make it to the centre of town, there’ll be someone there to meet us.”

“There’s no short-cut?” Solo asks. “You can’t get us a lift out of here the way you came in?”

Yael frowns. “Not a chance. It was risky enough getting a plane to drop me under the Russian-controlled radar.”

“How did you even manage that?” Gaby asks, clearly having missed a lot of backstory.

Yael’s voice softens as she turns to her, and Gaby is suddenly acutely aware of Solo’s presence. “Waverly had me stationed in Darjeeling. I was back-up, in case you ran into trouble. We had to wait a day because of the wind, but in the event it was an easy enough drop.”

“And now you’re stuck in this mess with us?”

She smiles. “It’s just a long walk. Hardly taxing. And I’m used to the desert.”
“Just a long walk?” Solo scoffs. “It’s over five hundred miles!”

Yael’s gentle tone disappears swiftly. “Which is why we need a proper planning session with Batbayar. It’s perfectly possible, as long as Illya can get enough strength back. I estimate it’ll take about a month, five weeks at the longest.”

“A whole month of my company, Yael. What riches must Waverly have offered you to sign up for that?” Solo drawls, and then pauses as the Israeli’s expression goes carefully blank.

Gaby sighs. Initially that reserve had foxed all of them, but Solo isn’t only good at unlocking doors, he’s good at people too. And although she’d never mentioned Yael’s little confession in Geneva to either Illya or Solo, it’s only a matter of time before the American figures out why Yael has volunteered to rescue them all.

In fact, it only takes him another few hours. Solo corners her as she goes to fetch water from the stream.

“Well, well, Miss Teller, I do believe you have another admirer.”

“Shut up, Solo.”

“I’m kicking myself, I really am. I was half-convinced that our Israeli friend had gone sweet on Peril back in Paris, but this makes so much more sense.”

She ignores him, to no avail.

“I admit, my pride was a little dented that my charm offensive had completely no impact on her. Clearly I was far too closed-minded. What will you do when our Russian giant figures it out? I’m honestly not sure which of the two I’d put my money on in a fight, now that Peril has dropped a few weight categories.”

She sighs. “I’m not sure Illya will react at all, Solo. Who knows what state he’ll be in when he wakes up?”

That sobers him.

“Gaby – I’m sure he’ll be ok. I don’t know what happened to him in the gulag, but the man is utterly besotted with you. Just give him time.”

There’s an uncomfortable stirring in her stomach, a reminder of all the repressed emotions she’s been so firmly sitting on. It makes her shoulders twitch, but she’s no stranger to keeping her feelings in check.

“Let’s get him conscious first, Solo.” She tugs the bucket out of his hand, turning away from his raised eyebrow.

Their planning session takes place that night around Batbayar’s fire. Illya is sleeping peacefully now, and Yael says it’s only a matter of time until he wakes up, making it hard for her to focus on the discussion.

Luckily the conversation is fairly slow. Even her imperfect Russian is better than Batbayar’s, who is manfully attempting to explain complex ideas with a limited vocabulary.

“There are no military bases here?” Solo asks. “No police or soldiers? No tanks or cars?”
Batbayar looks confused. “No soldier. Here, all like me. Sheep, goat, horse for ride.”

“Can we buy horses?” Yael asks.

“Buy?”

Yael pulls out a pouch and flips through a sheaf of currencies – rubles, yuan and what Gaby discovers later are Mongolian tugrik.

“With money – can we buy horses from the locals?”

Batbayar shakes his head, flipping through the money in puzzlement.

“Why need paper? If have sheep, then give for horse. Not paper.”

“So we walk?”

He nods. “I give you – words. For friends.”

“A message?”

“Yes. To say…” he gestures, trying to convey their unusual situation. “Food, water, show the way. Forget when leave.”

“The other nomads will accept that? They will help us?”

He nods forcefully. “Yes. It is…” he casts around for the word, and eventually shuffles across to his little shrine. “Must help. It is – good thing.”

“God bless the Buddhists,” mutters Solo, in English.

“And in the desert – all the nomads will be the same?”

“Yes,” he points north-west. “There – different people. Tsaatan. Different words. I no speak. But you go other way. This way, all same like me, same words. All horse.” He pauses. “Also temeenji, in Gobi.”

“Temeenji?”

Batbayar nods, obviously trying to figure out how to explain his point through gestures. “Like horse, but not.” He makes a strange rolling-wave motion with his hand, while the three of them stare at him blankly.

“Temeenji,” he repeats, as if this will help.

Yael figures it out first. “Oh, he’s trying to demonstrate a верблюд.”

Gaby’s quite pleased that Solo also looks none the wiser at the Russian word. Yael rolls her eyes at them both.

“Camels,” she says in English. “In the desert they also have camels. Apparently with two humps.”

“Oh come on, Yael,” Solo protests. “When the hell would I have needed to learn the Russian for camel?”

She smiles and turns back to Batbayar with just the barest hint of smugness.
By the end of the evening, the poor man looks exhausted, but the team have a working plan. It only remains for Illya to rejoin the land of the living, and to see what state he’s in when he does.

He wakes in the dark and for a few awful moments he thinks he’s back in the cell. The panic crawls up his throat as he tries to move, limbs weighed down by some kind of heavy material.

It’s the fire that saves him, glowing embers that catch his eye as he fights to breathe. He watches them for a long time, slowly getting his breathing back under control.

He becomes aware of the dull pain in his arm and the sounds of others in the room at the same time. Calmer now, his eyes adjusting, he manages to pull off the heavy rug covering him and sit up slowly. His head spins and he focuses on breathing again until it stops. In the gloom, he can make out a needle in his left arm. It leads off to a bag hanging from a nail, hastily knocked into a wooden post keeping up this strange, circular structure.

He frowns, and instinctively reaches to take the needle out.

“It’s just saline, leave it.”

The voice is calm, authoritative and – familiar. A small figure winds her way silently across the room.

“Agent Dayan?” His voice is cracked from disuse, and the whisper is so hoarse it is barely audible.

“Welcome back, Kuryakin. You had the others worried.”

He shakes his head to clear it a little, struggling to recall the series of events that will explain the current situation.

“Go back to sleep, Illya,” she says, voice softening a little. “Gaby and Solo will explain everything in the morning.”

He lies back obediently but doesn’t sleep. Instead, he watches the fire until dawn breaks, then shifts slightly to watch the grey light through the tent slowly strengthen into day. A gust of wind shakes the thick fabric, and he observes the ripples spread across the structure, feeling the breeze across his face from a crack in the tent door.

He doesn’t think, doesn’t investigate anything too closely. It’s enough to exist, to be able to see and hear and experience again. He feels fragile, awareness tiptoeing across his brain to avoid waking the sleeping wolves of his emotions.

As day breaks properly, a stranger stirs and rises. The owner, he presumes. He is small and wiry, instantly alert as he swings himself upright. The man’s eyes flick across to meet Illya’s and he tenses instinctively, but the stranger’s eyes are steady and calm in his weather-beaten face. He moves around the tent with an easy and quiet grace, and within minutes Illya is presented with a cup of hot tea. They sip in companionable silence. The taste is – his brain struggles to reconcile his expectations with the actual experience. It’s salty.
The man’s face creases in silent mirth at his confusion and he finds himself smiling back, the muscles in his face protesting slightly at the unfamiliarity of the expression. This simple interaction, the freedom to smile with a stranger, twists in him slowly until he feels a sudden rush of emotion he struggles to pinpoint, a swirling, giddying, childlike sensation that he finally labels joy.

The man smiles again, drains his mug and stands, holding out a hand. Like a naughty child, Illya casts a glance at Yael, but she’s sleeping soundly and doesn’t stir. The saline bag is almost empty, anyway, so he disconnects the drip and wobbles slowly to his feet, bent at the waist in a hunch that feels sadly familiar.

He pushes the thought away and takes the man’s hand, moving in a strange, dreamlike state across the tent and then suddenly out into the fresh morning air. The sight takes his breath away. The sky seems bluer than he ever remembers it, a cloudless cerulean bowl that stretches endlessly away. The moon is fading away towards the horizon as the sun gains in strength, illuminating rolling green hills and distant forests. He straightens, breathing in deeply, and feels his new friend observing him keenly.

He sinks down to the ground before his legs give way, settling himself to one side of the entrance, back resting against the tent wall. The breeze plays across his face again, unhindered by the tent, and he feels the smile etch itself into his features. The man nods and tells him something in a language he doesn’t know before picking up a small bag of supplies, swinging himself up onto his horse, and heading off down the valley.

Illya lies back against the tent and gives thanks to – to whatever force that moves in this world for this gift, this moment of peace.

It lasts about ten minutes before Gaby emerges from the tent and reality crashes back in on him. She ducks out of the door and pushes her matted hair out of her eyes, exposing the faded marks of his brutality on her neck. He can’t help but recoil slightly as he remembers pushing her down into the car seat, both hands wrapped around a neck so small that only one would have been needed for the job.

She sees him and her face lights up just as he winces and turns away, catching her expression crumble in his peripheral vision. He takes a few breaths to regain control before he turns back to find her watching him with a brittle smile.

“You’re awake.”

He nods stiffly.

“How – how do you feel?”

She sinks down to sit a careful distance away, showing that at least she has learned her lesson, finally understands how dangerous he is.

“Better. Thank you.”

She smiles tightly and looks away down the valley, allowing him to take in the miracle of her presence. Her hands are trembling slightly, and when she blinks a tear tips out of an eye and makes its way slowly down her cheek. Its track burns a new scar into his chest.

“You came for me,” he says, slowly. “You should not have done that.”

She sucks in a breath. “You would have preferred to die in that torture chamber?”
“Yes. It was too dangerous for you to come.”

He expects her to turn on him, to berate him for his stupidity, but she doesn’t move.

“You’re not worth saving?” She says the words lightly but her body is taut, her gaze still focused on a distant tree.

His father’s face swims across his mind, followed by Cherezov’s and a short identity parade of all the men he has killed or worse in his life.

“No, Gaby. Not – not by you.”

“So I should have forgotten you? Merrily gone on my way knowing where you were? What they were doing to you?”

He sighs. Clearly she hasn’t learned all the lessons she needed to from the past few days.

“I am sorry, малютка. I should never have put you in so much danger. I should never have dragged you into this.”

Her hands tighten into fists and she finally turns back to him.

“Dragged me into this? Fucking hell, Illya, out of all the people in UNCLE, you are one of the least responsible for me becoming a spy. It was Waverly that recruited me, years before I met you. Solo was the one who talked me into that first mission in Rome. So what did you do, hmmm? Don’t you dare imply that I was only in it to get into your pants.”

He frowns, feeling a familiar wave of irritation at her obstinacy.

“Do not twist my words. You are not one who had to hide what they felt from their handler. You are not one whose agency would have killed you if they knew.” His English is faltering in his efforts to make her see. “I put you in danger, Gaby. I am reason you are stranded here, hunted by Mongolian and Russian security force. I should never have done that to you. I should – I should never have kissed you in London. It was mistake.”

Her tone is icy. “I. Kissed. You. In the club, remember? I was the one who tried to wrestle with you in Rome. I was the one who seduced you in Paris. I chose you, Illya. I’ve been choosing you every goddamn day for over two goddamn years. Stop trying to be a fucking martyr. Scheiße!”

“And what do you get for this choice? Dragging me through Mongolia. Thrown out of UNCLE. Risking return to East Berlin. All for a man who hurts you? A killer? A traitor? You think you deserve this?”

She scrambles to her feet and stands over him.

“Yes! You damn fool, I don’t care what you’ve done. What do you think – I thought your time with the KGB was spent rescuing kittens? Solo and I came halfway across the world for you, we risked our lives for you, and you can’t even say thank you? You lecture me about what I should and shouldn’t want? You try to stop me having any choice in my own life? I love you, Illya, even though I want to kill you right now! It’s my choice, Illya – who are you to tell me any different?”

She loves him. It’s the first time she’s ever said it, a moment that he’s imagined over and over and finally, in the darkness of the cell, realised he could never have.

“I love you, Illya.”
He looks up at her and reads her expression. She knows how much power those words have over him. He’s waited his whole life for someone to see him, to know him and still love him. And somehow hearing it now, while his fingerprints are still on her neck, while they’re lost in the wilderness because of him; somehow to hear it now is the cruellest twist of all.

The blood pounds through his ears, his hands shaking like leaves on his lap as he forces himself to hold her gaze, to be stronger than his father, to do the right thing.

“Love is not enough, Gaby. You should not love me.”

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I am not an expert on Mongolian nomadic culture. I’ve tried to do some research to give my little fiction some realistic detail, but if I’ve got something horribly wrong, do tell me – I don’t mean to offend through ignorance!

_Shetach nof patuach_ is a Hebrew term which sort of means “no-man’s land”, or more literally, “open space.”

Illya’s symptoms and progression of the pneumonia should be vaguely accurate. I imply here that he’s managed to develop sepsis, a blood infection which can occur with severe pneumonia. Yael’s treatment with intravenous broad-spectrum antibiotics is also vaguely accurate, I think, although I have no idea how many courses of treatment he would need, or how long it would take him to recover etc. Again, please feel free to correct me if something really jars!

_Chutspenik_ is a Yiddish insult for a person who pushes his luck, an impudent person. Perfect for Solo!

_Tsaatan_ is another name for the _dukha_, a small tribe of reindeer herders who live in the forests of northern Mongolia. Batbayar belongs to the largest ethnic group in Outer Mongolia, the _khalkha_, who consider themselves descendants of Genghis Khan, and their _halh_ language would, as I understand it, be understood throughout Outer Mongolia.

The Gobi camels are Bactrian, indeed with two humps!

The tea that Batbayar keeps offering is _suutei tsai_, which is milky, salty tea. I imagine it’s quite similar to Tibetan butter tea, which I’ve tried. It’s…an experience.
Thank you so much for all the lovely comments I've received so far, and for anyone who's given kudos as well - it really makes a huge difference to know people are enjoying reading this behemoth.

We have reached halfway though (I hope - I've still got a terrifying amount of plot to get through) and the team are covering a lot of geographical ground. Onwards to China!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Gobi Desert, May 1966

Mongolia is breathtakingly beautiful. She wakes every day to stunning landscapes, from the forested hills in the north, the deep blue lakes, the flat, grassy vistas of the steppes and finally the harsh, angular beauty of the Gobi. They are sights that a small mechanic from East Berlin could only have dreamed of and she files them away with all the other wonders that she’s seen in the past few years.

The physical hardships of walking across a country are a small price to pay for the views. The aching feet, the basic sanitation, the temperature fluctuations, the need to carry dried dung for fuel – eventually, these things just become part of life. She has long ceased to register the others’ smells, and it’s not like she was particularly fastidious about her appearance before, back in the garage in East Berlin.

The mental challenges are more of a struggle. The lack of privacy, the tension of being around the same people day after day and night after night. Particularly when one of those people is a stubborn, pig-headed, idiotic, arschloch of a Russian.

It hadn’t been so bad when they were staying with the nomads. After bidding a warm farewell to Batbayar, they’d spent a fairly gentle few weeks making their way down through Mongolia, working their way from camp to camp, sometimes travelling with a group in the middle of their seasonal migration to summer grazing areas. She’d buried herself in the strangeness of it all, learned to like the strange, salty tea, the surprisingly strong alcoholic mead, the various ways of eating mutton. They’d spent evenings sitting around campfires, listening to stories of the sorcerer and poet Milarepa or war tales of Genghis Khan. At least she thinks that’s what the stories were about. They’ve all picked up a bit of Mongolian and a few of the nomads have spoken pretty good Russian, but in truth most of their communication has been a triumph of inventive gesturing and miming on both sides.

But eventually the chain of nomads had petered out about eighty miles from the Chinese border. A few days ago, the final group had filled water skins for them, packed dried meats and hard cubes of yak cheese, and sketched diagrams of the terrain in the dirt while Yael made notes on her map.

And then it was just the four of them, and even the brutal beauty of the desert cannot distract her from her swirling emotions.
They’d initially made good time over the bare rock that seems to make up large parts of the Gobi, and the sense of progress had provided a veneer of good humour. But two days ago, they’d finally come to an extended area of sand and the tougher terrain had sapped their strength, Illya’s in particular, and frayed their tempers.

If she were feeling more sympathetic, her heart might ache for her giant Russian, so used to being the strong bear, struggling with weakened limbs through the dunes. But for obvious reasons, she’s not particularly inclined towards sympathising right now. So when the argument starts, it’s not really a surprise to any of them.

She’s not completely sure how it begins; perhaps one too many mournful looks from Illya, one too many flinches when she brushes against him, one too many times that he rushes to stop her picking up a heavy bag, or hovers nervously behind her as she uses the large knife she won off one of the nomads to slice hunks of meat. He won’t actually talk to her unless it’s completely necessary. They’ve been dancing round each other for most of the journey, locked in their own, special Cold War.

Silent feuds aren’t really her style though, and now that it’s just the four of them her subconscious has clearly decided that it’s safe to let some of her pent-up anger out.

“They’re not made of glass. For the love of God, stop mothering me!”

“Am not mother to want you to be safe.”

“So you try and wrap me in wool? You want to protect me from what, exactly? Your demons? The world in general? You can’t keep me in a glass box, Illya.”

She pinches her nose as the argument begins to run into familiar territory, land extensively covered while he was recuperating. “If you want to protect me so badly, why don’t you be with me? Why won’t you stop hiding from this?”

“Can you not see that I am no good for you? I hurt you, I am dangerous. I kill people and we are running from people who want to kill me. Why can you not understand that being with me is a bad idea?”

“And I am safe, hmmm? You think I’m so pure and innocent? I’ve killed people too, you know. Did Solo ever tell you what we did to Fischer in that lab? He would have lived, I reckon, if we’d taken him out with us after I defused the bomb. Do you want to know what we did – what I did, instead?”

He stops her by putting a hand to her mouth, muffling her confession.

“Is not same, малютка. You did not hurt me.”

She sighs behind his palm and pushes it away. “You didn’t see me, Illya. You saw a threat. After months in that place, I don’t blame you. Why can’t you stop blaming yourself?”

He stops, face crumpling, and for a second she thinks she’s knocked some sense into him. They’re inches apart, his hand still hovering near her mouth. The stillness of the desert presses in on them, the evening heat pushing them together. She leans in slightly, aching for him to break, yearning to feel what kissing him through the bearded scruff feels like. But inevitably he steps back, pulling himself away from her.

“It was weakness to do this, Gaby,” he says, with a heavy sense of finality. “It was my weakness. You deserve better.”
Solo and Yael choose that moment to return from their scouting trip, something they’ve been offering to do more and more in recent days. They don’t bother to pretend they haven’t heard, but they don’t say anything. In fact, there’s a ringing silence around the camp that smothers any attempt at conversation. Night falls as Solo builds a fire from their remaining stock of dried dung and the four of them stare at the crackling flames while they eat, before Yael tamps it down to warm embers.

She lies back on the sand and lets her eyes adjust to the darkness of the sky, counting the stars as they pile into view, rows upon rows of gaudy sparkles. She’s not sure how long she lies there, but by the time she gives up on sleep the breathing around the fire has all settled into even patterns, Solo whistling slightly through his nose in a way that slowly drives her insane.

A few minutes later, Illya rolls onto his back and starts snoring, which shreds the last of her patience. She scrambles to her feet, dragging the blanket with her, and pads off into the desert. She settles down with her back to a sandy slope. These dunes are up a little hill, and the night breeze cuts cold through the blanket. From here, she has a wonderful view west across the desert, dark dunes rolling back and back until the night blends them into one shadow.

The emptiness, for a girl brought up in a city, is both appalling and attractive. It would be so easy to get lost out there, so easy to be swallowed up and never be seen again. Would that be a blessing or a curse? She shivers into her blanket. After the argument, all the emotions she’s been carefully pushing down are roiling around inside her. She should let them out before they consume her, but she’s not sure how. In her efforts to stay in control, she’s walled up all her mental doors.

She lets out a soundless scream, tipping her head up to the hectic brilliance of the stars above her as she drives her fists into the slope beside her. The sand gives easily enough; it’s a poor substitute for Illya’s face, which she swears she has never wanted to punch so badly.

She wasn’t foolish enough to go far and she wasn’t careful enough to be quiet. It’s not a great surprise that after about ten minutes a dark shape appears from around the dune. The shadow resolves itself into a small figure, and she tries to hide her disappointment as Yael settles down beside her.

Neither of them say anything at first. Yael seems content to shiver in the cold night air and watch the vast emptiness around them. It should be companionable, but her nerves are so raw that the other woman’s calm presence is irritating rather than soothing.

“I loved the desert, growing up,” Yael finally says, quietly. “There’s nowhere to hide, but there’s no judgement either. It’s easier to think out here. Just you, the sand and the stars.”

It’s unfair of her, but the Israeli’s tendency to share with her and only with her makes her suddenly and irrationally angry. She knows Yael is trying to help, but it’s triggering yet another set of feelings that she doesn’t know what to do with.

“Yael, why are you here?” she snaps. “I’m honestly curious. How did Waverly convince Mossad to send one of their best agents on a wild goose chase after two soon-to-be-disavowed UNCLE agents and a wanted Soviet traitor?”

Yael shrugs. “Waverly called me, and I explained to my superiors that the mission could result in some key intelligence on the Soviet Union that no-one else could get. Plus there were potential benefits to rescuing one of the CIA’s most effective agents and a promising Anglo-German spy.”

She narrows her eyes. “And they bought that?”
“It’s the truth. There are strong strategic incentives to recommend the action, and it didn’t involve crossing into the USSR.”

“And your real reason?”

Yael takes a moment to reply. “The same as yours. And Solo’s.”

Gaby pauses. Yael has given her a perfect out. They can both tiptoe away from the unspoken implication, ignore the subtext, choose to put a platonic spin on the whole conversation. All she needs to do is nod, drop the subject and start a new one.

“And what, exactly, would that reason be?”

Yael stiffens, eyes widening slightly in surprise.

“Waverly said you were in trouble,” she says eventually. “So I came. It’s what you did for Illya. That’s what you do for – for friends.”

“Friends?”

It’s Yael’s turn to narrow her eyes, looking at her with an intensity that has her leaning back instinctively.

“What are you doing, Gaby? What do you want to get out of this? What good will it do?”

“I don’t know,” she admits, the truculence going out of her. “I just – I’m tired, and I’m scared, and I want to know where I stand.”

“With me?”

“With everyone, with everything.” She drops her head to her knees, curling herself into a ball.

“I’m a friend, Gaby,” Yael says quietly, sadly. “Just a friend.”

She never thought she was a particularly cruel person, but there’s no other word for what she does next. It feels strange, pressing her lips to another woman’s. Yael’s face is so much smaller than Illya’s, soft and smooth. It’s very chaste – a lost, little cry for help, a child’s playground kiss, a dare.

It lasts only a few seconds before Yael pushes her away. For a moment, she thinks the Israeli is going to slap her. She anticipates it, yearns for it, the clear unambiguity of being punished for crossing a line. Then Yael gets up, gracefully sliding out of her huddle of blankets, and stalks off into the sand.

It was unforgivable, her behaviour, but it works. Something unlocks inside her and the tears finally flow. She cries solidly for about five minutes, great racking sobs that she can’t keep quiet, pouring her soul on to the cold sand.

She senses his presence before she’s quite done, but he knows better than to try and comfort her before she’s ready. He waits until the sobs have faded to gasps before he quietly sinks to the sand beside her.

“I’m sorry for waking you,” she mumbles.

“Don’t be. I’m sorry for disturbing you – I would have left you to it, except if someone hadn’t come to cheer you up, I think Peril would have thrown himself into the fire.”
“He’s awake?”

Solo grimaces at her, and she’s overcome with guilt, imagining Illya lying tense by the fire, hearing her howl into the empty desert, unable to come and comfort her. The guilt is quickly squashed by rage. It is all his fault, after all.

“Good. Perhaps it will teach him not to be so fucking stubborn.”

Solo diplomatically doesn’t say anything, just stretches out his legs and tips his head back, contemplating the glittering majesty of the heavens.

“What did you do with Yael, by the way?” he inquires lightly.

She flushes. “I may have – behaved badly,” she admits, confident that if anyone would understand, it’s her new companion.

He laughs mirthlessly. “She’ll get over it. Made of steel, that one.”

His casual understanding of the situation sparks her curiosity.

“How many others have you met like - like you?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Yael isn’t like me. I am… open, to whatever is on offer. I don’t think Miss Dayan has ever felt about a man the way she feels about you.” He pauses. “But if you mean people with preferences other than what these days counts as normal… I would argue that most people don’t know what they want. Most people don’t investigate themselves very much. If there’s a desire they perceive as strange, an unwanted reaction, they push it down. Others – for others, those desires are harder to ignore. Or perhaps we’re just worse at lying to ourselves.”

They both fall back into silence for a while. She trails her fingers in the cold sand, lets it trickle through her fingers.

“I suppose it isn’t surprising that I never noticed anything in East Berlin. It wasn’t a place that encouraged… any sort of personality at all, actually. But you’re a spy, Solo. Surely you’re meant to be more subtle about this sort of thing?”

“Hah – I’ve never been particularly subtle. Doesn’t suit me. And to return to your original question, you’d be surprised how many spies are queer. The ones in the field, that is. This life – it attracts the loners, the ones who never quite fit, who get really good at pretending to be someone else.”

There’s an undercurrent of pain to his voice which tugs at her. She’s never heard him speak so plainly about it before, never imagined Solo to be anything other than he is now – superlatively confident, completely at ease, entirely himself.

She doesn’t really know what to say next. Her tears have left her empty and exhausted.

“So,” he asks eventually, “how was it?”

“The kiss? Short.”

He laughs. “That’s fairly damning. I take it you didn’t have a sexual revelation?”

She smiles, ruefully. “I don’t know what I was expecting, really. Yael is – she’s beautiful, and deadly, and unexpectedly kind, and I don’t really understand what she sees in me. But – but even if
I could be interested in her, there’s no space in my head for that. He’s everywhere, the bloody idiot. I came halfway round the world for him, it’s going to take more than his pig-headedness to get rid of me.”

She pauses, considering. “You came halfway round the world for him too, though, didn’t you?” She tucks her head to the side and peers at his dark profile. “Is this all part of an elaborate plot to push me out of the picture and tempt Illya into bed with you?”

Solo laughs and leans towards her, lightly pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Oh Teller, if I ever get Illya into bed, what on earth makes you think you wouldn’t be involved? If only to coax him off the metaphorical ceiling.”

He rolls away and stares out at the desert, his face oddly melancholic. “I’m afraid that’s one pleasure I doubt I’ll ever have. I think Illya is as set in his ways as Yael.”

She shuffles closer and drapes her arm over his shoulders. “He’s a stubborn bastard, Solo, what can I say? If he ever gets over himself, I’ll put in a good word for you.”

She feels his smile rather than sees it as he gently rearranges her so that she’s tucked into his side, his arm resting lightly across her shoulders. She curls into his chest, seeking his warmth. His breath gently stirs her hair as he looks out into the dark. It’s cosy and safe, and the contact soothes her tired nerves.

“Thank you, Napoleon. You’re a good friend.”

“I know, Süße, I know.”

They sit in silence for a while longer until her eyes drift shut.

She barely registers him carrying her back to the camp, but when she wakes up in the morning, she’s lying next to Illya, his back curved round in his customary, protective position, his large hand resting lightly on her hip.

She’s not sure if it was a conscious move on Illya’s part or some clever positioning by Solo, but as she shifts slightly, Illya’s hand tightens on her, pulling her closer in his sleep. She feels the endorphins flood her system, the indefinable sense of being right where she should be. Her body is convinced that he’s hers, but her mind – she’s been so determined to get through to Illya, so focused on getting him to stop torturing himself that she hasn’t let herself acknowledge her own frailties. And if last night taught her anything, it’s that she’s not cut out to love someone who refuses to love her back.

Love is not enough, Gaby.

That little voice returns, her safety net, starting to slip cold fingers around her heart, pulling her back, inoculating her against the risk of imminent pain. Love is not enough. It wasn’t enough for your father to come back for you, it wasn’t enough to save Walter. She pushes it back down firmly. All relationships get their own scars, eventually. This will just be one of theirs.

But a few months ago, she would never have imagined that she would say I love you and not see his face light up, not have him say it in return. He loves her, she’s sure of it even if he refuses to say it, but – but is love enough?
If he looks at it from a sociological perspective, observing his teammates on this trek is providing him with a rich study of human behaviour. He wakes up a little too late to see Yael’s reaction to finding Gaby and Illya curled around each other in their sleep, but he rather suspects that there wouldn’t have been an outward reaction at all.

This suspicion is borne out later that morning when Gaby tries to make amends. As he expected, Yael simply locks down, receiving Gaby’s quiet apology with no emotional tells whatsoever. Which begs the question, can a lack of emotional reaction be an emotional reaction in itself? He’d lay ready money that this isn’t the first time the Israeli has found herself on the receiving end of someone else’s issues. Her coping mechanisms are a little too well-oiled.

The two lovebirds, on the other hand, are full of tells. He wonders, not for the first time, how Peril ever made it through an interrogation. He watches the Russian watch Gaby as she bustles self-consciously round the camp. There’s something particular eating at Peril, he’s sure of it. Some specific trauma he’s been through, beyond the physical torture, beyond even the incident, which Gaby has explicitly forgiven him for several times. There’s something else which is driving this difficult behaviour. Well, this specific difficult behaviour. It’s not like the man was sweetness and light to begin with.

He sighs, and resolves to corner Peril about it once they’re out of the desert. It’s throwing off the balance in their little team, and that’s bothering him more than he likes to admit.

The border is thankfully close, however, only another day’s walk. They plan to cross it about five miles west of Erenhot. Any closer and they’re too close to the manned Chinese checkpoints. When they arrive and scout the area, the closest checkpoint is still only a mile away, but Yael spots a convenient ditch that runs across the approximate border, providing them with cover.

She also spots what looks like a dust storm off in the distance, despite the rest of the weather remaining clear.

“Herd of camel?”

“Could be. Could be something else.”

“How fast was it moving?”

“Hard to tell. I suggest we do without a fire tonight. And pray for cloudy skies.”

In the event, they have to wait two days for the right weather conditions, two days spent hiding in a dug out sand burrow after the sandstorm resolves itself into a Russian military convoy. The forced proximity and the dwindling water supplies don’t do anything for the awkward atmosphere in the group. This is why he doesn’t get attached, he thinks. Too much drama.

“Do you think they’re here for us?” Gaby whispers, after the convoy has rumbled past.

Yael shrugs. “Your guess is as good as mine. Looks a little large for a search patrol, perhaps.”

It adds a layer of tension to what should have been a simple stroll over a piece of otherwise unremarkable desert. It’s a relief when the cloudy night finally materialises and they can bury their nerves in activity, burying most of their trekking supplies as the desert disappears into a thick black soup.

The walk is silent and slow, the team following Yael and her compass blindly, the darkness only
broken by some flickering lights from the distant checkpoint. Ahead of him, he can feel Illya’s discomfort at the lack of light – his breathing is fast and shallow and his movements stiff. He puts a hand out to calm him but it has the opposite effect, the Russian startling at the unexpected contact and stumbling over an unseen stone. The sound seems to echo through the barren landscape and the group freezes as one, listening for any reaction.

It’s not clear whether it’s this slip or simply bad luck, but while they’re still a few hundred yards from the cover of the ditch, there’s a sudden purr of an engine and headlights appear from around the dunes. The four of them freeze for a moment, caught in no-man’s land. Torches bob around the headlights, and he realises that the convoy must have spread out into border patrols. Either someone in the KGB has guessed their plan, or one of the nomad groups were a little less forgetful than they should have been.

They have seconds until they’re spotted, and he realises they can’t make it to the nearest part of the ditch without cutting through the headlights.

“Head towards the checkpoint,” he whispers. “They’re a damn sight more visible than we are, and I doubt the Chinese will take kindly to a Russian patrol lurking around.”

They start off at a brisk jog, aiming for a balance between speed and stealth, trying to stay out of the pools of light behind them. It doesn’t work. They’re still over half a mile from the checkpoint when he hears the shout go up.

“Сто́йте!”

“Run!” Gaby hisses, and they abandon stealth and sprint towards the checkpoint, running alongside the ditch which curves back towards them, now useless as cover. They’re technically in China now, he reckons, but in the middle of nowhere, at night, that doesn’t mean a goddamn thing. He can hear shouts and engine revs from the patrol behind them. Yael is at the front, and she steps her pace up a gear as they try to stay out of the headlight beams. He can feel Gaby groan slightly beside him as she wills her legs to move faster. Illya is flagging, still far from the Russian machine who had run down his getaway car in East Berlin.

There’s another shout in Russian behind them, an order to stop or be shot, but they’re finally close enough for the Chinese manning the checkpoint to hear the ruckus and to swing torches in their direction. Lights from the checkpoint flicker above their heads and play over the chasing vehicle until there’s an engine roar from the checkpoint building and a rival car screeches into the desert. The four of them swerve right and tumble headlong into the ditch as the car races straight past them.

He takes a second to recover some air, then slithers towards Yael and taps her on the shoulder. She nods silently, reaches out to alert Gaby and Illya, and the four of them carefully inch along the ditch, further into China and away from the scene.

Behind him, he can hear both sides shouting. Some of the Russian patrol are playing their torches over the part of the ditch they dived into. His heart thumps unevenly as they swing across, right over their current position.

Illya risks peeking over the trench, his hair blending in to the sandy landscape. He motions them to be ready, waiting for the torches to roam somewhere else. The seconds stretch out painfully.

“Now,” Peril breathes, and they slide themselves out of the ditch and creep away in a military crawl, at any moment expecting to feel the desert illuminate around them.
After a few minutes, he risks a glance backwards. There appears to be a minor diplomatic incident occurring. He’s too far away to make out the Russian any more, but the voices are getting angrier, and the torches are illuminating a lot of jabbing fingers and hands on hips.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he levers himself to his feet, turning away from the lights and letting his eyes reacclimatise to the absolute darkness. They endure another few heart-stopping minutes silently moving away as the voices fade into the desert behind them, before they stop for Yael to get her bearings.

“Well, that was a little more exciting than we planned for,” Gaby mutters. “Do you think the Chinese military will come looking for us now?”

They all shrug.

“Let’s assume we need to meet up with Waverly’s contact as soon as possible,” he says.

Yael nods, and starts guiding them quickly through the desert. They don’t see another soul as they reach the town outskirts just before dawn, creeping through some quiet streets and finally positioning themselves in an alleyway overlooking a small square.

“Do we send a message? How will contact know we are here?” Illya rumbles.

Yael shrugs. “I was told only to get to this square, discreetly, at dawn.”

“No date to aim for? No signal to watch for?”

She shakes her head.

They watch as the grey light strengthens. A few early risers shuffle across the square. It feels extremely exposed, four scruffy Westerners, including a blond giant, in the middle of a small Chinese town. The tension levels rise through the group as time ticks on.

Finally, an elderly man walks calmly into the square and settles down on a bench in the centre. He quietly extracts a thermos of tea and turns it around deliberately. It has the letters U. N. C. L. E. stencilled on the side.

“That’s got to be our man,” he whispers to Yael, and slips out his knife, wiping the blade free of the grime he’d used to dull the shine. He manages to catch the light on the blade, directing it at the old man. It takes a few seconds, but the man eventually notices and looks up, straight at them. His face doesn’t change, but he looks hard at them for a few moments before returning to his tea.

“Now what?” Gaby asks.

They watch him for another few minutes, before he gets the prickling sensation that they have company in the alley.

He turns slowly. A young man is leaning against a wall, watching them calmly.

“Look sharp,” he mutters. “I think we’ve met our guide.”

The man – young enough to be almost a boy – pushes off the wall and smiles at them, before turning and walking away. After the night they’ve had, everyone is a little slow to move, so a few moments later, the boy looks over his shoulder and beckons at them, executing a perfect, sarcastic eye roll. He gets the distinct impression that their guide finds this cloak-and-dagger mission a bit beneath him.
They walk uncertainly behind him through a maze of little streets until they come to a dead end. Their guide quickly scrambles up some piled wooden crates and swings his legs over the wall at the top. He looks back, grins and then disappears over the side.

“Could it be a trap?” Gaby asks as Yael swiftly climbs up after him, cautiously peering over the edge. The Israeli shrugs, “Doesn’t look like it,” and follows him out of sight.

He’s the last up, which conveniently hides how his knees ache at the scramble. He’s getting too old for this. When he drops inelegantly down on the other side, he can just see Illya’s long legs disappearing under a grimy tarpaulin over the back of a cart. Their guide is standing to one side, smirking at his unimpressed expression.

“We’re getting under that?” he asks.

The boy looks blankly back at him. He takes a second to look around. They’re in a private courtyard, closed in on all sides. The gate in front of them starts to open, and he ducks down hurriedly behind the cart. The boy wanders round to him, crouches with him, and lifts the edge of the tarpaulin pointedly.

He raises an eyebrow, refusing to give in so easily. Their faces are now only a handspan apart, and for some reason, his heart rate speeds up a little. The boy’s eyes are half disdainful, half amused. In the stronger light of the courtyard, he’s arrestingly attractive – dark eyes, high cheekbones, a slightly arrogant, scornful set to his lips. *Solo, you’re staring.* The boy holds his gaze brazenly, daring Solo to blink first. He’s suddenly and uncomfortably aware of how dirty he is, unshaven for over a month.

He blinks, and the boy smiles. Giving in with poor grace, he tumbles over the lip of the cart, practically on top of Yael. He tries to manoeuver himself into a more comfortable position before the tarpaulin drops down and the cart interior fades into a dim brown shadow.

It’s one of the least comfortable trips of his life, but it’s mercifully brief. The cart lurches through various streets before coming to what feels like a permanent stop. There’s a long pause, and the sound of voices. A gate creaks closed behind them. The tarpaulin lifts and the young man beckons them out and shoos them across another courtyard and into a small, dark room.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I do apologise for the difficult journey. A regrettable necessity.”

Disoriented, they all whirl around, eyes adjusting to the gloom.

“Where are we?” asks Gaby. “Who are you, and what in god’s name is going on?”

The elderly man from the square is standing in front of them. The room resolves itself into a small office, with files of paper on a desk beside him. The young man moves to stand behind their host’s right shoulder.

“Of course, you must have many questions. But first, please – have some tea. You must be parched from the journey.”

The old man speaks with a perfect English accent. It’s highly unnerving, and he can feel the discomfort radiating off Illya and Yael. He would rather not get into a fight with the men who have just rescued them. It looks like he’s the only one left with a sense of diplomacy.

“Thank you, sir, for getting us to – wherever we are,” he rasps. That tea would actually be very welcome. “I do apologise for our manners, but you must understand – trust is something of a valuable commodity.”
The man sighs. “Very well. You must forgive me for attempting to revive old customs of hospitality. My Western name is Benedict Fox, although no-one has called me that for many years now.” He smiles softly, as if relishing the feel of the words on his tongue.

“And now you have heard that name, you must forget it. Here, my name is Lao Hu Li. I’m an old friend of Waverly’s. Perhaps you could call me his old tutor. Languages have always been a fascination for him, and I believe he owes his Mandarin skills to me. He spent some time with me in Shanghai, a few lifetimes ago.”

“Waverly really does know everyone,” mutters Gaby.

“He is very inventive at keeping in touch, I must admit. He managed to make contact a month ago and asked me to keep an eye out for you. I’ve been sitting on that bench at dawn every day for a week.”

“Are we safe here?” asks Yael. “You said our trip in the cart was a necessity. We've been avoiding populated areas and here we are in the middle of a city. What happens if people see us?”

Fox – Lao Hu Li – smiles softly.

“Safe is a relative term. You are standing in my little fiefdom – my danwei. You are safe as long as you stay in the rooms I assign you, and you show yourselves only to myself and my associate, plus a few others as I direct. I am the leader of this little piece of China, but I am a limited king. We are owned by the State, every one of us. Everyone in this compound has a file, everyone here officially has a permit to stay. Except you. Now, I know which rooms are empty at present, and roughly when inspections will take place. I can hide you for a while. But you are fugitives and spies for foreign governments. I cannot keep you safe if the Party officially learns of your existence.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly safe,” Solo observes. "And, if you'll excuse me, how does a man go from entertaining British aristocracy to the leader of a communist factory complex?”

The old man sighs. “With great difficulty, Mr Solo, and not a little ingenuity. I have spent years carefully living a double life, and I am jeopardising all of that to help you. Perhaps you could appreciate the risk I am taking is equal to your risk in being here?”

Lao Hu Li pauses, and Mr-Pretty-But-Arrogant behind him shifts slightly. The boy’s face has remained implacably blank for the whole exchange (and Solo’s not proud of how closely he’s been watching him) but he gets the distinct impression that their guide has understood every word of the conversation.

“And your companion?” he asks, keeping his eyes on the boy. “Are we going to be introduced?”

Ahah. There is just the slightest flicker, the boy’s eyes shifting to Lao Hu Li for a moment.

“Of course. This is my assistant Li Shen, my right-hand man. This is his office.”

“He’s a little young, don’t you think?”

Solo has made his tone deliberately patronising, and again, there’s the tell – a little curl of the lip.

“My dear boy, Chinese faces may confound you. Li Shen will in fact celebrate his twenty-third year in September.”

“Then why doesn’t he speak for himself? Because none of us like secrets here, and I know that he
can understand us perfectly. Or don’t you trust us?”

Lao Hu Li pauses, narrows his eyes at them, and the bluff old gentleman act drops down a level.

“I see. You are an astute group.” He shakes his head and smiles. “Please forgive our attempt to dissemble. You must see that Waverly’s request caused us considerable alarm. We have a fragile peace here, and we were loath to see it disrupted.”

Solo addresses the boy directly. “You planned to eavesdrop on us?”

The boy shrugs, unabashed. “I did.” His voice is deeper than expected, in keeping with his true age. His English accent is almost perfect. “Your presence here endangers all the work Lao Hu Li has done to keep us safe.”

“I see. And so you thought you would try and lie to a group of accomplished spies?”

“It was worth trying. People usually underestimate those who seem young and simple.”

“But you are neither, it appears.”

Gaby clears her throat pointedly, cutting into the debate.

“Well, now that is all cleared up, it seems both sides could start trusting each other a little. We are grateful for your help. Some tea and, perhaps, a way to wash would be much appreciated. The rest can be discussed later.”

“But of course. Miss Teller, I presume? Yes, I thought so – I do have an ear for accents. Please – you and Miss Dayan have rooms this way. We have managed to procure a change of clothes for you both. I am afraid that the cheongsam has gone out of style since the Revolution. The clothing is therefore regrettably utilitarian, but you will be camouflaged better this way.”

He calls out an instruction in Mandarin, and an old woman ducks in from the corridor outside. Yael and Gaby look uncertainly at her before she smiles and encourages them to follow. They walk out slowly, the unease in Yael’s posture evident in every movement.

“And for you, Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin – Li Shen will show you to your rooms. There is shaving equipment as well as washing bowls and a change of clothes for you both. Mr Kuryakin, I do apologise, yours is somewhat patched. We had to cobble together some trousers long enough for you.”

Li Shen turns on his heel and leads them quickly down the corridor. He shows Illya his room first, small and spartan, demonstrating where things are.

“Let me know if you would like help shaving. Lao Hu Li prefers me to help shave him.”

Illya just shakes his head. Now they’re in a place of relative safety, he seems to be shutting down again.

“Peril? You ok?”

Illya waves him away. “I just – I need to be alone, Cowboy.”

He nods, and turns to go, conscious of Li Shen’s perceptive eyes taking everything in.

His room is the next one down, identical to Peril’s. Li Shen doesn’t even bother to show him around, just lounges against the doorway. He looks around himself, stopping by the simple wash
stand and lightly testing the sharp, deadly straight razor.

“You aren’t going to offer to shave me?”

“Do you want me to?”

He pauses and looks at the boy, automatically imagining tipping his head back into his chest, feeling his fingers gently on his neck, the sweep of the blade intimate against his skin.

“No… I don’t think I want you that close to my neck with this.”

“You do not trust me."

“Do you trust me?”

Li Shen smiles thinly. “I think you’re trouble. You’re all trouble. And China has seen enough trouble, recently.”

He turns on his heel and leaves, pulling the door firmly shut behind him.

Solo sinks on to the bed, suddenly feeling all the aches and pains of the last few weeks build up at once. Trouble. Oh, they’re certainly trouble. But he gets the distinct feeling that Li Shen is not half as upset by that as he pretends.

Chapter End Notes

Сто́йте = stop (plural) – I think. Again, any Russian speakers who can suggest improvements, please let me know!

So – I’ve had to make some revisions now I’ve had a chance to do more research. Many thanks to Quaxo for calling me up on it, and I’m sorry for not doing it properly to begin with! The main change is that Lao Hu Li is no longer Western – sorry if you read the original and are now a bit confused.

The next few chapters are quite heavy on historical detail, so I apologise for the hefty notes - ignore them if they're not interesting! As a quick heads up:

After Mao's Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, the number of Western residents in China declined dramatically. Information provided to the outside world was extremely limited, so I don't think any of our intrepid travellers would really have known what they were walking into, despite being intelligence operatives.

A danwei was the urban work unit, like a rural commune, that Chinese urban society was organised into following the Communist revolution in 1949. It transformed cities into a patchwork of self-contained cells.

Members were assigned to a danwei, usually without any choice, and from then on they were reliant on the danwei for housing, food, healthcare and so forth. Residential housing was provided in apartment blocks, arranged around larger courtyards, meals would be provided in a general canteen, and nearby would be the danwei factories and schools. The danwei leaders would have held a file on every member of the unit, managed travel and even give permission for weddings and so forth. Leaders would
have needed to be members of the Party. While I'm really no expert, I think as the leader of this *danwei*, Lao Hu Li would have the power he needs to hide the team, at least temporarily.

Lao Hu Li is more of a nickname than a Chinese name. It means Old Fox in Mandarin, and is often used to describe someone particularly wily. I figure that he would have enjoyed the allusion to his Western surname and also because his character has had to be pretty canny to survive.
I'm not 100% happy with this, but I've been faffing with it for ages so I'm just going to put it out there and move on. There's a few quick POV switches and a *lot* of OC backstory to get through, so apologies for that.

On a more serious note, while the rating of this story hasn't changed, a section of this chapter deals with some pretty dark history. If you're having a bad day and you don't want to be reminded how shitty humans can be to each other, perhaps leave this chapter for another time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Erenhot, May 1966**

He stares at the man in the patchy glass of the old mirror. It’s a face he knows, yet doesn’t know. It is thinner, tired, the eyes sunken and dark. He lets his gaze wander dispassionately down his bare chest, sees the healing scars, counts the ribs. This isn’t his body. He runs his hand over his smooth jaw, pushes his wet hair back from his face. His nose juts out more sharply now. He sighs, and lifts the razor to slice away hunks of the matted hair.

It takes longer than he expects to get his hair to look vaguely presentable, and when he’s finally done and dressed in the old shirt and loose trousers he’s been provided, he’s weary to the point of collapse. He sits down heavily on the bed, unconsciously undergoing a status report, a self-evaluation.

He is undoubtedly in better shape than he was in the gulag, but in worse shape than when he left the cosy little *ger* in northern Mongolia. The strains of the journey have set him back. He needs two weeks of food and rest to get back to baseline effectiveness. After a week, he can begin reconditioning training, which will contain – will contain… his brain stutters to a halt.

*He is not an agent any more.*

There is no reconditioning, no check-ins, no status reports. He answers only to himself. No-one will instruct him, command him. He no longer has to fight, to spill blood, to interrogate. The affairs of the CCCP are no longer his duty.

He breathes out, as if a band across his chest has loosened. The next breath in feels too rich in oxygen, and his head whirls. The sudden freedom is intoxicating, terrifying. He has spent his whole adult life in service, in penance for his father’s crime. *Alleged* crime. His whole being was devoted to erasing this shame, and now it is as if the ledger has been washed away entirely.

It is too much, entirely too much. He is cast adrift; he has no direction. His entire identity is crumbling, great cracks in the man of stone, the immovable object reduced to a leaf on a breeze. Where will he go? What will he do? He sees the world from a dizzying height, and he but a small speck. No home, no place, no refuge. Is this freedom? Is this what men fight and die for? To be without purpose, without aim?
He isn’t aware of tumbling from the bed, but here he is on the floor, a floor which feels as if it tilts under him, as if there is no solid surface on Earth, nowhere for him to stand firm.

“Peril? Peril? Are you ok in there? I’m coming in.”

Hands are under his shoulders, lifting him.

“Breathe, Peril. Come on, you’re having a panic attack. Just breathe.”

He obeys, grateful for a firm order, and air rushes into his lungs, righting the world.


He blinks slowly. He is sitting on the floor, his back pressed against a firm chest with a strong, sure heartbeat.

“Come on, Peril. Gaby will kill you if you do yourself more damage.”

Gaby. His world snaps back into focus. He shakes his head and pushes himself away.

“Am fine, Cowboy.”

He hauls himself to his feet too fast. His head spins again and he catches himself on the bed, slumping forward as he sucks in more air. Solo doesn’t say anything, simply leans back on the dresser and crosses his arms, waiting.

He looks up finally, and sees the set in his friend’s eyes. Solo is also clean-shaven, but his hair is still wet and he’s bare-chested. The flecks of shaving foam around his neck and ears suggest Illya’s panic attack was louder than he thought.

“I’m fine, Cowboy.”

“Like hell you are.” Solo crosses to the door and closes it firmly. “You are going to tell me exactly what happened to you in that gulag and why it’s eating you alive.”

“Or what?” he growls.

“Or I’m going to make you. You’re not such a menacing presence right now, Peril. And as much as I’d rather not destroy this room, I will if it means getting you to damn well open up.”

Solo sits quietly as Illya pours out his story in short, staccato sentences, wincing slightly as the man details his torture in Moscow, his treatment in the gulag, the revelations about his father and the subsequent events that led up to his final internment in solitary. Jesus.

No wonder the man is seven types of messed up, simultaneously pushing Gaby away and hovering over her like she’s the last thing keeping him alive.

“You have to tell her, Peril. She’s torturing herself trying to understand why you’re doing this to her.”

The stubborn idiot just crosses his arms and shakes his head mulishly.
“Is not her problem. I already put her in harm’s way with KGB. She cannot be something they use to get to me.”

“But she needs to make that choice, Peril. It’s her call, not yours. She wants to be with – oh I see. You don’t want to tell her in case she agrees with you. You’re worried it’ll make it real, kill that final piece of hope.”

“Shut up, Cowboy.”

“Absolutely not, you great oaf. I care very deeply about that girl, and I refuse to let you continue to put her through this.”

Peril has started to breathe heavily and one hand is trembling. Even in his weakened state, he is more than capable of inflicting a good deal of physical pain on an opponent. Solo steels himself, and steps into Illya’s space.

“You’re being selfish, and an ass. Go and talk to her, or I will.”

There’s a horrible pause as he forces himself to hold Illya’s angry stare. Of course, his subconscious chooses this moment to fixate on how pretty Peril is. After months of being hidden by matted hair, his clean, sharp features are even more distracting than usual, cheekbones and jawline almost more arresting because of the weight loss.

Shutupshutupshutup, he tells his libido, clamping down on the little tug low in his gut. This of course, only pushes Li Shen’s face into his mind. Not now. He’s never been very good at resisting temptation.

The stare has just reached DEFCON 3 when there’s a knock on the door. He tries very hard not to jump.

“Go. Away.” Illya snarls.

There are no locks on the doors, so Yael just opens it and walks in, unconcerned.

“I need to have a word with Illya,” she states calmly.

“Wait your turn, Dayan, I’m trying to knock some sense into him.”

“About Gaby? What a coincidence, that’s why I’m here.”

They both break the staring match, looking round at her in surprise.

“Two minutes,” she states and ushers him out, closing the door in his face.

He presses his ear to the wood, but she’s speaking too quietly to hear. He assumes she’s telling Peril about the desert kiss and mentally starts counting back from fifty. Looks like he’s going to get to see who would win a duel between the two of them.

Instead, exactly two minutes later, Peril wrenches the door open and strides off down the corridor, face like thunder.

He turns slowly back to the room, to see Yael quietly inspecting her fingernails.

“How – how did you do that?”

She just smiles and looks past him.
“Nice to see you again, Li Shen. I was just coming to ask what happens about dinner.”

The young man eases out of the shadows in the far side of the corridor. He hadn’t even noticed him there when he was peremptorily thrown out of Peril’s room. Christ, is anything going to go right for him today?

“I thought we made it clear that you are to stay in your own rooms. Please return there immediately, and instruct the Russian to return here. Food will be provided later.”

There is just the slightest stress on the word own. Yael raises her eyebrows minutely and nods, slipping out of the room.

And then it’s just the two of them. Li Shen’s eyes do not leave his face, but Solo is suddenly and acutely aware of his lack of shirt.

“I see you’ve managed to shave safely. Well done, Mr Solo.”

The boy’s – man’s – tone is light but there’s something in his eyes. Is it just wishful thinking, or is this flirting?

“Lao Hu Li has asked to speak with you privately,” he continues.

“What an excellent idea. I have plenty of questions for him.”

Gaby lies down on the narrow bed. Her hair doesn’t feel all that much cleaner, really, because there wasn’t any shampoo, but she has at least managed to get the worst of the desert out of it with the comb.

For the first time, she begins to regret her sweeping statement back in Siberia. China had seemed like the only option, but now that she’s here, she feels wildly out of her depth. It feels far stranger, more dangerous than the open ways of the nomads. But then, Waverly sent them here, didn’t he? Surely someone has a plan for them.

A wave of tiredness sweeps over her, as if she’s been carrying a burden that she has just now been able to put down. It’s because she’s finally alone, she realises. She wants to curl into a ball and shut out the world for a while, and she suits action to the thought, crawling under the covers.

Of course, it’s at that moment that there’s a knock on the door. She sighs and hauls herself up with bad grace.

“What?” she snaps, tugging the door open.

Her next sentence dies on her lips. Illya is standing there, looking – looking more like himself than he has since she last saw him in Rio, six months ago. He’s thin, sure, and it hurts her to see the sadness in his eyes, but he’s clean and tidy and she can see his face again. She tracks his features with her eyes, hand twitching by her side as she aches to map them with her fingers instead.

She doesn’t notice Illya’s expression shift as she completes her once over, but when she meets his eyes again, there’s a simmering amusement that she hasn’t seen in months.

“You’re staring,” he states, simply.
“It’s a shock to see more than one square inch of skin,” she retorts, embarrassed to be caught out.

“You did not approve of the beard?”

“I wasn’t aware that I was in a position to approve or disapprove of your appearance.”

His face falls and she looks away. She notices the pile of her desert clothes in the corner and drifts across to fold them neatly, anything to hide the telltale stinging in her eyes.

“Gaby – I – Solo and Yael they said – they,” he falters in his thoughts and she hears the bed creak as he sits. She turns unwillingly and finds him slumped with his head in his hands.

“They told you to come talk to me?”

He looks up at her, but his eyes do not quite meet hers.

“You kissed her?” he asks.

Her anger flares.

“But of course. It’s your jealousy that gets you to talk to me. You made it perfectly clear that you do not want to be in a – in a relationship with me. If that’s what you want, then fine – I will do as I please, and who I do or do not kiss is none of your business.”

He nods, quietly.

“She told me that I needed to talk to you, that I wasn’t being fair to you. That – that you still love me, but perhaps not for much longer.”

One day, she is going to have friends who are not spies, and then she may have a chance at keeping her own feelings private.

“Why are you here, Illya?”

“They are right – Solo and Yael. I am being unfair. I need to explain. To – to tell you about my father.”

Solo throws on the rough shirt and lets Li Shen lead him back to his little office.

“Do you run the entire compound from here?” he asks, idly running his fingers along the piles of paper.

“Of course not. There is an official office block to the south of this courtyard.”

“I see.” He wanders around the room again, subconsciously evaluating the space. Something about the bottom wall panel on the south-west corner seems off. Every time he gets close, he senses Li Shen’s stance grow more rigid. He presses down gently on the panel and feels something give. As he pulls back, the panel lurches out by an inch.

“Wait,” the boy stammers, his face jolting out of bored truculence and into acute embarrassment. He ignores him, sliding his hand into the narrow gap and retrieving a sheaf of loose papers.

“Hiding things?”
The papers are neatly handwritten, some in beautiful Chinese calligraphy, some in English. He flips through them slowly, ignoring Li Shen’s protests. They seem to be poems – at least the ones in English are, mostly classic British affairs such as Shelley, Coleridge and Keats.

“You like poetry?” he asks.

“Lao Hu Li wrote down the ones he remembered for me. They – they express more than the sum of the words alone.”

He smiles down at the page in front of him; the boy has hidden depths. He’s stopped at a short Chinese verse, barely a sonnet’s length. His eyes catch at something – a few of the characters are familiar.

“Does this character translate as frost?”

“This one? Yes – it is shuāng. How do you know?”

“It’s shimo in Japanese. The traditional kanji is similar though.”

The boy shrugs. “It is one of my favourites, by Li Bai. Tang Dynasty. Some of the same ideas as Coleridge’s Frost at Midnight.”

“Why keep these ones hidden? Chinese poetry isn’t encouraged?”

“The correct poetry is encouraged. Mao writes many poems, and Tang Dynasty poetry is usually ok. It’s the Han Dynasty fu poems I have in here that would cause problems – they include political criticism.”

“Which style do you prefer?”

“I like lots of styles, British and Chinese. This one is my favourite, actually.” He shyly flips through the pages until he finds Siegfried Sassoon’s The Death-Bed.

“Really? It’s so – depressing.”

The boy lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “I – I know how it feels. Not war, of course, but – having death close by.”

Lao Hu Li clears his throat gently from the doorway.

“I bring a Westerner home for two minutes and you’re already talking poetry?” he teases the boy. “I thought you were meant to be on high alert – your new friend is a wanted man.”

Li Shen’s face falls, and Solo finds himself automatically stepping in. “I’m sorry, Lao Hu Li – it’s my fault. I sniffed them out.” He turns to Li Shen. “If you want, I can figure out a better way to hide them.”

The boy grins, the prickly sarcasm entirely evaporated. “Xièxiè. That would be great!”

He feels himself grinning back. Get it together, Solo. You’re a grown man. He wrestles his face back to neutral and turns to Lao Hu Li.

“So – Li Shen says that you wanted to talk to me? By that, I assume you’re going to tell me your very interesting life story, and then ask me a favour. Am I close?”

“How perceptive, Mr Solo.”
He gives Li Shen an instruction in Mandarin, and the boy – man – nods and slips out. Solo stuffs the poems back into the wall cavity and pops the panel closed.

“He speaks remarkably good English. How long has he been studying?”

“Only six or seven years. It is indeed impressive – he reminds me of Alexander, the same wonderful memory and ear for language.”

“But then, he has an exceptional teacher. Your English is impeccable – as is your memory, if you remembered all of those poems for him. Are you working from schoolboy knowledge?”

Lao Hu Li looks pleased. Solo is rapidly coming to the conclusion that the man likes people who can put puzzle pieces together. He doesn’t reply immediately but wanders round the desk, settles down in the old chair with an audible sigh of relief and leans back, fixing Solo with a shrewd look.

“Forgive me for the assumption, but the other three looked a little preoccupied. I felt this would go faster and better if I spoke to you alone.”

Point to the old man, he thinks.

“Whatsoever you prefer, sir.”

“It’s interesting that the boy has taken such a shine to you.”

Solo feigns ignorance. “A shine?”

“He doesn’t normally speak of the darker parts of his past to anyone except me.”

“But death said: ‘I choose him.’ So he went. And there was silence in the summer night,” Solo recites. “Yes. Not what I would have expected him to choose as a favourite poem.”

“As he brought it up, I will explain. But I suggest that we start with me, much as it is unpleasant to talk about oneself.”

“I think, in this situation, a little autobiographical detail wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Very well. Please stop me, if you get bored. I was born in 1906 in Shanghai, the only child of wealthy Chinese parents. My father owned a number of silk printing factories, and dealt extensively with Western commercial enterprises in the Concessions, particularly with the British. My parents wanted nothing more than to give me a classical English education, and so when I was twelve, at the end of the First World War, I was sent off to Harrow to become Benedict Fox.”

“Was there any connection to your birth name? Fox isn’t the easiest name to pronounce for a native Chinese speaker.”

“My birth name, my dear boy, is a secret I will take to my grave. No-one left alive in this country knows it other than me. And Lao Hu Li is something of a nickname – it’s certainly not what is on my Party membership papers.”

It’s not as if Solo is any stranger to reinvention, but it occurs to him that he now has two names for their host, both of which appear ephemeral, loose skins to be put on and off. He wonders what name the records at Harrow really show.

“But we digress. I returned to China after a degree at Oxford, arriving in the summer of 1927 and narrowly missing the April 12 massacre, the first of many lucky escapes in my life. I had
unfortunately picked up some bad habits at university, and the blossoming of Shanghai into a decadent and debauched city suited me a little too well. I was uninterested in my father’s business and preferred to spend my days in opium dens and gambling houses. I was not really a suitable companion for poor Alexander, who spent a year or so living with us in the early 1930s. I regret to say that as well as teaching him Mandarin and improving his Cantonese, I also introduced him to opium.”

Solo lifts an eyebrow. He’s aware of his boss’s difficulties with both the poppy and spirits. It is strange to be sitting in remote China with the man who unleashed that particular beast.

“I hear he’s been clean for many years now.”

“Waverly doesn’t speak of it. But I’ve never seen him anything other than perfectly sober.”

The man smiles warmly. “And for that, I’m profoundly glad. Leading Alexander astray was one of my many sins in that period.”

“My life took a turn for the worse after the Japanese invaded in 1937. Both of my parents perished in the violence. I was ruined, my family fortune disappeared and I was left as a refugee in the concessions. As the Japanese authorities became harsher, I vanished further into my own selfish vicissitudes. And yet, this moral and physical collapse proved my saviour. I was rescued, if you can call it that, by a local communist sympathiser. He bullied me clean and gave me a new name – the name on my Party documents. I had seen the inequalities in Shanghai society during my time on the streets, and I became a believer in the socialist cause. When in 1949, the People’s Liberation Army took power and slaughtered the counter-revolutionaries, I regret to say that I supported their action, even though it meant the deaths of former family friends. That is another black stain on my character that I doubt will ever be washed clean.”

The man pauses, and takes a sip of tea. Solo uses the break to sift through all the information he’s been provided.

“So when did you have your moment of enlightenment? Unless you’re still a true believer?”

Lao Hu Li sighs. “I will always believe that the rights of the common man must be as important as the rights of the most powerful. Unfortunately that is not the reality of the Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó. I had realised that as early as 1954. That is when Alexander was able to make contact with me. At that time, he was leading MI5’s Hong Kong branch, and I was pleased to see his language skills being put to good use. He asked me to do what I needed to do to survive, despite my misgivings, and get to a position of unthreatening, mid-ranking power.”

He stops, and spreads his hands to indicate his little danwei.

“Once that was achieved, I was to report back when I could. It became expedient for me to make my way to Erenhot to observe the realities of Sino-Russian relations. Which placed me very conveniently for your little escape, I must admit.”

“And we are grateful for that, believe me.”

“And so, have I satisfied your misgivings about my character?”

Solo smiles. “You have given us shelter in our time of need – your character was never in question, sir. Simply your motives.”

“Which brings us to my request. My condition for helping you – my motive, as it were.”
Solo nods – it’s not unexpected. Even a local agent wouldn’t shelter four exceptionally dangerous fugitives without some conditions.

“I understand from Waverly that you must get to the British Legation in Beijing. From there, the Legation can get you to Hong Kong, as long as you do not arrive at their door with the Chinese authorities on your tail. Li Shen will get you to the Legation. It will be difficult – the countryside is still full of eyes. The best way is for him to accompany a convoy of goods from the factory to the capital. One is leaving next week – you and your companions will have to hide in the back of one of the trucks. Li Shen will be able to get you food and water on the journey, and escort you to the Legation building when you are in Beijing.”

It’s reassuring that there’s a planned way out of the country. After weeks of travelling, he can almost taste the creature comforts of the Legation building. A few days huddled behind a box in the back of a goods truck is a manageable price for the chance of a proper suit at the end of it.

“And the request?”

“I will have to fake Li Shen’s travel permit for the journey, and when he does not return, I will have to answer for the disappearance. You see, this will be a one-way ticket for the boy. He must get to Hong Kong with you. You must promise me that you will get him into the Legation, get him out of China.”

There is real fear in the man’s eyes, a desperation. There’s not much he can say other than to agree, but it’s an empty promise. He has no idea how much pull the team will have with the Legation. A fugitive Russian and a rogue CIA agent will be bad enough, but a refugee Chinese boy too?

“Of course, I promise we will take him with us. Just one question – does Waverly know he is coming with us?”

Lao Hu Li breaks eye contact. “In vague terms, yes. He has been in touch with the Hong Kong authorities and the British Legation in Beijing, who are expecting you with an escort.”

That doesn’t answer the question, he thinks.

The man’s tone shifts and he tilts forwards, fixing Solo with dark eyes. “Something is coming, Mr Solo. Something that I do not expect to survive. Beijing is becoming more dangerous by the day, and it will surely spread. I cannot protect the boy forever, but to save him and to save yourselves, you must all go into the hornet’s nest.”

“That sounds surprisingly apocalyptic, Lao Hu Li. Forgive me, but you’re four hundred miles from Beijing. How can you tell?”

“I can feel it in the gossip, in the rise and fall of Party grandees. This country is about to undergo another violent convulsion, and I need that boy out before he gets caught in the crossfire.”

Solo suppresses a shudder as various unwanted memories swim to the surface. Berlin, Budapest, Algiers – chaos in the streets, mobs, riots. He’s seen too many countries in the grip of unrest.

“I am going to need you to be significantly more specific, sir. Particularly about the boy. Who is he?”

Lao Hu Li sighs and motions Solo to a seat. He sinks into it and the man sits back, closing his eyes. This time, the man does not speak in dry, emotionless sentences. These words spill out in a flood, painting a picture of a life so vividly that Solo’s own eyes fall shut, watching it play out on the insides of his eyelids.
A boy grows up in a small rural village in Suzhou. It’s a happy childhood, if poor. He has siblings, parents, a village that acts as a wide extended family. His life is punctuated by work and festivals. The events of the wider world wash over him – the rhythms of the seasons sublimating such petty human endeavours to background noise. Harvests wax and wane, and he knows the bite of hunger and the satisfaction of a full stomach. Life is simple.

He thinks little of ideology or politics until he is eleven, when his village organises itself into a collective. Men in his village talk admiringly of their new rulers, of shared ownership of land, tools and animals. His father is more reserved, and prays to their ancestors for guidance.

When he is thirteen, the village collective is subsumed into a vast commune. Their plot of land, the central axis of his universe, vanishes into the power of the state. Festivals and traditions are swept away, he must no longer think of his ancestors, only of the Party. He is provided with a hukou to tell him where he must stay, to stop him from leaving. But why would he leave? This is his home.

When he is fourteen, the cadres arrive with new orders from Beijing. They know little of his land, and decree strange experiments which will increase productivity. This is a good thing, he is told, because the State requires more grain to feed its growing ambition. They say they will produce far more than his little village has ever managed in its good years. His father’s face becomes strained. He goes to talk to the leaders, and comes back black and blue.

The summer arrives, and the weather is perfect. They work round the clock to gather in the harvest, using lamps at night to keep going. He has never been so tired, but at least they will have a good winter.

It is not enough. They have not produced enough, they are told, and the needs of the State are greater than the needs of the commune. They must give what they promised, and survive on what is left. By the winter, half of the commune is too weak to work. The cadres do not find this acceptable. They beat the men and the women alike to force them into the fields. One man is buried alive, another has his nose and ears cut off. Men freeze to death in the fields, collapse from exhaustion. There is death everywhere. His youngest brother dies first, just stops breathing in the night. They hide his body to try and save his ration for the others. The authorities find out and beat his mother.

The next summer, the weather is poor, and the harvest suffers from lack of manpower. The village is decimated. The cadres inform the commune that there will be an inspection. The dying must stay indoors, they say. No-one can show the Party officials how weak the people of Suzhou are. He is tasked with dragging in the dead from the fields; some have been half-eaten by mice. This gives the most desperate men ideas. There are rumours of cannibalism.

He gets weaker and weaker. His mother dies in June, his sisters by July. His father lasts the longest. In August he starts refusing to eat, urging his remaining son to take his ration. You must run, he is told. Gather your strength and run. There is only death here.

His father dies a week later. That night, the boy leaves. It is his sixteenth birthday. He drags himself through fields, hides away in a truck taking the precious harvest to the cities. He eats raw grain from a sack. Two days later, he arrives at a town. His hukou is no help here. Without a valid permit there is nowhere for him to stay. The authorities will send him back to the village, the place that is no longer home.

He lies down in the corner of a warehouse behind some boxes. He is tired, so tired. Some sun flickers in through the high windows. It slowly fades as the day wears on. He is tired, so tired. He sleeps, and in his dreams he sees his family again. Steps approach, and his father stands by his side. He reaches out a hand, and the boy tries to take it, but his arm is too weak to lift.
A hand grasps his shoulder, and he cries out. The shock startles him awake. There is a strange man, older than his father, crouched beside him. He tries to run, but there is no strength in his legs. The man tells him to wait there, that there will be food. He hides in the warehouse for a week. The man returns daily with food and water. He learns his name, a little about him.

After a week, the man arrives with a registration document. It has his name and his date of birth, but the other details are different. It says he belongs to the man’s danwei. The man says, You can come home with me, if you want.

“And I said yes,” Li Shen fills in, from the doorway. Solo is wrenched back to the present, to the little office. He turns to the boy and, still half-lost in the nightmare of the past, tries to reconcile the assured young man before him with the starving, orphaned boy.

It is a mistake. Li Shen stiffens, eyes narrowing at his expression.

“I don’t want your pity, American,” he snarls.

Lao Hu Li’s head is bowed. He murmurs something in Mandarin to his charge. The boy’s eyes flash and he steps further into the office.

“So what if we need him? I’m not your way back to redemption, old man, some good deed to help you sleep at night. I don’t need any of you to save me, I’m not some poor soul to be pitied.”

He turns on his heel and sweeps out, leaving Solo reeling from the switchback change. Lao Hu Li simply blinks benignly.

“Pay Li Shen no mind, Mr Solo. The boy does not yet understand how dangerous a mind like his is in this place. He must get out of here, or this regime will suck his soul dry. I cannot stand by and watch that happen. A flower may bloom in adversity, but even the hardiest plant can be crushed.”

Whatever she had expected, it wasn’t this. Illya pours out his past to her like a dam in his soul has burst. The words flood out of him in a mix of Russian and English, his eyes fixed on a spot on the floor, hands shaking in his lap. He tells her everything, a strange, tumbling confession that starts with the gulag, but jumps between his childhood, his time in the KGB, and even encompasses events that occurred before he was born. He tells her about the various tortures he’s endured – the mental scars far worse than the physical. He tells her about his father, about the man in the gulag, about how close he came to breaking completely in that dark, cold, silent little cell.

She stays quiet, listening to her fragile warrior let his demons out with words for once, not with his fists.

“I am lost, Gaby. I have no family, no home, no country, no purpose. All I have are powerful enemies, men who will kill me to keep their secrets, to teach others lesson. There is no place on this Earth that will be safe for me, no person in this world who can stand with me without stepping into this storm. You must understand – I expected I must leave you when I ran. I knew I would have to hide for years until they tired of hunting me, and then – then I thought perhaps I could come back for you.”

“You never saw a future for us together?”
He laughs harshly, still burning a hole in the floorboards with his stare. “A future with fugitive whose only skills are to kill, to fight, to interrogate, to harm? What would woman want with that? Gaby – I couldn’t let you throw your life away. Not on me. You deserve man who can give you stable home, family, keep you safe, not put you in danger.”

“So I never had a choice in the matter? The two years we spent in UNCLE – every night you spent with me, you were actually saying goodbye?” She huffs out a breath, fighting the tears down. “You’re a much better liar than I thought, Illya. I never suspected a thing.”

He finally looks up at her, the redness around his eyes making the icy blue painfully bright.

“But what did you imagine, hmm? What did you think we would do? Be spies forever? That Russia would let me work with you and Cowboy indefinitely?”

That cuts deep. She had just assumed, after Paris, that eventually he would defect, that Waverly would sort everything out. That they could just keep going, cheating death and laughing at danger until – until what? She had been very good at avoiding the difficult questions.

“I don’t know. I suppose I thought that you would at least let me decide whether or not to run with you.”

He frowns at her, confused. “You would choose to come with me? After all I have told you?”

She laughs. “What do I have, Illya? You’re not the only one with no family, no country. I have you, Napoleon, a job that is probably gone now, and a set of useless skills. I’ve dragged you halfway across Asia – do you think I couldn’t cope with a few years on the run?”

The sudden dawn of hope on his face blazes true and clear and then he reaches for her, pulling her into his arms like a drowning man reaching for a rope. For a moment, she thinks he might actually crush her in his arms.

“Do not promise, малютка,” he mutters into her hair. “Not until you think through what it would mean. It would not be like UNCLE. No smart hotels, no beautiful clothes. We would creep through life, you understand? Keeping under radar, as boring as possible. You must be calm to decide this. Wait until we are out of this chaos.”

She nods hastily. “Yes, yes, until we’re out of China. But for now – please Illya, don’t keep me out.”

She feels him nod, and then the grip tightens again, and she lets herself sink into his embrace, trying to ignore that small voice sounding an insistent note of doubt.

*Is this what you really want, Gaby? Are you ready for a life in the shadows, looking over your shoulder, living quietly, avoiding trouble? After everything you’ve seen and done, with everything you still want to do, are you ready for that?*

She pushes against his arms for a moment, working one arm out and pulling his face down to hers to crush their lips together. He groans, tugging her down into his lap and deepening the kiss, chapped lips dry on her skin, damp hair cool under her hands. She licks into his mouth, upping the ante of the kiss until the blood comes pounding to her ears, finally drowning out that little inner voice, chasing that familiar sensation of being entirely enveloped by Illya, surrounded by his certainty, his desire, losing herself in rediscovering him.
CCCP is the Russian equivalent abbreviation for the USSR.

The Li Bai poem that Li Shen mentions is *Thoughts in the Silent Night*. I believe I’ve got the pinyin of the character right, and the equivalent Japanese *kanji*…corrections appreciated if not!

*Frost at Midnight* is by Coleridge. I’ve tried to pick poems that Lao Hu Li would have learned while at school in England.

The timeline that Lao Hu Li lives through should be correct. The info on Waverly, including the fact that he speaks Mandarin and Cantonese, should be consistent with his file at the end of TMFU - obviously that didn't contain any dates but I think my timeline is plausible.

*Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó* is the pinyin for the People’s Republic of China.

*Xìèxiē* = thank you (one of the few phrases in Mandarin I actually have down!)

The Great Leap Forward - the event that destroys Li Shen's family - is one of the greatest man-made tragedies ever known. While death tolls are uncertain, it is estimated that 37 million people died between 1958 and 1962 as a consequence of the famine, which raged across several provinces. (The official government estimates of the death toll are around 17 million.)

Gansu Province, where Suzhou is based, was one of the worst hit, approximately 1 in 13 people died. The worst famine was in Sichuan, where around 10 million people died.

The punishments the cadres mete out on the villagers are all based on real accounts, I’m afraid. There are many examples of even worse treatment of dissenters and protesters, but I honestly couldn’t stomach typing them. There were reports of cannibalism as well.

*A hukou* is an internal passport, a system of registration tied to the household. Effectively it restricts internal migration of people to cities. In the Great Leap Forward, having an urban *hukou* was often the difference between living and dying, as urban residents had fixed food rations. Police would routinely check permits on the streets of cities and deport refugees from the famine back to their homes.
Sorry for the slow update! It's been a really busy month, and I found this chapter quite difficult to write. I'll try and get the next one up more quickly, particularly as this one ends in a pretty depressing place. Please check the tags!

Also there's some very strong language near the end.

Erenhot, June 1966

She surfaces from the tangle of sheets with a groan. Frustration continues to simmer under her skin, the burn sustained by a steady stream of memories. Blond hair, cool hands, rough stubble. Gentle strokes, firm grips, soft bites, hard kisses.

Three days. Three days of sitting with Solo and Yael and Illya in a small, dusty storeroom, bored out of her wits. Well, not bored, precisely. The tension is getting unbearable. Since Illya put kissing back on the table, her body is practically vibrating every time he’s in the same room as her. Which is all day, but never without Solo and Yael’s presence. It’s torture.

She knows she should probably be using this time to think about the future, properly examine how she feels. That little voice in her head nudges her every few hours. But it’s easier for her to push it down under her reawakened lust. She can remember exactly when the fire had been lit. The first few kisses had been messy, urgent, more about comfort than need. But then he’d buried his face in her neck and, knowing her well, had bitten her just there and pulled her even tighter into his lap, and she’d lost all track of time until a very pointed cough had dragged them both back to the room.

The young one – Li Shen – had been standing in the doorway, eyes pointedly averted. They’d disentangled themselves, rather reluctantly, before the boy practically hauled Illya out of her room, snapping about the risk he and the old man were taking in hiding them – which is fair enough, she supposes, but that doesn’t stop her resenting him for it.

Since then, the boy has dictated a tedious routine. They each stay in their rooms overnight until he fetches them in the morning and chaperones them to the small storeroom. There they wait, staring out a small window or at the wall, or in Illya’s case, stares at her with steady, dark eyes that keep fanning the flames under her skin. Li Shen or Lao Hu Li stop by intermittently with food or some information, before night falls and they are herded back to their own rooms again.

Where she can’t sleep. Instead, she spends her nights reliving the feeling of his eyes on her and replaying memories of time spent in more luxurious beds in cities around the world. None of which actually help to quench the desire. She’d be up for sneaking out at night, except she doesn’t know exactly where Illya’s room is and doesn’t want to end up in Solo’s room or worse. And she thinks Illya would probably take a dim view of her risking everyone getting discovered just so she can get some damn satisfaction.

Judging by Solo’s mood the last few days, she isn’t the only one feeling frustrated. She knows him too well by now, and the way his face brightens every time Li Shen shows up before falling
slightly as the boy studiously ignores him, is evident even in her distracted state.

Only Yael is the same, inscrutable presence. Which – well she already feels bad enough about how obviously she’s lusting after Illya. It would be a hundred times worse if Yael was making it difficult. But she’s not. In fact, she was the one that finally got Illya to open up, stopped him screwing it up. Why? The small voice decides to point out that, as kisses go, her encounter with Yael left something to be desired. Perhaps it broke whatever spell she’d cast on the Israeli. Or perhaps Yael is simply not interested in kissing women who are in love with someone else.

Gaby sighs and rolls over in the narrow bed again. Sensible woman. She’s not sure how well she would cope if she had to watch Illya with another woman. She hadn’t coped very well in São Paulo, and that was just a matter of the mark’s floozy having a weak spot for tall blonds.

Her mind helpfully replays the aftermath – dragging him into the shower fully clothed to get the woman's lipstick off his cheek and collar, her perfume off his skin. Then marking his back with her nails, his neck with her teeth. The spray of the shower had soaked into her dress as Illya pressed her against the wall. She remembers water running off his nose, trickling between her breasts, turning his shirt transparent as she hauled it up his back. It was the only time he’d let her ruin one of her outfits. He’d practically ripped it in half when he couldn’t get purchase on the buttons.

And wonderful, now she’s overheating again, kicking the rough blanket away as she moans silently into the thin pillow.

The door clicks open, and it shakes her out of her reverie, her knife shifting from under the pillow to her hand within moments.

“Is me, малютка,” the dark shape drawls softly. “But good to see you sleep prepared.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Illya?” she hisses.

His silhouette shrugs. “Cannot sleep.”

“Thought you’d share?” she snaps, unaccountably flustered.

“Thought would do something to help,” he rumbles, and his voice is suddenly much closer.

“You’d better not get us caught.”

“You will have to keep quiet then.”

One large hand slides down her arm, the skin buzzing in the wake of his touch. The bed crunches slightly as he settles down next to her and starts kissing his way back up her tingling skin.

Too slow.

Her body reacts before her brain does and simply launches itself at him. The noise he makes is very gratifying, and it’s only then that she realises he’s arrived in her room shirtless. Her brain concludes that she’s capable of managing without its interference, and checks out of the process entirely.

It turns out that keeping quiet is a challenge for both of them, but she thinks they do a pretty good job. More importantly, when Illya eventually leaves a few hours before dawn, the little voice in her head stays quiet and she falls into a deeper sleep than she has for months.
Over the next few days, despite his best efforts, Solo’s attempts to apologise to Li Shen all fail. It doesn’t help that he can’t get the boy alone. The team spend their days cooped up in the same room together, ready to hide in case of an inspection. Li Shen delivers their meals, but as his past isn’t common knowledge, and as Solo has no right to make it so, it’s hard to apologise in front of three sets of eyes. Although, really – the boy sulks even better than Peril. Three days, and he’s still pouting over one poorly judged expression.

It takes a visit from the boy alongside Lao Hu Li to clear that up. Looks like Solo’s not the only one getting the cold shoulder treatment. And that really is unfair – the old man’s going to a lot of trouble to help the kid escape to a better life. In a few days, they’ll head to Beijing and he’ll likely never see the man who saved him again. You’d think he would be a bit nicer to him while he ca – oh.

Fine, so a month spent solely with three emotionally constipated spies for company has messed up his normal people reading skills.

But because he is a good person and without any self-interest whatsoever, Solo decides to fix it. He waits until mid-afternoon, which three days of staring out the grimy storeroom window has taught him is when the children are still all in school, the factory workers are in the middle of a shift, and the other assorted members of the *danwei* have largely finished cleaning, sweeping, fetching and carrying. The storeroom door is locked from the outside, but that’s hardly a challenge. He can feel the raised eyebrows from his friends as he quickly manipulates the lock.

“Solo – what are you doing?”

“Urgent call of nature, Dayan. Some of us haven’t your bladder control.”

It takes only a few minutes of cautious exploration to find his way back to Li Shen’s little office. It’s empty, but there are files out on the table and the chair is pushed back, suggesting imminent return. Excellent. He settles down to wait, and sure enough, only a few minutes later the boy walks in.

Unsurprisingly, Li Shen isn’t pleased.

“Don’t Westerners ever follow rules? If it’s not the enormous blond one creeping around at night, it’s me finding one of the women up on the roof at dawn, and now you roaming the corridors in daylight.”

“Illya’s been sneaking around at night?”

Li Shen rolls his eyes. “Not very subtle, for spies. He was in one of your friends’ rooms for hours last night, during which time the other woman decided to scale the walls to get on the roof. You are all insane.”

*Interesting.* Good for Illya. Sucks to be Yael.

“Well, we’ve never been very good at following orders.”

“So I see. Why are you here?”

“I got bored. And I wanted to talk to you.”
Li Shen simply sighs. “Well, I do not want to talk with you. I’m very busy. Please get out of my chair.”

Solo smiles his most winning smile. It doesn’t have any effect.

“It’s ok to be scared, you know.”

“What?”

“You’re scared. I get it – it’s a scary thing to do, leaving everything you know behind. Leaving the people you love.”

Li Shen’s eyes narrow. “I’m not scared. And what would you know about it?”

“I was sixteen, you know, when I went to war. I didn’t really understand what it all meant. I just saw it as an adventure. Didn’t really think about how it affects you, to see people you know get killed, to die in front of you. I was scared shitless.”

The boy frowns – apparently Lao Hu Li hasn’t taught him some key bits of English vocabulary.

“What’s your point?”

“I don’t know what you went through, but at least I know what it’s like to be scared, to have death all around you. I’m not pitying you, I’m –”

“Bìzuǐ!” The boy cuts him off. “I’m not scared. But who even says I want to leave, hmm? You and the old man – you think you know everything. This is my home, my life. Who says I want more?”

Solo leans back in Li Shen’s uncomfortable desk chair and regards the boy thoughtfully.

“Ok, I take it back. You’re not scared – but you 

As glares go, Li Shen has some natural talent, but Solo’s been glared at by plenty of much scarier men in his life, including Peril on an almost weekly basis.

“ Plenty. I know a lot about not fitting in, being interested in things that others aren’t. Feeling things that others don’t. Why do you think I ran away to war at sixteen?”

Li Shen’s expression falters a bit.

“If you really don’t want to leave, then you don’t have to. I’m sure your ingenious protector can figure out a way for us to get to Beijing without you. But – look. I’ve never had much of a family, so maybe I’m speaking out of turn, but – the way Lao Hu Li told it, your father did everything he could to make sure you made it out of the commune alive. He wanted you to live. Do you really think your family would judge you for leaving China? For seeking a better life than hiding in a provincial danwei?”

The boy slumps on to the edge of the desk, his face working. Solo tries to ignore the resulting tug in his chest. Just a pretty face, Solo. Don’t go soft.
“What if I forget them?” It comes out almost as a whisper.

Oh god. He steels himself to stay in his chair, stops himself from reaching forward.

“You won’t. How could you ever forget them? They’re part of you. You’ll take them with you.”

Solo, you sap.

The sun rises in the boy’s eyes, and that gets Solo out the chair – job done, situation fixed. Pats on the back all round. Time to escape before he does something stupid.

He almost makes it out the door.

“I am scared, American.”

Oh boy.

He replies without turning. “I know. Anyone would be.”

“What is it like?”

Great, now he has to turn around. “Hong Kong? Not sure – I’ve never been.”

“No – I mean, what is it like, to go wherever you want? To do whatever you want?”

“I can’t do whatever I want, Li Shen.”

The boy’s face quirks. “Your behaviour to date would suggest otherwise, American.”

He can’t help the smile. “Fair point.”

“I envy you that. To have that freedom. To not have to hide what you want.”

Oh, if only.

The conversation has taken a tricky turn, and he looks away, trying to figure out how to explain. This turns out to be a mistake. When he looks back, Li Shen has a very distinct look on his face. The boy bites his lip and Solo’s skin suddenly feels too small and too warm.

He’s normally more on top of this sort of thing. Is he off his game? The boy levers off the table and moves into his space. The small part of his brain that acts as his conscience – which he does own thank you very much Peril – is yelling at him to step back, but the rest of his body appears to be ignoring it. No change there then.

Li Shen’s eyes flick down to his lips.

“I’ve never done this before,” he whispers.

Solo’s mind spins back to a cold, damp army tent in the middle of France. Billy Jones has dragged him out to help him hide some contraband, and they’re hiding in a packed supply tent as a patrol goes past, squeezed behind some crates and pressed against each other. He’d been half worried about the patrol and half freaking out about the hard-on he was getting from Billy’s body against his. There’d been a moment of tension, a second when the childish excitement of sneaking around had shifted into something else. Just a second of their eyes meeting, and then Billy had breathed a curse and kissed him. “Sorry pal. Just – do you have any idea how tempting you look when you pull that face?”
Now he knows. Now he knows just how Billy must’ve felt.

“Fuck it,” he says, and closes the gap between them.

When he extricates himself from the room, about an hour later, Yael is waiting for him in the shadows.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asks.

“I could ask you the same thing. Aren’t we meant to be staying out of sight? How long have you been in that corridor?”

Her eyes narrow, and she drags him through another nondescript door and into a windowless, dusty room small enough to essentially be a cupboard.

“Don’t deflect, Solo. I want to know what possible reason you can have for being so damn stupid.”

He weighs up various responses, before deciding on flat denial.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Yael.”

“Don’t lie to me – it’s written all over your face. How could you be so foolish? Chasing a pretty face when we’re this close to getting out of here? You’re complicating everything, and it’s going to blow up in your face.”

“Complicating things? I hardly think a little flirtation is going to stop us getting out of China.”

She snarls, and he holds his hands up in placation.

“Fine, fine, I promise not to scare him off before we’re safely in Hong Kong. I’ve already been dragged through enough countries on this trip due to an ill-advised love affair. I’m not in a rush to start one of my own.”

“It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?” she practically spits, and he can’t believe he ever thought her cold and reserved. “My goodness, it’s so easy for you, Solo. You flit between people, between feelings – like a damn bird of paradise, never landing. The rest of us aren’t built that way. That poor boy – you’ll break him if you play with him like this.”

“That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think? I’m not coercing him – he’s a grown man, able to say no if he wants. Attraction works both ways, you know.”

“Of course I know, Solo. But one person’s attraction is another person’s heartbreak. How do you think it feels to fall in love with someone you can’t have?”

He raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t say anything.

“And what will you do when we get to Hong Kong, hmm? Abandon him in a strange country with some cash and a handshake?”

“That’s a little harsh, Yael. I’m not that callous.”
“Oh, so then you’ll take him with you? Whisk him off into the West to live in sin with you? Exactly how would you manage that, in your situation?”

That blow lands. The idea of Li Shen in New York, devouring books in public libraries, discovering the ballet, the art galleries, the food, the fashion. Oh, it’s incredibly tempting, but as with most temptations, it’s also a fantasy. *In your situation.* He’s a criminal, serving a prison sentence at the beck and call of the CIA for two more years. He’s in no position to help a penniless refugee, much less start a relationship with one. His face falls as the reality sinks in.

Yael is watching him closely, calming down a little as she sees him take her seriously.

“I admit – I hadn’t entirely thought through the consequences."

“He’s not some exotic experience, Solo. He’s not a trophy, or a challenge. He will fall in love with you. He doesn’t know you like we do – he doesn’t know to protect himself.”

It stings a little, but it’s fair.

“Am I that dangerous?”

“You’re lethal, Solo. You’ll leave and he’ll be left behind with all the questions in the world and no-one safe to ask. A lifetime of wondering, ‘what is wrong with me? Does no-one else feel the same? Will I ever feel like that again?’”

“You act like I never asked those questions myself.”

“Did you? Did you ever question yourself, Solo? I always assumed you revelled in your difference. I’ve never met anyone who owns their narcissism like you.”

A memory sparks unbidden. A twelve-year-old in a dusty town, pouring his heart into his sketchbook, trying to recreate the way the hair falls into the laughing eyes of the boy that sits one desk down, one to the right. Dozens of sketches, never quite catching the expression right. The day the book is snatched from his hands as he hides on one side of the cafeteria; the howls of laughter, the insults, the blows. Uncurling to see the boy (what was his name?) standing over him, holding his best effort. A long moment of silence, then another kick to the ribs, and pieces of paper fluttering down around him, settling like feathers on his bruised body.

Yael is watching him, trying to read him like he reads everyone else.

“It seems you are human after all, arumloyfer. Just – be careful with the boy.”

It’s another four days before they set out for Beijing. Solo spends most of them picking quiet moments to sneak into Li Shen’s office, to Yael’s irritation. Gaby doesn’t understand why it bothers her, but she’s reluctant to ask. She’s still feeling strangely guilty about Illya’s midnight visits – she’s got no moral high ground here.

But the dull days and furtive nights finally come to an end. Lao Hu Li takes his leave of them the night before, with all the ceremony of a host bidding goodbye to honoured guests. There’s a sadness in his eyes that even his elegant manners can’t conceal. He seems very old, suddenly. Solo has explained that Li Shen is to come to Hong Kong with them, and she senses that their protector
is saying farewell not just to his protégé and some Western fugitives, but to an entire side of himself. No-one will be left to remember the educated, urbane gentleman he becomes in their company.

She doesn’t see his parting from Li Shen, because the boy comes alone to wake them before first light, hurrying them down to a convoy of canvas-covered, flat-bedded Liberation trucks in a back courtyard.

There is a small space for the four of them to huddle behind the goods boxes in the last one, and she feels Illya tense as he crouches into the narrow gap. She guides his fingers to the gaps between the canvas and the wooden sides of the lorry, and he relaxes slightly as he feels the flow of air. Yael sinks fluidly into her space on his other side before Solo squeezes in last, clutching a thermos of tea and a parcel of food.

The four of them sit in silence as Li Shen quickly rebuckles the canvas flaps and slips away. Gaby falls into a half-conscious doze as they wait, so that she can’t tell if it’s ten minutes or two hours before the voices of the drivers filter in. She catches Li Shen’s voice among them, sounding so different when he uses the tonal, short syllables of his native tongue, and then doors open and slam, engines rumble to life and the truck finally lurches forward.

The roads are awful, and the engine in their truck is a travesty of engineering. After half a day, the sound of it whining and growling as the vehicle bounces in and out of potholes grates on her nerves more than anything else she’s ever experienced. Her fingers clench in annoyance – if someone would give her a set of tools and half an hour with it, she could make this lumbering little engine roar.

In the dim, brown light, she spots Illya smiling to himself at her frustration, a smile that only broadens as she is bounced half in the air by the latest pothole, bumping her head against the wooden slats on the side. He snakes an arm around her, tucking her into his heavier bulk and weighting her against all but the worst of the lurches. On the other side, she notices Solo has draped his legs across Yael’s to help do the same, and the look on the Israeli’s face at having to accept his assistance is enough to make Gaby smile even as her head throbs.

The convoy limps along like this for hours more, with only brief stops for fuel and for the drivers’ comfort. The light outside slowly fades. Finally, mercifully, the trucks rumble to a proper halt. They listen to the drivers share an evening meal by the road before silence finally falls. A while later, the canvas flap is quietly released, and the four of them totter out unsteadily. There’s a full moon and it’s a relief to be able to see their surroundings in the silvery light. They share a soundless dinner hidden behind their truck, stretched out as much as possible on the rough roadside.

“Where are we?” whispers Solo eventually.

Li Shen raises an eyebrow. “Ulanqab prefecture. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing,” Solo whispers cheerfully. “Just trying to think of a more polite way of asking if we’re nearly there yet.”

Illya chuckles softly, while even Yael can’t repress a slight snort. Li Shen shakes his head.

“Another day and a half, American.”

The smiles turn to quiet groans.
“Stop complaining. If you’re good, I’ll try to get the drivers to take a break tomorrow night in view of the Great Wall.”

Li Shen is as good as his word, and twenty-four hours later, Gaby is able to creep out and stare up at the sharp, thickly wooded hills above her, the full moon illuminating crumbling stone walls winding their way along the peaks. She stands there for a long time, thinking about her own city’s Wall, and the strange quirks of human nature that compel them to build barriers. The next day, she manages to work a piece of the canvas loose and peers out as the convoy snakes through the passes, marvelling at the largely unbroken chain of fortifications stretching off into the distance. It’s almost worth the aching muscles. Almost.

By the time they reach Beijing and Li Shen hustles them out of the trucks in another anonymous courtyard, Gaby feels like her back will never be the same again. Illya has reverted to that awful hunch that he’d had for days after they got him out of the gulag, Solo’s limping dramatically, and even Yael’s perfect posture has taken a battering. They all hobble after their guide as he quickly leads them to a side gate and into the outskirts of Beijing.

To start with, it looks a lot like the bits of Erenhot they’d seen, except on a larger scale and with far more people. Small hutong alleyways are interspersed with larger, modern apartment blocks, the warehouse complex they’d emerged from fading into the distance behind them. The afternoon sun is warm on her arms, sweat pooling under her rough tunic jacket and trousers. It doesn’t seem to bother the locals – men and women hustle in and out of small shops, people roll past on overloaded bicycles, workers sit on the edge of pavements, drink tea and chat. For the first time in China, she gets the sense of the country and its people in a way that observations through a storeroom window failed to produce.

On the other hand, after ten days of hiding in said storeroom, and before that the month in the Gobi, the number of people around them is overwhelming. She feels over exposed, as if at any moment someone will loudly call them out.

They certainly draw a few second glances, but not as many as she expected. The clothing helps; there’s a utilitarian uniformity to the outfits that means from a distance, the four of them simply blend in to the masses. The peaked baker boy cap they all sport is equally useful. Roughly sixty percent of the people around them are wearing variants of the same design, and the brims cast a shadow over their Western features and hide Illya’s telltale golden hair.

As they head inexorably into central Beijing, and each street safely navigated brings them closer to the Legation, she starts to relax a little. After the brutal concrete of the danwei in Erenhot, she keeps spotting flashes of unusual architecture – old tiled roofs with telltale rising corners, huge embossed doors flanked by carved stone statues which, slightly ajar, provide glimpses of elegant courtyards. Once, as she looks down a long road heading west, she spots a distant lake, sun shimmering off the water and beyond it, nestled into a steeply rising hill, an enormous pagoda surrounded by trees. Just for a moment, she forgets the ever-present danger and revels in the strangeness of it all, the mix of ancient and modern, the familiar and the unknown.

Later, she tries to put her finger on when the atmosphere around them changed. After around half an hour of walking, and still three hours from the Legation, the buildings around them shift towards larger walled complexes with some very grand gates. Angry red banners proliferate on the streets, the people around them are younger, and they walk in agitated knots. More than once they
pass people shouting at each other and waving small red books. From behind the walls, she
occasionally hears crashes and more raised voices.

It’s then that she realises that the five of them have drawn closer together and their pace has
slowed. Illya and Yael’s eyes have taken on the hard stares that signal their discomfort, their sense
of nearby danger.

“I do not like this,” Illya mutters quietly. “Something here is not right.”

“Where are we, Li Shen?” Solo whispers out of the side of his mouth.

“Haidian District, where the schools and universities are. Perhaps – perhaps we should have taken
a different route.”

“What’s dangerous about students? Shouldn’t we be more worried about the police?”

Li Shen shakes his head minutely.

“A few weeks ago, Mao announced the continued existence of class enemies within the party. He
urged a renewed attack on the evil habits of the old society. When we left, Lao Hu Li warned me to
take care. But we didn’t know what the effect of the announcements would be. It seems the
students have appointed themselves as the guardians of the Revolution. The dazibao, the big
posters, they’re all slogans denouncing reactionaries. The shouting you can hear – the students are
accusing the teachers and administrators of being capitalists. It makes no sense – all these teachers
would be communists, supporters of Mao. I don’t understand it.”

The scream is perfectly timed, neatly cutting into the tense atmosphere. Students and fugitives
alike jerk around at the noise. A group of students appear through a nearby gate, pushing and
shoving some older men and women in front of them, wearing signs around their necks and white
hats scrawled with characters.

Gaby is frozen to the spot – they all are. There’s an indefinable sense that if they attempt to move,
to get away from this spectacle, the students will turn on them, like jackals.

One student steps forward and starts shouting to the street. It’s not clear what he’s saying, but
behind him, the prisoners are pushed to their knees by his classmates. More followers gather to
cheer him on. She stares at the scene unfolding in front of her. It feels staged, curiously unreal, as
if she’s watching a movie reel.

“Āiyā, this is wrong,” Li Shen mutters. “These people are just teachers, they’re no capitalists. This
is crazy.”

The student finishes his oration, turns and spits at the nearest teacher. The kneeling man barely
reacts, clearly too shocked to comprehend what is happening. The student gestures at his followers,
ranged behind the prisoners and shouts what sounds like a command.

The events of the next minute appear to happen both in slow motion and far too fast. At the sound
of the student’s final words, Li Shen yells and sprints towards the group. Solo shouts after him to
get back, and the unfamiliar syllables cause the nearest students’ faces to whip round, expanding
the circle of focus to include their little group.

As she registers the unwelcome attention, her focus is dragged back to the desperate little tableau
by another scream. The teacher’s face is now streaming with blood, the student behind him raising
her stick for another blow. It doesn’t fall. Li Shen wrenches it out of her hands, screaming at her
and her friends. The sound of the crowd is like an angry buzz as Li Shen brandishes the stick at the
line of students.

She scans the crowd, trying to gauge their mood. They’re kids barely out of their teenage years, eyes burning bright with whatever crazed revolutionary slogan has brought them on to the streets. For a moment, the sound of an authoritative, appalled adult stops them in their tracks. None of the others dare to strike the kneeling teachers while Li Shen is berating them. The leading student’s oratory pales beside Li Shen’s fury – she can’t understand what he’s saying, but somehow the passion behind the words seems to translate.

Li Shen pauses for breath and hauls the bleeding teacher to his feet, snatching the white dunce cap from his head. In a moment of pure theatre, he casts the paper headgear to the ground, stamps on it, and eyes burning, dares the crowd to defy him.

There’s a moment of absolute silence. A moment where she dares to believe.

The stone is thrown from somewhere near the back. It’s an unlucky shot, a sharp edge, a one percent chance. Her eyes follow it as it arcs gracefully over the heads of the mob and hits Li Shen hard in the side of the head. Her legs respond almost before her brain, rushing forward as the boy staggers, touches the blood running from his temple in confusion, and collapses. His head hits the concrete paving with a sickening thud.

Solo moves faster than any of them, sweeping Li Shen up and sprinting towards the nearest building. The mob surges towards them and on instinct, she grabs the nearest teacher, spinning him round and screaming “Go!” as if he’ll understand. She points towards Solo, disappearing through a doorway, and shoves him in that direction. The physical contact seems to shake him from his shock and he grabs a colleague’s hand and pulls her after him. The other teachers cotton on immediately and she follows them, hauling students off the slower ones with a strength born of pure rage.

If those few minutes stick in her memory clear as crystal, the next five are a mess. They fall back to guard the door, repelling the clumsy efforts of the mob. It isn’t said exactly, but the three of them are aiming to put the individual attackers down, not out – they’re untrained kids after all, but no less determined despite their lack of finesse.

The sheer weight of numbers means it takes them a while to thin out the crowd, bodies piling up in the gutter groaning until the mob loses enough critical mass. It’s sudden, as if someone’s sounded a retreat. One minute she’s moving as fast as she can, spinning, ducking and connecting, the next moment her fists are flying at thin air. The remaining kids take off down the street, and a growl from Illya encourages most of the ones still on the ground to pull themselves together and hobble away.

She helps Illya barricade up the door. Yael has already disappeared inside to help Solo with Li Shen. The building turns out to be a small school and they find everyone in a classroom. There are faded maps on the walls, a blackboard at the front and some rickety wooden desks. The teachers are huddled at the back, sensibly well away from the windows.

Solo has pushed some of the desks out the way to make room for Yael who is bent over Li Shen on the floor, pressing forcefully on his chest and periodically forcing air into his lungs. Gaby moves closer, a sick panic starting to clutch at her. Solo is slumped against a desk, muttering under his breath.

Yael’s efforts slow and eventually stop. She looks up from Li Shen’s body, catching Gaby’s eye. Her lips are tightly compressed, and she shakes her head tightly, eyes fixed on Gaby’s, asking for forgiveness for her failure. Her eyes flick to Illya, then unwillingly find Solo’s.
Later, she wishes she hadn’t followed Yael’s glance. Napoleon’s face crumples with grief and
guilt, a suffocating, isolating weight that makes it impossible to touch him. She can only watch as
his whole body sags, sinking to his knees next to Li Shen, clutching at a limp hand.

Her hand finds Illya’s as she watches her friend unravel. Napoleon doesn’t wail, or cry. He remains
absolutely still on his knees, his back to her, until after an eternity he heaves three deep breaths,
stands, and starts methodically pounding the nearest surface with his fists. It's as if her two partners
have switched bodies. Solo – the unflappable, insouciant Napoleon Solo – is reducing the flimsy
wooden desks in the room to splinters.

“Illya – do something. He’s going to hurt himself.”

He just shakes his head. “Better broken hand than broken mind, малютка.”

She can’t see the difference from here. “Napoleon…please – please stop. It’s – you’re scaring us.”

He wheels on her, and if she thought she knew all his sides, she’d underestimated him. He keeps
more of himself hidden than any of them, and now she sees there’s a fury there which burns as
brightly as any of Illya’s rages.

“You’re sorry?” he spits. “You? We should all be sorry. Fucking hell, do we ever learn? We’re in
one of the oldest civilisations on Earth and they’re making the same fucking mistakes as your lot
did thirty years ago.”

“And you,” he rounds on Illya, “so goddamned tortured about betraying your shitty revolution, so
slow to get out when you could that we ended up having to rescue you from your goddamn
comrades. Because you were expendable. Hah – we’re all expendable in the face of some fucking
idea. That’s what this is, you know – this madness. These kids out on the street? They’re doing this
for some idea. Some charismatic cunt’s wet dream. The same bastard who starved half the villages
we drove past on the way here, who killed Li Shen’s entire fucking family. How many millions of
people need to die, to suffer for these godawful ideas? Because you always need to blame someone
else, you need some sacrificial lambs. These teachers – they’re suddenly the root cause of all the
misery? Because they weren’t teaching the right propaganda this week, or because they were
trying to teach what is actually going on in the world rather than some damned political theory?
Fucking hell, how many new ways will we find to hate each other?”

He breaks off, gasping for air, and Illya finally moves into Solo’s space. Solo snarls and throws a
wild punch which Illya ducks easily, pressing forward inexorably, avoiding Solo’s wild swings
until his arms are wrapped around his friend. Napoleon’s body stays rigid for another few seconds,
and then he breaks, sagging into the embrace and audibly sobbing against Illya’s shoulder.

She lets out the breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding. The silence in the room is broken only
by Solo’s grief. The teachers are huddled in a corner, terrified beyond reason, too scared to leave.
Through sign language and a reassuring tone, she thinks she encourages them to hide with friends
and family. She hopes that’s the right thing to do – she can’t offer them any refuge, any
reassurance. She knew the rules in Berlin, the ways to weather and avoid the official government
brutality. But here, she’s completely lost – even if she could communicate, what advice would she
give?

One of them grasps her hands as she tries to gesture these complex messages. Tears are running
down the teacher’s face as she stills her movements. The woman turns to the group and says a few
words, and the others start gathering themselves together. “Xièxìe,” the woman says, “xièxìe.”

She can at least scout out the narrow hutong at the back of the building, and seeing no immediate
danger, ushers them away. The same woman takes charge and herds them down off the street.

“Sicher sein,” she whispers after them. *Be safe.*

Back inside, she finds all three gathered around Li Shen’s body. He looks amazingly peaceful. If it weren’t for that one telltale gash near his temple, he could be asleep.

She slips her hand into Illya’s, taking Napoleon’s in the other. Yael hesitantly holds out her hands to the men, completing the circle.

“Yit’gadal v’yit’kadash sh’mei rabah,” Yael murmurs, and the unfamiliar words are strangely soothing. She feels Napoleon jerk slightly in recognition and then relax. He seems to know the prayer, even murmuring *Amen* at certain points. She remembers that he once said he helped to liberate Dachau and imagines him standing with the survivors as they said goodbye to their friends. The first of many human tragedies Napoleon has had to witness - how naive of her to think he didn’t carry some scars.

“Oseh shalom bim’romav, hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu v’al kol Yis’ra’eil v’im’ru Amen.”

There’s a moment of silence as Yael finishes, an audible sniff, and the moment is broken.

“Solo,” Yael says, her normal voice a rasp compared to the mellifluous syllables of the prayer, “we still need to get to the British Legation. You’re the best at recognising characters. Can you get us there?” She holds out a crumpled map that she obviously had to go through Li Shen’s pockets for.

Solo takes it from her slowly but steadily, turning resolutely away from his lover’s body to lay the map out on one of the few intact desk tops. Gaby watches him visibly control himself, pushing down the pain until it’s only noticeable through the tension in his shoulders. She’s suddenly aware of Illya’s hand in hers, and she finds herself gripping it tightly, as if her body is reassuring itself that he’s really there, really alive. He tightens his own grip in response, and she offers up a small prayer of thanks to the universe for the miracle of his survival.

Chapter End Notes

Bizuï = shut up.

Arumloyfer = a fun lover, irresponsible.

The Cultural Revolution started in Beijing in late May 1966. The UNCLE team arrive just as the students were starting to organise into the Red Guards. The students’ ire initially focused on academic authority figures. During June and July 1966, mass violence spread over campuses, where teachers and other educators were abusively subjected to “struggle sessions,” humiliated, and beaten by fervent students. In August, the main target of the Red Guards’ agitation shifted from campuses to the society at large, and it was in August and September 1966 that the beatings became lethal. Thousands of people were killed in these months.

By the end of the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution had swept across China. In Beijing, only the Forbidden City was protected from the Red Guards’ fervour. They tore down “imperialist” road names, and many ancient and religious buildings were damaged.
In 1967, the Red Guards even started to attack foreign embassies. The British Legation, where the team are heading for, was attacked by the Red Guards in August 1967. They set fire to the building which forced the staff outside, and proceeded to beat them. After about an hour, the army were persuaded to intervene and took the Legation to safety. The embassy was rebuilt in 1972.

The prayer that Yael recites is the Kaddish, the mourner’s prayer. I’m not sure it’s necessarily the right blessing for that particular moment, but I don’t see Yael as hugely religious and it’s a prayer that most Jews would know by heart. It is also very beautiful (I think).
Chapter Notes

Wow, so getting this thing finished is taking AGES. Life stuff has been getting in the way, leaving me with little time to write and a wicked case of writer's block. Not to plead for support, but if you are still with me and have any thoughts to share, honestly they really help me keep focused!

This chapter does a lot of set-up for the final, Gallya-centric act, so please bear with all the dialogue and a wee bit of exposition. (But much less heavy historical detail.) The last two chapters (plus an epilogue) are all sketched out, so I promise I will finish this ridiculous endeavour, but it might take me some time. Argh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

British Hong Kong, June 1966

Gaby opens her eyes to a pristine white ceiling, soft cotton sheets, the quiet whirr of a fan in the corner, plush carpet underneath her. The mattress on the bed had been too soft. Two days into their stay in The Mandarin, she has yet to successfully sleep anywhere but the floor.

Her clothes had been another surprise – she didn’t think she’d lost much weight, but the garments she’d been supplied with, though ostensibly in her size, hang off her. It’s only now she has the luxury of baths and mirrors that her body becomes visible to her again, washed clean of the layers of grime and dust to reveal a desiccated husk that reminds her unpleasantly of Illya’s body after the gulag. She supposes she had less to lose.

She stands and walks slowly to the tray of food that appears in the living room every morning without any input on her behalf. She stares at the steaming plates and starts to pick her way through the food. It’s a cautious process, relearning what her stomach can cope with. Strong coffee, for example, had been a mistake. By the time she’s done she’s exhausted again, so she settles down in her little cocoon on the floor and lets herself drift.

The final walk across Beijing had taken them five hours, not the three that Li Shen had predicted. Without him, they’d struggled to decipher the hand-drawn map, hadn’t wanted to spend too long peering at the complex characters in the street signs, marking themselves out as strangers. So they’d ploughed on, hunched into themselves to avoid eye contact, jumping at shadows, seeing threats around every corner.

They had drifted past more beautiful temples, but there had been no joy in them, just a few old, scared monks, probably soon to meet the same fate as the teachers. She’d felt utterly helpless, an unwilling observer, an insubstantial ghost. Eventually, they had come to an enormous rectangular man-made moat, within which high red walls enclosed a serrated series of roofs, stretching away into the darkness.

It had taken them a long time to skirt the first side, and even longer to make their way down the second. When they finally reached the corner, they’d been faced with a vast, modern grey square, staring down the traditional, elaborate, red-walled complex. There had been something chilling about the square, the gaping space a reminder of dimly remembered rallies in Berlin, memories of
eyes burning with the same zealous fire as she’d seen in the eyes of the students they faced earlier. She’s had long-forgotten childhood nightmares every night since.

At least there had been no final obstacle to accessing the Legation. The Chinese soldiers lounging by the front entrance had been entirely uninterested in providing strict security. A few minutes after Yael had disappeared over a quiet part of the back wall, they’d been beckoned through a side gate and into the building.

The next day, they had been bundled out of mainland China. The Legation itself remains a blur. The staff had been kind enough, she thinks, but scared. The pall of uncertainty and fear had hung heavy in the air. It had been a relief to leave.

The Security Service welcome in Hong Kong had been somewhat more forceful. They’d been hurried off the diplomatic plane and into a luxury hotel. It had been made clear that they were not to leave their floor, and preferably not even their separate suites. That means food arrives magically every day, but she hasn’t seen a soul for almost forty-eight hours. Waverly is apparently on his way, so she expects real life to come crashing in on her in a few hours.

In the meantime, the seclusion suits her. She feels oddly detached, disconnected. More guilt-stricken than grieving. It’s not the first time that they’ve lost someone on a mission. Her father, for one... but there have been also been a few extractions gone wrong, potential informants who were not as careful as they thought they were. However, they’ve never lost someone so innocent, someone drawn in purely to help them. And however fleeting her interactions with Li Shen, it is clear how much more that boy was to Solo. The promise of something to come, or the memory of what could have been – either way, his death has shaken something apart in her friend.

She knows better than to try to console Solo. All of them prefer to lick their wounds in private. That night in the Beijing Legation, she had broken into the male staff quarters and located Solo’s room, but he hadn’t answered when she knocked. She had waited there for some time, sitting in the corridor with one hand on the door, as if the wood would be able to magically convey some support to her friend. Wishful thinking.

She tries not to think of Lao Hu Li, sitting in his office in Erenhot, unaware of the tragedy that befell a boy that, in every way except biology, was his son. She wonders if it is better that he will probably never know what happened to Li Shen, will probably live out the rest of his days imagining a glittering life for his boy far away from the restrictive walls of the danwei.

She stares up at the ceiling again, counts her heartbeats, and lets the rhythmic whirr of the fan carry her away.

Waverly comes to see him first, he thinks. He arrives on the second day of their confinement in their gilded Hong Kong prison, days that Illya has spent mostly in a limbo state, trying to keep the rich food down and sleeping as much as physically possible. He had debated going to find Gaby, but given the distrustful looks he’d been given by the British intelligence staff here, it’s probably wiser not to push his luck.

At least Waverly appears relaxed and pleased to see him.

“Kuryakin, good to see you again. I must admit, I would not have bet on this outcome.”
“For anyone other than Cowboy and Teller, I would not have bet on it either.”

“I’m inordinately pleased that they pulled it off. It would have been a criminal waste of two good assets if they hadn’t come back.”

He’s conscious of the slight rebuke, the underlying message: *You are expendable. They aren’t.* It makes sense. He’s worthless now, a burden. Unless he decides to spill some more interesting intelligence. That’s what Waverly’s visit is all about, of course. It’s a negotiation.

“It was Kovacs, I think,” he offers. “The leak. So that avenue was burned. I had to give them Macaulay.”

“Don’t worry, we got him out in time. The man has eyes in the back of his head, I swear. So – they knew about the defection plan, but they didn’t know about the microfiche?”

“No. They suspect, of course. But I have learned some of Solo’s tricks, there was no indication they knew I had access to the documents the last time I was in Moscow.”

“Good. We thought as much, given they didn’t take any mitigating steps after your arrest. That gave us hope, of course. Every man has his breaking point. I am sincerely glad they didn’t find yours.”

He stays silent. There is no need for Waverly to know how close he came to it, in that dark little cell. He remembers the names of the men responsible for his father’s death, their crimes squatting in black and white on the miniature images of highly classified documents. It is in his power to destroy them now, he realises, and his hand, unconsciously clenched, slowly relaxes.

The physical tell doesn’t go unnoticed, but Waverly restricts himself to an inscrutably raised eyebrow.

“Well, if your little cache is safe, that gives us options. I won’t be so crude as to demand its location, but as I have always said, things would go a lot easier for you if you would give us at least some of the evidence.”

Illya sighs. He has already thought this through, but betraying your country still stings. He had spent the past few hours mentally categorising the intelligence he’d stolen into three categories: items he can sell to the West for a new identity and citizenship; items he can use as leverage when his agency inevitably catches up with him; and then the nuclear threat – the items that Waverly and the rest will never even know exist unless his agency do something very foolish. Like kill him, or Gaby, or Solo.

“Kuryakin?”

He takes a deep breath and steps over the invisible line he’d drawn in his soul.

“Yael has what you need.”

Waverly’s eyebrows quirk up in surprise.

“Agent Dayan? Why her?”

He shrugs. “Her motives are aligned with mine. And your reaction suggests she is wise choice. Unexpected.”

He doesn’t say the obvious – she was the only choice. He trusts her without caring about her too
much to shield her from the danger involved. She is one of the most capable agents he has ever
seen in the field, and her nationality ensures that she cannot be compelled by either the British or
the Americans to give up anything he does not want her to. Even he does not know what chain
reaction she would put into effect should the nuclear threat be required, and while that loss of
control was terrifying when he enacted it a year or so ago, the events of the past few months have
only reassured him of the wisdom of his choice.

“I will speak with her,” he continues. “She will pass on some selected intelligence. It will be
enough for what you need.”

Waverly smiles. “Excellent. Well, we have a plan all set up for you. America is obviously not an
option.”

He hums his agreement. Living in the USA would be a step too far.

“If nothing else, it’s far too high profile,” Waverly continues. “The KGB operatives in the country
are probably memorising your photograph as we speak. And anyway, I doubt the Americans would
take you. They think you’re a liability. Unstable.”

It’s his turn to quirk an eyebrow. “You do not think so?”

The older man spreads his hands. “I know you better than they do. Unstable isn’t the word I would
use. No, no, I think we can do better than the USA. As we’re already in Asia, how does Australia
sound?”

Illya considers it. “Is remote. Better than Britain or America. Limited strategic use, but aligned to
Western cause. Limited Soviet espionage activity. Logical.”

“And warm. After Siberia, you must have had enough of the cold for a lifetime.”

He just shrugs. Gaby likes the warmth, he thinks.

Waverly produces a sheaf of papers.

“This is our work-up of a proposed identity for you. We have a place in mind for you to stay
initially. Something of a safe house, to help you get acclimated.”

He nods, already flipping through the information. “And Gaby?”

“Miss Teller is free to do whatever she chooses. Given the likely value of the intelligence you are
now willing to hand over, the Security Service will consider that a fair exchange for the risk she
and Solo took to get you out. At least, that’s the deal I struck with them before I left. She and I are
in the clear, once you and Miss Dayan ensure receipt of the intelligence we discussed.”

Of course. He could best the Englishman at chess quite easily, but the man must be unbeatable at
poker. He’s brilliantly manipulative. He almost suspects that Waverly leaked the original defection
plan deliberately, setting off this entire chain of events just to make him give up his secrets. He
suppresses a shiver. He doubts the man is that calculating, but he certainly has a way of getting
exactly what he wants.

“When can I see her?”

“Just give me a chance to debrief her, old boy, and then she’s all yours.”
Waverly knocks on her door just after midday. She is at least washed and dressed by then, which feels something of an achievement.

“It’s good to see you, my dear. How are you feeling?”

Her handler’s voice is warm and affectionate. She remembers that, apart from her panicky Morse code in the hills of Mongolia almost three months ago, he hasn’t heard from her since March. It’s the longest they’ve ever been out of contact since she called him from West Berlin, three years ago.

“I’m fine, Waverly. What is going on? Why have we all been separated?”

He shakes his head. “The separation was not my idea. The current head of MI6 here is a fool. They suspected a threat.”

“From Illya?”

“From all of you – four renegade agents turn up on their doorstep and people get twitchy, I’m afraid.”

“Are we going to be arrested?”

“No, no. Well, not now that I’m here.”

“Then what is going to happen?”

“I have been discussing with Illya plans for him to get resettled under a new identity in Australia. Solo is about to have a fairly uncomfortable conversation with the CIA and Yael will go back to her day job with Mossad. Life continues, my dear.”

The relief washes over her.

“Illya isn’t going to be arrested?”

“Goodness no. He is now a formal defector from the USSR and has appealed for political asylum. We are in the process of securing a D-Notice for him, just as Australia did for the Petrovs ten years ago.”

“And Solo?” Her chest tightens again.

“Well, I can’t say that the Americans are pleased with him, but given the intelligence that Illya has agreed to share, I think we can talk them down from whatever high horse they’re planning to ride in on.”

“And – and what about me?” She has been afraid to ask, ashamed of her fear. She made a decision in London. *You can send me back to the Stasi – I don’t care.* But she does care, the memories of the scared teachers in Beijing still fresh in her mind, a brutal reminder of life under a government that cares little for the lives of its people. Not that she has any intention of going back. If Illya is going to run from the KGB, she can run from the Stasi. And from her own agency, if she has to.

Waverly reads her expression with ease.

“Gaby – no-one is going to send you back to East Germany. You’re a valuable member of British Intelligence, not an illegal refugee.”
“And my British citizenship?”

“Is open for you to take up whenever you wish to sign the paperwork, Miss Teller.”

There’s an immediate rush of air which leaves her lightheaded. *She wouldn’t have to run.* It flies in the face of all the assumptions the three of them had made while planning the rescue, back in London. After the initial release, suspicion sets in.

“I understood before I left for Russia that I would be lucky to remain a guest of the British government, even if we were able to get Illya out safely. What changed?”

Waverly smiles. “Were there to be any actual proof that you were in Siberia, then yes, things would be rather tricky. However, you and Solo pulled off something of a miracle. The Russians are so embarrassed that some unknown agents managed to steal an important asset and get across Asia undiscovered that they are disinclined to make the sort of demands that involve publicly admitting their failing.”

She translates with the ease of long practice. “They don’t want to admit they lost him so they’re denying they had him in the first place. As far as the record is concerned, we were never there?”

“Exactly.”

“So what does that mean for Illya?”

“Oh, they’ll try to find him and eliminate the threat. We will try and make it as hard as possible to find him – hence the D-Notice, but more importantly, we need to convince them that his death would do them more harm than good.”

“Which means?”

“Which means that Illya and I have it in hand.”

“The same way that you both had his original defection in hand?”

“Trust me, Agent Teller, it’s better for all concerned that you do not know the details.”

She opens her mouth to argue, but is interrupted by an appalling racket in the hallway. Waverly sighs and exits the suite to find Illya improbably menacing a short, sandy-haired man with a china vase. Solo is in a doorway behind him, rubbing his jaw in a way that suggests someone just landed a punch on it.

It takes more than the absurd tableau to shake Waverly. He calmly places himself between Illya and the intruder and gently prises the vase from Illya’s grip.

“Kuryakin, not the Ming vase, please. Next time, I’d prefer it if you threatened Sanders with that hideous ceramic lamp.”

The man – Sanders – practically snarls. “Solo – if you ever pull a stunt like that again, I swear to God I’ll send you to a prison that makes your first incarceration look like a goddamn vacation in Florida.”

His voice is immediately familiar. In all the time she’s spent at UNCLE, she’d never met Solo’s CIA handler, but she’s heard him plenty of times down a telephone line or from another room. The smoker’s rasp raises her hackles just as Oleg’s cold, clinical delivery had done. Illya may be free of them now, but Solo’s still caught in their ugly little net.
“Alternatively, you’re not too old for re-enlistment given your prior active service,” Sanders continues. “How does a return to the front line sound? Vietnam is really hotting up, I’m sure they’d be happy to have you.”

Illya growls, but the threats have no effect on Solo. His eyes have the same blank, cold look he’s worn since they reached the Legation, and the dark circles under his eyes are so pronounced that he looks like someone other than Sanders has been beating him around.

“Come now, Sanders,” Waverly interjects. “All’s well that ends well, and all that.”

“You’re just lucky that the new Director has a soft spot for you, Waverly. But you can count our co-operation on this little venture of yours at an end. Solo – you have precisely thirty minutes to pack your things.”

Solo remains unresponsive. Sanders sighs in frustration and attempts to push past Illya, who simply stands his ground. Even underweight, he’s a formidable presence.

“Waverly,” the American snaps. “Call your Ovcharka to heel.”

There’s a moment of silence where it looks like Illya’s self-control will give way, and she automatically steps into a familiar role, quietly clearing her throat. His eyes snap up to lock onto hers and she wills the cold, blue fire to bank and simmer down. She counts two slow, even breaths before Illya’s stance relaxes slightly and he stalks away from the smaller man.

Waverly continues as if the past thirty seconds consisted only of polite chit-chat. “Kuryakin, we still need to sort out a pile of paperwork. May I prevail on your time for a few minutes more?”

The four men disappear through various doorways, leaving her in the hallway at something of a loss, the adrenalin of the confrontation seeping out of her. She drifts back into her own suite, listlessly starting to gather her own belongings. Her mind runs over the conversation with Waverly, but she can’t seem to focus on it. She’s distracted enough that she doesn’t even register Yael’s entrance until the Israeli coughs quietly to get her attention. The other woman is lolling against the bedroom door, watching her pathetic attempts to fold her newly expanded wardrobe.

“It feels strange to have more than one set of clothes,” she admits ruefully.

“That’s natural. It will take a while to readjust.”

Yael’s eyes fall on the pile of blankets and pillows on the floor and just as quickly flick away. She feels a prickle of embarrassment that flares into a full on bloom of shame as the silence stretches out.

“The bed was too soft,” she mutters.

The silence swallows her confession, leaving her twisting a pair of nylons in her hand, uncharacteristically ill at ease. Her mind helplessly replays her tantrum in the desert. She hasn’t been alone with Yael since then. There’s a lot she should say, but her tongue seems locked.

“I’m leaving as well,” the Israeli finally says. “There was a telegram waiting for me. I came to –”

Gaby finally finds her voice. “I’m sorry, Yael.”

Yael simply raises her eyebrows a little.

“We’ve – I – we’ve treated you so badly. You saved all of us and we – I… I treated you badly.”
The other woman waves it off. “No need to apologise. As I said, Gaby, it’s what you do for friends.”

“Friends, still?”

Yael sighs and shrugs. “You love Illya. You’ll probably always love Illya, no matter what happens. And I don’t want to be a second choice for someone, Gaby. I’d prefer to be no-one’s choice at all. And – it’s such a half-life, that we’re offered. Our partners become this dirty little secret, this shame. And, well – I lie about everything else, Gaby. I’m realising that I’d prefer to be alone than have to lie to the world about that.”

She looks away, tense as she always gets when she’s required to share her feelings, leaving Gaby wondering if she is talking about life as a lesbian or a spy.

“Anyway, I love my work too much to settle down.” Yael continues, talking half to herself, and it’s only at Gaby’s involuntary intake of breath that the Israeli catches herself. “I mean – the work I do, it’s important to me. It’s worth the sacrifice. I don’t want to compromise. That’s not to say that it’s the wrong choice, compromise. I mean…”

Gaby can’t help the way her face changes.

“It’s fine, Yael. You’re right, I love Illya. If giving up this life is what it takes to have him, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Of course.” Yael’s face is now carefully blank, the expression she uses when she’s deliberately not saying something. “It’s a completely understandable decision.”

“You disagree?”

“It’s not my place, Gaby…”

“Yael, you’re not Waverly. Out with it.”

The Israeli smiles, unrepentant. “I meant nothing by it. Only – it is a shame for you to retire after so few years of espionage. You’re made for it, this life. The danger, the intrigue, the travel.”

“What are you suggesting, Yael?”

The Israeli pauses for a moment, before wandering over to the window, watching the hot, busy streets below. “The world is a dangerous place right now. There is instability everywhere. We need the right people, people with skills and nerve, people who can help keep it turning.”

“Who is we, Yael? Are you offering me a job? Would Mossad recruit a German? A German whose father and uncle worked for the Third Reich?”

The Israeli smiles. “We’re a practical nation, Miss Teller. We do not believe the sins of the father are visited upon the daughter. But I wasn’t speaking of my agency specifically. Perhaps – perhaps you should talk again to Waverly, before you make up your mind.”

She waits for a moment to see her arrow hit home, before slipping out of the room as quietly as she had entered. Gaby barely notices her go. She is still standing there, thoughts whirling, when Illya returns.

“Gaby? Are you packing?”
“What? Oh – yes. It sounds like we’ll all be leaving today.”

“Waverly told you of the plan?”

“Plan?”

“Australia? The safe house with his old friend? He has identities for us, an initial cover story in Melbourne.”

“Oh yes – he mentioned Australia. That’s good, right?”

“It is more than we could have hoped for. A normal life, at least within reason. I will be registered as student of Quantum Mechanics at the University of Melbourne. It is good school, I can finish my doctorate. Although – perhaps I will change to study the new computing sciences…”

It’s like her brooding partner has become a six-year-old boy, and she lets him prattle on for a few minutes more. His enthusiasm is infectious – he tells her about the engineering department, about the co-educational facilities…

“Or Waverly says his family friend has many connections with the motor racing community in Australia. You could work in top garage, like Alexander Vinciguerra’s… with perhaps fewer Nazis. I would have to vet the workers first, of course…”

She lets it wash over her, letting him describe her future for her, filling in the vague haze in her own mind with his certainty, his excitement. She lets him help her pack, fussing over the proper way to fold her new, smart, impractical clothes. She wishes she could talk to Solo. He would know how to help, how to break her out of this strange holding pattern. But he has bigger problems right now. How can she be so selfish to worry about her own future, a future that seems to contain everything that just a few weeks ago seemed beyond reach, when Solo’s future contains only the inside of a cell, or at best, being tugged around on a short leash by a singularly charmless man.

He lets Sanders chunter on in the background while he packs his meagre belongings. It suits him for the man to be distracted. It allows him to quietly fold two dog-eared pieces of paper into the lining of his new suit, the flowing characters of the Chinese poem pressed against the neatly precise letters of the English one in a permanent embrace.

There’s a constant buzzing in his head, a white noise that settled in during that final trudge through Beijing. The noise of guilt. The waste paper basket contains several carefully shredded attempts to confess to Lao Hu Li. Not that the final attempt will ever make it to him. He’d given it to Waverly earlier, and the man had just sighed.

“Would knowing really be better, Solo? Lao Hu Li knows that he will die in China, most likely sooner rather than later. Are you asking me to send a message that will not only place him in greater danger but also break his heart? Some things – some things are better never to know.”

So the guilt lies with him alone. Waverly had waffled on about living Li Shen’s life for him, not taking things for granted and other meaningless platitudes. Sanders’ approach had been preferable – he was in the mood for some punishment, some self-flagellation.

But not prison. That had been an empty threat, he knew. Sanders wouldn’t have dashed to Hong
Kong to pick up his asset if that’s all they had planned for him. A suspicion borne out by the glimpse of a manila folder in Sanders’ briefcase when he extracted Solo’s new papers. He began to play a familiar mental game as he finishes laying in the last of his unworn wardrobe. *Africa, Western Europe, South America, Latin America, the Middle East, Central Europe... eeny-meeny-miny-mo.*

He’d just settled on South America and had started guessing countries – made harder by his absolute isolation from current events outside Asia for the past few months – when Sanders actually says something interesting.

“What was that?”

“Lost in your own head, Solo? Better get it screwed on now. If you’ve got to pick up basic Arabic in a few weeks, you’ll need every brain cell you’ve got left. Although – you’ve always learned fast when there’s a pretty girl involved, I’ll give you that.”

“Arabic?”

“I’ll brief you on the plane.” His handler turns towards the door. “What is it?” he barks abruptly.

Solo’s head turns to see Yael watching him calmly. He feels like he’s missed something key… something about Arabic and a pretty girl…

“Sanders – there’s a telephone call for you in your suite. General Stenson wants an update.”

“Of course he does. Damn that man.”

She stays leaning against the door for good few minutes, watching him narrowly and listening to his handler huff and puff out of the suite and down the hall.

“What’s the verdict?” he finally asks.

“I’m sorry?”

“On a scale of one to ten, how stupid was I?”

“Solo – you don’t think I’m here to say I told you so, do you?”

He shrugs. It would be the least he deserves. “You warned me to be careful with the boy,” he says tonelessly.

“This isn’t what I meant, Solo. You know that. You weren’t to blame for what happened. For any of it.”

“Maybe not. But I’ve shirked responsibility for enough things in my life, I’ve escaped death enough times, perhaps I began to feel invulnerable. Living my charmed life, maybe fate needed to redress the balance.” His throat closes up as the guilt rises like bile. “I can’t help but feel like I damned him. Perhaps, perhaps you were right – I am lethal.”

He has to hand it to her, she doesn’t try and talk him out of it. The silence lets him breathe, lets the world keep turning despite his admission. And then, so soft he might have imagined it,

“So am I.”

For a second, the wound is fresh and open, exposed to the light. The raw pain is sharp but somehow satisfying.
The moment is not so much broken as shattered and then stamped on by Sanders as he reappears in a fresh coat of irritation.

“Damn man wasn’t even there. Hotel switchboard swears blindly that he was on the line until thirty seconds before I got there. Now they can’t even reach him due to the damn encrypted connection. What a mess.”

He catches Yael smothering a satisfied smile, and it elicits the first glimmer of light in his soul for days. Sanders fusses around them.

“All packed, Solo? Then say your goodbyes. Wheels up in twenty, which means in the car in five.”

It’s not in Yael to be demonstrative, so she sticks an awkward hand at him in lieu of anything warmer. He rallies a little, feeling a shred of his old mischief wrap around him as he takes her hand and raises it to his lips.

“Always a pleasure, Miss Dayan.”

The words lack some of his usual arrogance, but it’s a start.

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon, Solo,” Yael murmurs, and his earlier suspicions are immediately confirmed. It’s not Gaby or Illya, but it’s something. And right now, he’ll take something over nothing.

“Get on with it, Solo.” Sanders scoffs from the doorway. “You never change. One day perhaps you’ll learn to keep it in your pants.”

And at least that earns a genuine smile from Yael as she turns away, their own private joke. Working with yet another woman who won’t sleep with him…Sanders has no idea how much he’s changed.

His goodbye to Gaby and Illya is necessarily brief and forced, with Sanders lurking malevolently in the corner. He tries to put on a brave face for them, intended to leave them with the sense that everything is fine.

“Two more years, then I’ll be haunting your doorstep. Don’t worry about me, if nothing else, the last few years have proved that I’m quite difficult to kill. In fact, my life expectancy has probably improved now Teller won’t be driving us around like a madwoman the whole time.”

Gaby refuses to let Sanders’ disapproval stop her from hugging him goodbye. He can feel tension radiating through her body, and he’s not sure whether to ascribe it to concern for him or worry for herself. His little German isn’t quite herself yet, not that he’s one to talk, and he catches Illya’s eye over her head. Illya seems unconcerned, so he contents himself to a warning look and an affectionate farewell:

“Peril – don’t fuck it up.”

“Cowboy – don’t get yourself killed without me.”

“Not having you around will be like having my own personal bodyguard, Peril. What will I do without all the extra fights you got us into?”

“Two more years, Solo,” Gaby cuts in. “See you in ’68.”

“It’s a date, Süße.”
And then he’s gone, before his voice can betray him.

Chapter End Notes

The grey square in Beijing staring down the Forbidden City is Tiananmen Square, one of the largest squares in the world. It’s a really weird collision of old and new declarations of power – the Imperial Palace vs the Communist Square.

A D-Notice (now a DA-Notice) is an official request to news editors not to publish or broadcast items on specified subjects for reasons of national security, used in both the UK and Australia.

KGB agent Alexander Petrov defected to Australia with his wife while stationed in Melbourne in the 1950s, and lived quietly there until their deaths.

An Ovcharka is a large Russian dog. (In fact, the Caucasian Ovcharka is also known as the Russian Bear dog.)
Choosing

Chapter Notes

Firstly thank you all SO much for the wonderful comments on Chapter 8. It really helped to push me along - in fact this chapter would have been up even sooner were it not for an ill-timed bout of food poisoning.

Secondly, this chapter contains lots of poor decision making and angst, sorrynotsorry... let me know your thoughts please!

At least Chapter 10 is half written so hopefully Gallya fans won't hate me for too long. Ch 10 and the Ch 11 epilogue will be posted together so this is the penultimate update - almost there!

Finally some notes on the inclusion of Miss Fisher. So...the crossover between TMFU fans and Miss Fisher fans is probably not enormous but I adore the show and hopefully this little cameo will encourage more people to look it up. (The UST, the outfits, Jack's *hands*...unfff.) I couldn't have the team heading to Melbourne without including Miss Fisher - it just makes *so* much sense that she’s an old friend of Waverly’s.

I'm using the TV series incarnation of Phryne, so her age should be roughly in line with what the show (set in the 20s) indicates. I'm sorry there's no Jack - fair warning! But he's there in the subtext. I hope MFMM fans can forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melbourne, July 1966

It’s winter in Melbourne, and the slate grey skies and chilly wind do nothing to shake off her strange lethargy. They sit in the smart car that had met them at Essendon airport, the luxury conflicting with the informal ease of the driver who had cheerfully flung their suitcases in the boot.

“I’ve got you a place to stay for a while,” Waverly had explained to her and Illya on the flight, “with an old friend. She’s a little eccentric, but sharp as a tack and with a soft spot for waifs and strays. Much better than an awful government safe house.”

His smile had suggested genuine fondness for their new landlady. “They don’t make people like her anymore. You’re about to meet the woman who helped me get clean.”

That would normally be enough to pique her interest, but now she finds herself staring out blankly at the wet streets, unable to summon her enthusiasm.

The window glass is steaming up, obscuring her view, so despite the weather she cranks the glass down a little. The wind whips in immediately, carrying a sharp, salty tang which her brain takes a moment to place before the road curves round, bringing the sea into view. They pass a road sign emblazoned *St Kilda*, and she realises they are getting close.

Illya rests his hand lightly on her knee, picking up on her tension. It had been impossible to hide
her strange mood from him on the plane, but they’d had no opportunity to properly talk. And even if they had, what would she say? She has everything she could have hoped for four months ago, when she and Solo crossed the border into East Berlin.

She tries not to think about her conversation with Yael yesterday: “It is a shame for you to retire...you’re made for it, this life.”

They pull up in front of a lovely period townhouse with a white stucco exterior and a delicate, red-accented verandah ringing the first floor. An impeccably attired man opens the door and announces their arrival, while Waverly ushers them into a room filled with knick-knacks and objets d’art.

The lady rising stiffly from her chair by the fireplace must be heading for eighty, but there’s a sharp and playful intelligence in her eyes. Gaby warms to her at once.

“Alexander!” she exclaims, and her voice is strong and clear, decades younger than her face. “So it takes an international incident to get a visit from you these days.”

“Phryne, if only Melbourne were a little closer to London, I would be over every Tuesday for tea, you know that.”

She turns to her visitors, sizing them both up with a half-smile.

“As you arrive with such attractive guests, I’ll forgive you. Come in, please. Alexander has told me all about you both.”

“Gaby, Illya – I have the pleasure of introducing the Honourable Miss Phryne Fisher. Gaby – you’re in the presence of one of the best motorcar racers that Australia never had. Noted private detective, special constable to the Victoria police force, renowned socialite, and in a neat case of nominative determinism, shares her name with an ancient Greek courtesan.”

Miss Fisher’s laugh is throaty and full, particularly when she notices Illya’s expression. “Don’t look so shocked, my dear. It’s not like your generation invented sex.”

She looks at him more closely, and her face softens. “You remind me of an old, old friend, tovarisch. He would look at me just that way sometimes. Indulge an old lady, come sit by me and let me tell you all about him.”

In the face of such a charm offensive, Illya is powerless to resist. He is sucked into Miss Fisher’s orbit, and she and Waverly trail after him, surrendering to the tidal wave of personality that washes over them. She sinks into a chair and watches, fascinated, as Miss Fisher coaxes a smile out of Illya in less than two minutes. It’s something of a relief to remember that their host must be forty years older than him – Gaby gets the impression that Miss Fisher could steal away the heart of any man she put her mind to.

Which reminds her of an absent friend. She wishes Solo was here to meet his match, although it’s possible that putting that much charisma in one place could reasonably be considered illegal.

Miss Fisher’s butler – a Mr Driver, confusingly enough – reappears to serve whisky to the women and water to the men, apparently psychically divining her and Illya’s preferences at this hour. She feels her mood lift with the alcohol, tension bleeding out of her shoulders as she watches Illya try to control his face while their host regales them all with tales of increasingly outlandish derring-do.

During Gaby’s second dram, while Miss Fisher continues to scandalise and entertain Illya in the parlour, Waverly draws her away to a small dining room.
“Miss Teller, I feel I owe you an apology. In Hong Kong, our discussion was interrupted by Sanders’ little altercation with Solo. And after that, I entirely neglected to finish our debriefing. A very poor show indeed.”

“What else was there to discuss?”

“Well, the matter of your future, my dear. You’re a free woman, no-one is hunting you. You can go where you choose. Of course, while I hesitate to comment on your arrangement with Mr Kuryakin, I would understand entirely if your immediate choice of location is here. We took the precaution of developing your cover story for just that eventuality.”

Her new identity places her at Miss Fisher’s as the granddaughter of an old family friend, independent of Illya’s cover as an unrelated lodger. That hadn’t seemed strange to her. While she expects that Waverly has known what she and Illya were up to even before they did, their relationship is obviously not a matter of official record. Nevertheless, she had assumed that the existence of said identity meant that this was where Waverly intended her to stay. It occurs to her that the concept of choice has entirely passed her by.

Waverly interrupts her train of thought. “However, were you to decide that you have a few more rolls of the dice in you, your talents would be most useful in my next little endeavour. I recall you rather enjoying South America, and MI6 feel that this new revolution in Argentina requires some reliable ears on the ground.”

He’s offering her a new mission. Her heart stutters, as Yael’s voice echoes in her ear. “Perhaps you should talk again to Waverly, before you make up your mind.”

She had dismissed the Israeli’s hints during the long flight south from Hong Kong. Waverly had said nothing to her the whole way, had given her the cover identity, talked effusively about Melbourne’s many charms. Perhaps, her treacherous little voice supplies, he wanted to wait until you saw Illya would be alright, had known that you couldn’t consider leaving him without being sure that he is safe.

She shakes her head, trying to unjumble her thoughts. “I thought you were retiring?”

He smiles ruefully. “I don’t think it agrees with me, I’m afraid. Really, how many new languages does a man need to learn before it becomes a little academic?”

He waits, watching her expectantly. She stalls for time.

“Does this offer have an expiration date?”

Waverly smiles, “Well, I am leaving tomorrow. I don’t mean to rush you, but international events wait for no man – or woman, in this case.”

“And how long would it be for?”

“For as long as you want to do it, Teller. Or for as long as you stay alive. Take your pick.”

The rooms that Mr Driver shows her and Illya to are nominally separate and highly respectable, but turn out to have a secret interlinking door. Miss Fisher is living up to all her initial promise.
Normally this discovery, made when Illya emerges unexpectedly from a cupboard in her bedroom about thirty seconds after they said goodnight on the landing, would be a welcome surprise. But after Waverly’s proposal, she can’t focus on her Russian at all. When he kisses her, urgent and fierce, all she can think about is the deadline tomorrow and the insistent ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

Illya’s not an idiot, so he can tell something is wrong, but he doesn’t press her for details. Her muttered excuse of a headache after the day’s travel sounds pretty flimsy after what they’ve been through in the past few months, but as she’s been quiet all day it’s not entirely unbelievable.

He checks her room for surveillance equipment through force of habit before kissing her goodnight and departing, the half-light of the room shadowing his eyes and preventing her from gauging his mood. Perhaps it’s the weight of the secret, her guilt at not immediately turning Waverly down, but there’s a distance between them that’s stopping her from reading him properly.

On the other hand, perhaps the barrier between them has nothing to do with Waverly’s offer. She can’t remember the last time she felt completely at ease with him. It’s not like their relationship has a great track record of strong communication. Her mind runs round in circles as she brushes her teeth, rotating through all the arguments, the sleepless nights, the triumph and despair of the past few months.

She was a fool to think that they could segue effortlessly into civilian lives, swapping intrigue and danger for routine and calm. They have no idea how to live like that, how to sustain passion and excitement without regular injections of danger and disaster. Neither of them have any idea how to conduct an ordinary relationship, how to be happy. She thinks back to Buenos Aires, the last time there was a façade of normality. Had she even known his mind then, as he made love to her while he planned to leave?

She’s still angry with him about that. He had intended to vanish from their lives for years, planning to outrun his agency without the help of any foreign power, without the help of his teammates. At least this turn of events has forced him to compromise. What price a few Soviet secrets when it buys him the protection of governments?

But then, he’s not the one hiding things any more. No, no, Teller, that’s your speciality now. It’s not Illya that’s standing in the way of their future lives together. He’s not the one that stayed silent rather than immediately telling Waverly to find another agent for his new mission, not the one whose first instinct was to play for time. Illya had been thrilled to find out they didn’t have to run. In fact, he hasn’t shown any hesitation at all, has jumped at the chance to be a normal man in a normal town, every humdrum little choice he makes a finger in the eye of his former masters.

If a man as damaged as Illya can seize his chance to be happy, to trust the everyday joys of an ordinary life, then why can’t she?

Her suitcase stands open in the corner, still mostly packed. It squats there, fat, full and reproachful. She stares it down until she cracks and hauls piles of clothes out of it, throwing nylons and dresses, slacks and blouses into cupboards and drawers with little care or attention. There, she thinks. Happy now?

But she’s not. She fidgets in her pyjamas on the firm mattress, forcing herself to relax on to it. You’re a normal person now. Normal people sleep in beds, not in little bundles on the floor.

Her subconscious, though, is having none of it. One hour passes, then two, until in rage and frustration she tears back the covers and slips downstairs to find some alcohol. Something about Miss Fisher’s face makes her suspect she won’t mind a few slugs of whisky going missing.
There is a selection of wonderful single malts in the drinks cabinet in the dining room. She settles on a nearly-full Macallan, honeyed and soothing, then locates ice and glass before wandering back up to her room and opening the window on to the verandah before swinging herself out into the cold night air.

The wind has dropped to a light breeze and the whisky counteracts the nighttime chill nicely. The fresh air helps to calm her nerves and she sips in peace, leaning on the delicate wire barrier and staring out into the dark, quiet street below.

She’s startled by the arrival of their host, who appears unannounced from around the corner of the house. She can believe Miss Fisher was an accomplished detective back in her day – she moves like a cat.

“Can’t sleep?”

She nods. “Did Waverly explain the situation?”

Miss Fisher moves to join her, resting her weight against one of the slender pillars that break up the verandah railing.

“He gave me a summary, yes. When I heard the clink of the downstairs liquor cabinet, I suspected I might find you out here.”

“I’m sorry for waking you.” She winces. “And for stealing your scotch.”

Her host laughs softly and conjures her own glass from within a capacious sleeve. Gaby proffers the bottle, and Miss Fisher pours in a healthy slug.

“No need to apologise. I don’t sleep much, these days. And I have more scotch than I know what to do with. I was beginning to worry that bottle would outlast me.”

In the darkness, she had almost forgotten Miss Fisher is old. She seems ageless, somehow, as if the accumulation of years weighs as little on her shoulders as her cashmere robe.

“It doesn’t seem to be doing much good, so far,” she admits. “I’m still wide awake.”

“Well you would be, wouldn’t you? I never understood the phrase, ‘I’ll sleep on it.’ Hard decisions tend to get in the way of sleep.”

Gaby smiles ruefully.

“So,” Miss Fisher continues, “are you going to tell me about it, or do I need to wring it out of you?”

She sighs and stares down at her glass, trying to put her swirling thoughts into a logical order.

“I went halfway around the world to save him. I risked my life – and other people’s – to get him back, to make sure he was safe. I fought tooth and nail to be with him, while he kept telling me it was the wrong choice. And now I have him, and I don’t regret it at all. But – and I can’t believe I’m saying this – is it enough?”

She winces as the words leave her mouth, but Miss Fisher simply hums thoughtfully, and motions her to continue.

“I’m not sure I can bear to leave him, but I’m not – I’m not ready to stay. I spent so many years trapped in one place, literally fenced off from the free world. I risked everything to escape East
Berlin, to be part of something bigger, to see the world. And I’m not sure I want to give that up. No
offence, Miss Fisher – Melbourne seems lovely. But it’s just so far away from the rest of the world.
And it has to be. It’s dangerous for Illya even here. So if I stay now, will I ever be able to leave?”

Miss Fisher nods quietly, taking her time to reply.

“I’m not generally one for advice, Gaby. Lord knows I never took anyone else’s. If you’re waiting
for me to tell you what to choose, I’m going to disappoint you. You alone know your own heart.”

Gaby sighs. “It’s not my heart that I’m struggling with.”

Miss Fisher shifts to stare out into the distance, the lamplight from the downstairs porch shining
just brightly enough for Gaby to make out the softening in her expression.

“It’s funny how history repeats itself. Your Russian reminds me of a wonderful man that I loved
very much. He was probably the closest any man ever came to holding my undivided attention.”

Gaby takes a moment to imagine having Miss Fisher’s undivided attention. Personally, she thinks it
would be terrifying. Clearly Phryne’s old flame had been made of stern stuff.

“What happened?”

“That’s a story that will need a lot more whisky, my dear. But the essential conflict was perhaps
similar to yours. Jack loved single-mindedly, wholeheartedly. He was an all-in kind of man. While
I – I prefer to be playing three games at the same time. Hard to reconcile.”

“You think Illya is like that?”

“I think that boy would walk through fire and flood for you. And that’s a hell of a thing. It’s
wonderful to inspire that devotion, but it can be a weight to bear. Never stay to make someone else
happy, Gaby. Only ever stay to make yourself happy.”

Miss Fisher pauses, searching for something in the darkness.

“There are no right choices in life, I’m afraid,” she says eventually. “No way to live without
creating some regrets. If I’ve learned anything, it’s to know your own heart and your own mind,
and not to beat yourself up too much if they don’t agree with each other.” She drains her glass, and
pushes herself off the railing.

“I hope you find some answers, my dear. But either way, don’t stint on the scotch.”

She starts to sashay away around the corner, before pausing. “If it’s bothering you, by the way, I
never got into quite so many scrapes on my travels as I did in Melbourne with Jack. We caught a
number of murderers, almost got ourselves killed on countless occasions and had a glorious time.
Life is as exciting as you make it, you know.”

Gaby smiles and raises her glass in salute. You can trust Waverly to have the most interesting
friends. She turns back to face the street, the cold wind whipping against her cheeks.

Lost in thought, she doesn’t see one of the windows behind her, previously ajar, quietly slide shut.
She wakes the next morning with a dry mouth, an aching head and a decision. The room is flooded with watery daylight, making it hard to work out how early it is. She hauls herself out of bed to twitch aside the curtain. The sky outside is still grey and a soft drizzle is falling, deadening the noise of traffic and giving the road a sleepy feel, so it’s a surprise when she turns to the clock and finds that she’s slept half the morning away.

She groans to herself, scrubbing away the sleep from her eyes, and struggles into some fresh clothes. After months of never caring what she looked like, it’s frustrating to have to put on an outfit each day, but she makes an effort for Illya and for Miss Fisher – whose clothes and *macquillage* last night were stylish enough even to satisfy her difficult Russian’s tastes.

It doesn’t help that half of her clothes are hideously creased from being bundled unceremoniously into cupboards. She stares at the mess for a while before deciding to fix it after she's spoken to Waverly and drunk some coffee.

She drifts downstairs and into the kitchen, where Driver makes no comment about the hour. He seems used to erratic hours and eccentric guests. He also continues to display psychic inclinations, setting down a cafetière of coffee for her almost before she’s gathered her words enough to ask for one.

Around her second cup, Waverly bustles into the kitchen.

“Ah, Gaby my dear, you’re up. Capital. I was beginning to worry we’d have to wake you.”

She grimaces. “Blame Miss Fisher’s drinks cabinet.”

He smiles. “She does like her strong liquor. The only time I’ve ever seen this place entirely dry was when – well, when I was drying out myself.”

Gaby pauses. Her boss has never explicitly spoken about his addictions before. It occurs to her that he has become a slightly different person in this house, as if it is a place safe enough to let his defences down a little. It reaffirms her sense that this the right place for Illya to be.

“Waverly – I should tell you…”

“Goodness me, is that the time? Don’t worry about the packing, Gaby. Driver will take care of all of that for you. Just be ready to go in fifteen minutes, otherwise we’ll miss the flight.”

She just blinks at him for a moment.

“Flight?”

“Yes, yes – Kuryakin found me this morning and let me know you’d be joining me. I’m thrilled, I really am. So pleased that you’re on board. This assignment would have been hell without your help. Now, I’ll brief you when we’re in the air. It’s going to be a pig of a trip to Buenos Aires, so we’ll have plenty of time to get into the details.”

Her boss grins broadly and squeezes her shoulder, completely ignoring how rigid she’s gone, hands clamped white around her coffee cup.

“Get that down you and say your goodbyes. I’ve said it to Miss Fisher on your behalf as she had an engagement with Dot and Hugh, but you should find Illya helping Driver with the woodpile out the back, I think.”

The phone rings in the hallway. “Ah, that’ll be HQ. Do excuse me.” And he disappears into the...
Gaby takes five slow, deep breaths, allowing the previous minute and a half to sink into her ragged brain. By the fifth inhale, the bewilderment has evolved into a slow build of anger, gathering steam as she pieces together the evidence get to one, inescapable conclusion.

Then she drains her coffee and stands, neatly places the empty cup and saucer in the sink, and strides towards the back door.

Her hand is just reaching for the handle when the door swings open, and Illya, arms full of chopped wood, almost collides with her.

“Illya.”

His expression is shuttered, emotionless. “Gaby.”

He sweeps past her through the kitchen, forcing her to trail after him into the parlour, where he dumps the wood into a basket by the fire.

“Illya.”

He straightens, still facing the fireplace, before turning slowly to face the music.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

He doesn’t reply immediately, choosing to take a deep breath in and out and visibly making his arms drop loosely to his sides.

“Am thinking you need to be gathering your things.”

“You don’t get to make my decisions, Illya! Nor do you get to eavesdrop on private conversations.”

He bristles. “Is not private conversation if held outside my bedroom window, Gaby. Surely you did not expect me not to hear?”

She winces. She’d been drunk, and she and Miss Fisher hadn’t been whispering.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

She tosses her head – her misdemeanour is definitely not the major crime here.

“Irrespective of what you heard, or thought you heard, Illya, what you didn’t hear was me deciding to leave. So why is Waverly convinced that I am joining him in Argentina?”

“Because it is what you want, малютка. Am I wrong?”

“Yes, you idiot. I decided to stay!”

He startles for a moment, and then recovers.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”
“No. It is bad decision.”

She grits her teeth. “Irrespective of whether it is a good or bad decision, Illya, the choice is mine to make.”

“Not if it means you will be unhappy. If I could come with you, would you stay here? Would you retire from spying?”

“Well no, but –”

“You enjoy the game still, I know this. The thrill, the danger. Getting the bad guy, as Cowboy says.”

“So do you. If it weren’t for the situation, you would come with me, right?”

Illya slowly shakes his head, and her doubts from last night start to resurface, churning queasily with the coffee in her stomach.

“No, my little chop shop girl. I am finished with it all. I do not want to kill any more, now that I have choice not to.”

“And what about my choice, hmm? What about my decision?”

He sighs, and lifts his gaze away from her, staring maddeningly at a point on the wall over her head.

“You have already made it, малютка. You just do not realise this yet.”

She starts to protest, even stammers out a few words, but her throat closes and her mouth grinds to a halt. It’s true. If Illya could come with her, she would have said yes to Waverly without a second thought. If he hadn’t been whisked off to the gulag by his bosses, she would happily have carried on in their little team. It’s only Illya that’s keeping her here, and he seems determined that she should leave.

She needs him to be the rock in this relationship, the grounding force that can anchor her here and help her build a normal life. He needs to be certain, sure. And he’s not. Her heart is breaking but her mind, her rational, unemotional mind sees clearly. He has never said it to you, Gaby. Even now. He has never asked you to stay.

Steps sound in the hallway behind them, and she turns to see Mr Driver carrying her suitcase to the car. She feels all the control slipping away from her. It feels like she’s a passenger in her own car crash.

She takes a deep breath and turns back to the room.

“I need a reason, Illya.”

He winces, but doesn’t meet her gaze.

“Give me a reason to stay.”

He stays silent, fixing his eyes over her head, one hand beginning to clench and unclench rhythmically.

“Come on, Illya. I’m begging you now. Give me a reason to stay.”
There’s a tick in his jaw now, his whole body shaking, but the stubborn ass won’t bend. She’s beginning to panic herself, her voice shrill and desperate.

“Illya, please.”

He sucks in a breath, visibly calming himself, and finally slants his eyes down to meet hers.

“Goodbye, Gaby.”

Her fear ignites, turning into pure, white hot rage. Everything she had put herself through, everything she had risked, everything she was willing to give up, and he couldn’t – wouldn’t – fight for her.

Her hand fumbles at her throat, finding the slim chain. She tears at it roughly, feels the clasp give, and hurls the battered, faux-pearl ring at him.

“До свидания, Illya,” she spits, and turns on her heel.

The rage insulates her from any other consideration. She gives her body over to it, letting it carry her out of the house on a wave of fury.

Waverly is waiting for her in the car, the same irreverent chauffeur in the front. She slams the door behind her.

“Go.”

“Do you have everything, miss? Don’t want to forget your passport or something.”

“Go!”

The car screeches off obediently, and she keeps her eyes fixed straight ahead, feeling one lid twitch as a small part of her strains to look for blond hair in her peripheral vision, urges her to turn around in case a tall, familiar figure is chasing them down the street.

But the street is empty, and this car is not her little Wartburg, and this is not East Berlin. They reach the end of the road and smoothly take the corner, and even without looking, she knows exactly when the house behind them moves out of view.

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**September 1966**

The quiet beep wakes him easily, moving from unconscious to alert as smoothly as he used to do on his missions. Mac says that he’s not sleeping enough, but the security measures he’s installed at least allow him to get a few hours a night.

The little red light on the console shows a perimeter breach on the south west corner of the property. He recalibrated them last week, so he’s at least eighty percent sure that it’s not another fox. That assessment rises to ninety percent when you factor in the security alert he’d received yesterday from ASIO.

He slides a knife into his sleeve, slips on soft-soled shoes, and eases into the hallway. At the top of the stairs he pauses, letting his ears adjust to the sounds of the house. The end of the early-spring
fire is still flickering in the parlour grate – he can hear the last logs crackling and shifting. The slight creak of the wind on the wooden porch. A distant car. And then the unmistakable sound of the back door handle being depressed.

It had pained Mr Driver grievously when Illya had deliberately messed with all the doors and windows on the property, and only Miss Fisher’s explicit orders had prevented him from immediately re-oiling them. She had been equally unruffled when Illya had started digging up the petunias in the garden and mucking about with the chimney flue.

“Driver, this house has never been safer,” she’d exclaimed, conveniently ignoring the fact that none of these precautions would be required if she weren’t harbouring a Soviet defector on the premises.

And now her bald-faced lie is being put to the test, the least he can do is to repay her faith in him. It’s the bare minimum the woman deserves.

He’s not sure he would have made it this far if it weren’t for Miss Fisher. (He isn’t quite ready to move to Phryne yet, but he’s getting there.) He shudders to think how much money he has already cost her. There was the cleaning of the parlour carpet, of course, after she found him passed out blind drunk in his own vomit the day Gaby had left. Then the bill for replacing the furniture in the his guest bedroom:

“Waverly suggested it would be wise to move all of the good furniture out of your room before you arrived, so really it’s nothing we weren’t prepared for.”

And the even higher bill for repairing a good chunk of the furniture in the room Gaby had used, the one night she’d been here:

“Well,” Miss Fisher had reasoned, surveying the damage. “Frankly this is my fault for not anticipating that might happen.”

But she’d done more than just let him vent his pain physically. She’d let him use her own support system – Dot, Hugh and their brood of children and grandchildren, who, showing no fear, tended to view his long limbs as an impromptu climbing frame; Dr Macmillan – Mac – who reminds him faintly of Yael, fixing him with a sharp stare over her whisky glass before gently interrogating him over a chess game; Mr Driver, who had invited Illya to help him polish the silver, somehow knowing the rhythmic, almost mindless activity would settle his mind and allow him to sleep properly for the first time in days.

And Miss Fisher herself, who’d driven him across town a couple of days after the second furniture incident to a sprawling, ramshackle old mansion, unlocked the door and told him:

“Have at it. Honestly, go nuts. A friend of mine is completely remodelling this monstrosity but has temporarily run out of cash. He says as long as you don’t bring down the upper floor on your head, you may do whatever you please.”

He’d stared at her uncertainly until she’d picked up a sledgehammer and, displaying surprising strength for her age, had smacked a hole in the nearest piece of plasterboard. Then she’d handed it to him and left him to it.

When he’d come out forty minutes later, panting and exhausted, she’d been perched calmly on the bonnet of the car, holding a first aid kit for his knuckles.

“Take the car and come across whenever you like,” she’d told him on the drive home.
“You do not wish to drive me yourself?” he’d asked wryly, as the car had skidded round another sharp bend in the road.

She’d smiled. “I do love driving. And you’re doing much better than Jack. He used to practically cross himself when he got in the passenger seat.”

He’d shrugged. “Am used to it. Gaby drives just as fast. But like her, you are in perfect control. So, nothing to be scared of.”

It was the first time that he’d said her name since she left.

The back door squeaks ever so gently as it closes, bringing him back to the present. He hasn’t needed to go to the house for a few weeks now, instead able to chase away his demons with long, brutal runs and a punishing weights routine in the back garden. His body is coming back to him, the power he knew slowly returning to his limbs with the benefit of rest and regular food.

He will be a much harder target for his agency now. They were too slow to find him.

The kitchen door whispers open and a dark shape slowly creeps along the hall. He shadows it down the stairs, slowly unsheathing his knife, before it stops in front of the parlour door, surveying the faint glow of the fire spilling out on to the tiles.

The figure silently eases a gun from its pocket, the barrel shining very faintly as its owner nudges the door ajar and reconnoitres the room. Illya imagines the room’s set-up from the stranger’s perspective, the two high-backed armchairs turned to the fire, any occupants deliberately difficult to see from the door. The intruder pauses and then pushes the door wider and slips inside.

He knows he has only a few seconds to incapacitate the assassin before they finish scoping the room, so he’s down the last few stairs and into the room in moments, knife in hand and ready to throw.

What he finds however, is a figure in black backed up against the fire, its gun abandoned on the (still faintly stained) carpet. He rounds the sofa to find Miss Fisher comfortably positioned in the left armchair, pointing a gun steadily between the intruder’s eyes.

“As I’ve mentioned before,” she remarks. “One of the perks of being old is that you don’t sleep much.”

He takes a moment to adjust to the new circumstances.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Illya,” she says, not taking her eyes off the man. “What on earth did you bring a knife for?”

He shrugs. “Thought would be quieter. Didn’t want to wake anyone.”

“Well, it’s a bit late for that, but thank you for the thought. Alright, tovarisch – I assume you are a tovarisch – let’s see who you are. Off with the mask.”

The man by the fire reluctantly tugs off his balaclava, revealing a face Illya recognises from missions long ago.

“Petrov, you little shit,” Illya says, switching into Russian. “I should have known they would send you.”

Petrov takes a step forward. “Kuryakin. I knew they should have just killed you in Moscow. But
no. Orlov decided to play petty power games, tucked you away in Siberia in case he needed a scapegoat for the crap that went down in Belgrade. Well, that backfired spectacularly.”

Illya shrugs. “He is no longer heading up the Fourth Department at the Seventh? No big surprise. He was always shit at his job.”

“He was good enough to find you.”

“Petrov, a blind duck could have found me in half the time. I was wondering what was taking you so long.”

“While this is all very interesting,” Miss Fisher cuts in, in accented but intelligible Russian, “I don’t believe I gave you permission to move, young man.”

She gestures with her gun, and Petrov moves back up against the fire. Illya notes that a few fresh logs have recently been thrown on it, so it’s blazing brightly against the back of Petrov’s legs. His old colleague is starting to sweat a little.

“What do you want to do with him, Illya?” she asks, switching back to English.

He smiles.

“Oh, Petrov is old friend. No, no. We will just give him message.”

“What kind of message?” Petrov asks in Russian, a hint of fear beginning to creep into his eyes.

“Don’t worry, it’s very simple. Even you couldn’t forget it – just four names.”

“Four names?”

“And an invitation to someone who actually matters. I will be waiting for them, at their earliest convenience.”

He pulls Petrov forward and whispers four names quietly but clearly into his ear, then tugs the man down to drive his knee into Petrov’s solar plexus. The man hinges forward, gasping for air, and his downward motion brings his nose sharply into the rising heel of Illya’s hand. There’s a crunch, and blood streams from Petrov’s face on to the carpet. Illya completes his message with a sideways blow to Petrov’s right knee, which he remembers has only half the cartilage it should do. He bends down, and repeats the four names to the man wheezing on the floor, before hauling him up and dragging him out of the room.

He takes a moment to survey the front porch, but Petrov has clearly (and foolishly) come alone. For his troubles, the assassin is dumped unceremoniously on the pavement outside the front gate.

Illya returns inside, makes a quick phone call to get the ball rolling, then heads into the parlour to find Miss Fisher looking speculatively at the floor.

“Sorry about blood on carpet, Miss Fisher. I did not think.”

“Oh don’t worry about it Illya, the carpet needed replacing anyway.”

She pulls herself out of the chair and heads to the drinks cabinet.

“I feel like vodka would be appropriate, yes?”

He shrugs, but lets her fix him a drink.
“May I ask the significance of the four names?” she asks, and he sighs, stretches out his legs, and starts to tell her about his father.

A few days later, three CCCP officials are abruptly withdrawn from their positions. It doesn’t cause a stir in the international press, most don’t even report it. But it’s there, if you look closely; a diplomat called home due to a sudden, mystery illness, the unexplained replacement of an obkom bureau secretary, and most significantly, an unexpected early retirement of one of the members of the Party Control Commission. No-one reports the fourth casualty, but it’s probably fair to assume that, behind the scenes, a KGB officer from the First Chief Directorate (Fourth Department, Line F, to be exact) is having a very unpleasant few days.

Four men with nothing to connect them, other than the words of a dead prisoner buried in Tayshet and a message carried by a man with a broken nose and a limp.

Illya gets another visitor about a month later. This one arrives during the day, smartly attired in a suit and sweating slightly in the warm spring sunshine. He leaves a security escort outside. He rings the bell, and waits politely for Illya in the parlour. Their conversation is short.

“So, Kuryakin, you’ve made your point. And I suppose we should thank you for bringing certain indiscretions to our attention.”

"You should be thanking me for choosing relatively unembarrassing targets. Next time, I won't choose a few mediocre career climbers to disgrace."

The man's expression becomes a little strained. "I take it you have more?"

Illya smiles and lays out his terms and conditions. It’s a fairly one-sided negotiation.

The man, a little pale, leaves with his escort. Illya stands on the porch and watches them go. He feels a shadow leave with them, burning away in the bright sunlight of the street.

She will be safe from his agency, at least. He has done what he can.

Chapter End Notes

Tovarisch - comrade.

The ASIO is the Australian Security Intelligence Organization – the domestic security service. ASIS is the foreign intelligence equivalent.

Melbourne/Tullamarine Airport opened in 1970, so I think they would have arrived into Essendon. I’ve not been to Melbourne, I’m afraid, so I’m terrified of making a local mistake here – eek!

The house used for Miss Fisher’s home in the TV series is actually near Melbourne University in Parkville, although in the books (and I think in the TV series in theory) it’s a good way further south in St Kilda. I’ve gone with that location here.
Of course Mr Butler is the butler in the TV show, but there’s no way he’d still be going strong in the 1960s. So I’ve created an equally efficient successor in Mr Driver, to continue the terrible joke.

Waverly is referring to the Revolución Argentina, a military coup d’etat which took place in June 1966, overthrowing the previous government. As Ayelen Toscano has pointed out, Waverly is being a bit circumspect here. British Intelligence weren’t always on the side of the angels...

До свидания = goodbye, or, more accurately “until we meet again”. I think Gaby has missed that subtle difference here...!

No-one knows too much about the KGB, so I’ve done a bit of research and then just made stuff up. The Fourth Department of the Seventh Directorate dealt with surveillance of non-Americans, while the Fourth Department of the First Directorate would have covered intelligence operations in the German Federal Republic and Austria. Line F apparently refers to the group that oversaw "wet work" - murders, sabotage etc.

The CCCP Officials are all mid-level ranking positions – an obkom was a party committee at the oblast level, an oblast being an administrative region or province in the Soviet Union. The bureau secretary would have been the leader of the obkom. The Party Control Committee oversaw the discipline of Communist party members, administering punishments such as expulsion from the party.

(Any Miss Fisher fans - I know Bert and Cec are missing here, sorry. I couldn't quite fit them in, and I figured that with their communist leanings (even though I doubt they'd still be fans after Stalin), it was possibly best for them not to know about Illya for the time being.)
Returning

Chapter Notes

So... I know I said this would be the last main chapter before the Epilogue, but I lied. The first half of my planned Chapter 10 was super easy to write, but the second half became enormous. Like almost 10,000 words enormous. So while I finish wrestling that into shape, I thought I would split them up and get you part 1 of the finale. This chapter is pretty short, but at least it should scratch the unbelievably drawn out itch. The angst mostly ends here, guys!

Also a HUGE thank you to Silver_Shadow who did an above-and-beyond job at bringing Melbourne to life for me. Hopefully that will come through in both this chapter and the next, and any errors are 100% my own fault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melbourne, April 1968

As usual, he is the last to leave the lab. Dr Hirst departs first, rushing home to help his wife with the kids. He is quickly followed by Thorne, off on another ill-conceived date.

Malcolm leaves last, lingering by the door.

“You’ll come to the tournament then, next week?”

He makes himself smile. “Yes. I said I would.”

“Good – great. I mean, if you play anything like as well as when you beat the rest of us last week, we’ll be unstoppable!”

The boy disappears out the door, leaving him with the distinct impression that he will regret giving in to the temptation to visit the university Chess Club. Perhaps he should have toned it down a bit.

It’s not that he dislikes his colleagues, exactly. He just has so little in common with them. Except for the work. And the chess. But he feels no need to socialise; he’s not sure he even knows how. How does one make friends, without the help of renegade Nazi organisations and near death experiences? Small talk has never been his forte, and although after eighteen months his cover story sits more comfortably, there is still too little he can share to create proper intimacy.

It doesn’t help that his accent carries negative connotations. It’s hardly unexpected, but eighteen months of slight flinches, raised eyebrows and occasional outright hostility in passing encounters is a little wearying. As is the constant media commentary about the evils of communism. The disappearance of the Prime Minister while sea-swimming in December had been, if he’s being honest with himself, a welcome distraction. The whole country had focused on little else until the launch of the Tet Offensive had pulled at least some attention back towards the wider world.

So he continues in his taciturn little bubble, living within narrow boundaries that only Phryne dares to ignore. He works until his customary finish at six, carefully finishing the operation running on the PDP-8 before tidying his papers and tutting at the disaster zone of Malcolm’s desk.
As he heads out into the evening warmth, the autumn sun still carrying some heat, he registers the usual gaggle of girls outside the laboratory door. They seem to be there more days than not this term. When it first started occurring, he had covertly photographed and checked each of them using Miss Fisher’s ragtag intelligence network, which had proved to be both faster and more thorough than official channels. But the checks had thrown up nothing suspicious, so he has had to ascribe the girls’ regular presence to an inconveniently timed lecture nearby, although he can’t find one listed on any campus schedule.

His eyes flick over the group, checking instinctively for any awkward movement, any suggestion of a concealed weapon or camera. He doesn’t spot anything amiss, but as he turns to lock the door he can’t shake the feeling that he’s being watched more intently than usual, an invisible stare from the centre of the amorphous group of bright colours and short skirts.

He scans the group again as he starts to walk away, and the double take earns him a ripple of giggles. He tries not to blanch too obviously and strides off quickly, the disconcerting sound of the mysterious private joke ringing in his ears down the corridor and across the quad.

He’s outside the campus when his neck prickles again. It’s a sixth sense he’ll never lose, that certain knowledge when he’s being watched. He slows his pace, waiting for the moment that his shadow realises their presence has been acknowledged. He can’t help the curious mixture of hope and apprehension that floods his system.

Since his negotiated truce with his former employers, he has been left entirely untroubled. At first the calm was unnerving, but regular updates from Waverly and the Australian agencies have reassured him that, for now at least, he is considered a low-priority threat by the KGB. And yet the shadow is still behind him, hiding in the evening rush of commuters. Perhaps something has boosted him up a watch-list in Moscow, or worse, he has made it on to a watch list of another agency.

He’d moved out of Miss Fisher’s house in early 1967, driven by a craving for independence and (to be brutally honest) fleeing from the septuagenarian’s exhausting social schedule. His small terraced house in Carlton, conveniently close to the university, is a far more modest affair and poses its own security challenges – not least working out how to stop his security sensors going off when a possum lands on the tin roof – but its unprepossessing exterior and carefully vetted, elderly Italian neighbours provide him with the anonymity he needs. He doesn’t own a car, his telephone line is ex-directory, and all his mail is delivered to a post box on campus, so no-one has his new address apart from Phryne, Waverly and his contact at ASIO.

He would like to consider more optimistic possibilities, but his shadow is unlikely to be any of his old teammates. There’s been no word from Solo or Yael for months. The Israeli’s silence is easy to explain. In the aftermath of the Six Day War, she’s probably embroiled in the complexities of a regional conflict that showed no sign of easy resolution. As for Solo – well, it’s been almost impossible for Cowboy to contact him ever since he bade them farewell in Hong Kong. His handlers are treating him more like a prisoner than an asset. He knows that Solo is no longer in the Middle East with Yael, but that leaves a lot of global trouble for his friend to get into. He hopes the American is nowhere near Vietnam.

Which leaves one further possibility.

Gaby.

He hasn’t heard from her since the day she left. It had taken him months to stop seeing her face in various passers-by, to stop hearing her laugh echoing down empty corridors or tasting her perfume in the air. He still wakes with her voice in his ears, the memory of her skin under his hands, but
each time a little quieter, a little more insubstantial.

Now, like a bad habit, he thinks he catches sight of a small figure with dark hair reflected in the glass of the shop windows on the street. But when he shifts to get a different angle there’s no-one around that fits the description. His heart is beating a little faster, but he’s learned the hard way not to expect miracles.

Instead he focuses on practicalities. Whoever his pursuer is, they’re good. Very good. But it’s hard to follow someone who knows they’re being tailed without eventually being seen. He turns down a quieter residential road, where the lack of shops makes it more difficult to duck out of sight.

His shadow must realise this too, because as he walks along, the sense of being watched fades. He stops for a moment, ears pricked to pick up any unusual noises around him. The streets are wide and straight with a central reservation to separate the opposing lanes of cars. Not that there is any traffic at present, simply a few parked cars by the pavement. In fact, the street is almost eerily calm, only few pedestrians in view, the nearest a small knot hurrying away from him past the next junction. His neck prickles again. Something – someone is observing him. Every sense screams it.

He waits for a few minutes, letting the sounds of the city wash over him. A truck turns the corner and rumbles up the street. On instinct, he tracks its progress as it passes him, and as it rolls away it reveals a figure on the opposite pavement, skirt blowing slightly in the vehicle’s wake, like a magic trick or a mirage.

He counts to ten, waiting for the apparition to fade, but she remains stubbornly visible, staring back at him until he cracks and sends her an awkward half-wave.

It is undoubtedly Gaby. She looks both different and achingly familiar. Her hair is longer but her skin is still clear, smooth caramel. As she starts to cross the street towards him, he tracks a slight stiffness in her walk – not quite a limp, but lacking the balletic grace he knows so well. As she gets closer, he notices a few lines around her eyes that he doesn’t recall, and there’s a strain in her expression which he thinks is new. But it could just be his mind playing tricks. In his memories she is always laughing, teasing; the sun to his dark shadow, a neat inverse of their physical colouring.

She gains the pavement before he notices the scar marring the base of her neck. It crosses her collar bone and disappears like a thin, red serpent under her pale blouse.

A rage that he has not felt for months ignites, and it’s all he can do to focus on her face. All he wants to do is whisk her inside to examine the wound properly, to undress her without any desire other than to ascertain whose handiwork it is, so he can lay them to waste.

She reads his expression with slightly disturbing ease.

“They’re already dead, Illya.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because I killed them myself.”

He’s sure he’s not meant to feel slightly pleased by her response. She certainly doesn’t seem to be proud of her achievement. But he can’t help it; there are few other people on the planet that he would trust to have adequately avenged this outrage. Not even Solo. But he knows his little mechanic. He sees her capacity for violence, her ruthlessness – inherited perhaps from her uncle. She would have had no mercy on her tormentors, she would not have hesitated. It is, he realises, one of the reasons he loves her so deeply.
He becomes aware that he is staring at her in awkward silence, and colours slightly.

“Good. Then I do not have to blow cover to hunt them down. Who were they?”

She sighs. “Uruguayans, mostly. But this is probably not something to discuss in the street.”

“Yes – I – sorry. My home is this way.”

She smiles slightly. “I know.”

“You do?”

That earns him an eye roll. Waverly, of course. Or Miss Fisher. Either would have given her his address. Which doesn’t explain why she was staking him out at the lab.

He shepherds her in awkward silence through the mix of wide boulevards and narrow backstreets to his small front door, then fumbles uncharacteristically with the deceptively complex locks. He feels a blush prickle hotly along his neck and a sweat break out on his back. The silence becomes increasingly painful as he struggles to maintain some sort of composure. The unasked questions hang heavily in the autumn air.

He finally wrenches the door open and ushers her in, seeing with new eyes the narrowness of the little hallway, the shabbiness of his living area, the complete lack of any homely touches.

It is neat, at least. Only the desk in the corner betrays a hint of personality, half-finished circuit boards jostling with a chess set and a stack of cheap paperback classics in assorted languages. He moves to draw back curtains, revealing a dingy back yard and bumping his shins against a spindly side table in the process.

She watches his movements with quick, sharp eyes. He notes that she has moved instinctively from the hall doorway to a position of half shadow at the edge of the little kitchenette, away from any sight lines. Exactly what he would have done. She is an expert now, he realises, with all the scars that come with acquiring expertise. It breaks his heart a little.

“Drink?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Vodka?”

She starts slightly.

“No, thank you. Just – just water, please.”

It’s a shame. He could do with some Russian courage right now. He leaves the tap running to get it cold and inspects his empty refrigerator nervously. It mocks him with its barrenness, his entire environment conspiring to emphasise how little he has to offer her, how little there is to tempt her to stay.

“I left.” she says suddenly and he recoils sharply, bumping his head on the edge of the freezer above.

“I remember,” he says quietly, forcing himself to meet her eyes. She looks puzzled until he realises she hadn’t meant him.

“No, I – I left MI6.” She shrugs awkwardly. “I’m a civilian again. Just like you.”
“When?”

“Three months ago.”

“Why?” he asks, and then kicks himself. “Because of the – the torture?” The thundering in his head returns.

“Sort of.” Her face twists. “I wasn’t in a good place. Not because of what they did to me. It was – it was what I did to them. Because I enjoyed it.”

She crumples slightly, as if she expects him to be disappointed in her.

“I felt myself disappearing, Illya. Or at least, a part of myself was disappearing. The part that is still a little chop shop girl from East Berlin.”

He doesn’t have an answer to that. Whoever he would have been without the KGB, without his father’s disgrace – the man that boy might have become never existed.

“It is nature of the job,” he offers, and she tosses her hair impatiently.

“I knew that. And it was fine at first, even without you or Solo or Yael. But Waverly was side-lined – I think our escapade cost him more than he admitted, and my new handler was… different. And the work was –,” She stops and searches for the words to explain.

“It got hard to remember who were good guys and who were villains, yes?”

A humourless smile pinches the edge of her lips.

“It got hard to remember if I was the good guy or the villain, Illya. Even before Montevideo.”

His eyes drift to the scar hugging her collarbone again. It’s healed nicely, but the skin is still livid red.

“What happened?”

She looks away, holding herself still. She has learned that from Yael, to hide all her discomfort under a veil.

“It’s classified.”

“I do not need details.”

That earns him a sigh. “Fine. A mission went sideways. There was some bad intelligence – a bad order. I made a call. Turns out it wasn’t a popular one.”

“They didn’t pull you out?”

She shakes her head. “I got accused of being a double agent, of switching sides. Not by MI6, but the Uruguayan military tried to get some answers.” She looks back to him and shrugs, artificially light. “They may have pushed the matter a bit.”

He swears softly.

“I was there for a week. Managed to extract myself and make it to a pick up location, but the whole operation was shot to hell. No big loss, frankly. Anyway, after that I couldn’t trust what I was told. Makes it hard to do your job, you know?”
Her jaw is rigid, giving the lie to her breezy summary. He takes a few deep breaths to quell the urge to demand more, to get a list of the people he needs to hurt.

“You do not miss it?”

“A little. But the prize was not worth the price.”

She crosses to the window and looks out at the cracked, grey concrete of his backyard. He winces again at the unlovely surroundings.

“I wanted excitement, to see the world,” she continues. “And for a while, I did. But you don’t really see the places you are sent. You see threats and targets and dead drops and extraction points. And I’ve seen enough of those.”

She turns to him and smiles with a little more warmth. “I think it’ll be our time in UNCLE that I’ll miss. It lent chasing the rich and evil a certain style. Like Solo used to say – the luxury hotels, the gourmet food, the pretty people.”

He can’t help but smile too. How much easier this would be if their friend was here to knock their heads together. It was impossible to be awkward or forced with the American.

He casts around for a change of topic, something to keep the half-smile on her face.

“If you knew where I lived, you could have rung doorbell, you know. Instead of following me home and giving me fright.”

The smile stays, thankfully. “I see you still haven’t got the hang of definite articles.”

She’s teasing him, and it gives him courage.

“Gaby, you are avoiding question.”

She shrugs, giving up her attempt to change the subject.

“I wanted to see you without you seeing me. To see how it felt.”

His chest tightens, heart thudding uncertainly against his constricting ribs.

“And how did it feel?”

“You mean how did it feel to join your little fan club?”

She’s deflecting again, but he humours her. “Fan club?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Illya. Don’t tell me you’re that clueless. Those students outside the lab, they’re there every day to swoon over you. You’re the least available, best-looking man on campus. There’s even a pool going for the first woman – or man, actually – to get a kiss off you. The odds for more than a kiss are astronomical. Do you even know the nickname they’ve given you?”

He shakes his head, completely confused.

“They call you the Soviet Spunk, and don’t ask me how that bit of slang took off, because the word means something entirely different in London.”

He can’t help the blush this time, the embarrassment floods his system completely. It’s not that
he’s unaware of how people react to him, but he’s solely attuned to signs of threat or fear. Not – that.

“Aren’t they a bit – young?”

“I tell you that you could be sleeping with any woman within a mile radius, and that’s your reaction? Mein Gott, Illya. It’s like that body is wasted on you.”

Her tone has lightened in her teasing, his heart lifting with it. He swallows, and seizes the opportunity.

“Any woman?”

Gaby’s face clouds over immediately, and he curses his impatience.

“Illya, I – I’m not the same person I was.”

And there it is, the final nail in his heart’s coffin. The sudden, swift pain actually makes him gasp a little.

“I’m sorry,” she mutters. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come.”

She turns slightly as if to leave, and it jolts something loose in him. It’s a blinding flash of clarity, a sudden realisation that he’s free now – free to say everything he spent years wanting to say. Even if he only gets to say it once, even if it’s far too late.

“Gaby, I love you.”

She pauses, still turned slightly away, and for only the second time in his life the words come pouring out.

“I have always loved you, I think. From – from the moment you ran from me in Berlin. You were this furious, beautiful angel. I loved you before I knew what love was. And I should have told you every day. I’m so sorry, малютка. I was so wrapped up in my own failings, my deficiencies. You deserved so much better. And I know you do not feel this way anymore, and it’s – this is ok. I understand. I will not say it again to you. But don’t leave – please. If you need help or – or money, or time. Anything you need. You saved my life. So, it is the least I can be doing.”

He stumbles into silence, and she stands there motionless, expression hidden. He can’t breathe, can’t blink. He just stands there, slowly suffocating, willing her to stay.

“No, Illya,” she whispers. “You loved an illusion. A perfect ideal. I wasn’t that girl then, and I’m definitely not her now.”

The anger sweeps in like a riptide. “Нет! Do not tell me how I feel, Gaby. I loved you. I still love you. No matter what you’ve done. You think I put you on pedestal, but I see you clear. You are ashamed of what you did to survive, ashamed of the anger, the violence. I see this. But I am not ashamed. I am proud. You are most determined person I ever met. You turned the world upside down to make me safe, to set me free. So you do same to save yourself, yes? You killed to protect yourself. And for this you think you are broken? Нет, I do not think so. You did what you had to do. You always do what you have to do. That is the woman I love, the one who will burn the world to save what she – what she loves.”

There is a long pause.
“But, Illya – I left you.”

“Да, as you should have done, as I told you to do. You did not want to settle down. I knew this. Is why I made you go.”

Her shoulders slump a little, and he breathes a little easier.

“Perhaps. But I chose to stay away.”

“That is not burden for you to carry, малютка. It was right decision.”

She turns and he sees the tears on her cheeks. It occurs to him that it is only the second time he has ever seen her cry.

“And so you still love me,” she states. “After all this time?”

The relief bursts in his chest, stealing his words again. It takes him a moment of nodding dumbly before he can stammer it out.

“Да, да, I will always love you, little chop shop girl. Always.”

She nods slightly, his fiery angel. Head held high, unbending. Unbreakable.

“That’s good, I suppose. Because, as it turns out, I still love you.”

His knees give way a little, and he leans heavily on the back of the sofa, not trusting his ears.

“I love you,” she whispers again, eyes dark and steady, locked on to his.

The next five minutes are something of a blur, but somehow they end up curled together on the uncomfortable sofa, his fingers gently carding through her hair, his other arm tucking her close against him, unwilling to ever let her go.

“Why did you refuse the vodka, earlier?” he asks eventually.

Her hand drifts to her scar, tracing the raised edge of skin over her collar bone. “After this, I lost control for a bit.” She wrinkles her nose. “I know you thought I drank too much anyway. It was – a way of forgetting.”

The thought of her alone and in pain tugs at all his control mechanisms, and his hand twitches in her hair.

“Why did you not come to me sooner?”

She sighs, tensing a little. “I was embarrassed, Illya. I didn’t want to turn up on your doorstep reeking of booze. I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

He can’t help but smile. “You think I do not know about losing control?”

She twists her face around to look at his amusement.

“It’s a fair point, I suppose.”

“Well,” he says smugly. “You are here now. Only stupid for three months. Not so bad.”

She hits him gently and shifts in his lap, making him still suddenly. Eighteen months of repressed
desire suddenly make themselves felt very urgently. His hand stops playing with her hair and he tries hard not to move, afraid of spoiling the tenderness of the moment.

“Illya?”

She turns to look at him in confusion, and the movement makes his condition very – evident. He colours, but she just laughs at him.

“Oh, I am really regretting not getting in on that pool on your campus. I would have cleaned up.”

He tries to recover some shred of dignity.

“I thought ladies do not kiss and tell.”

She laughs again and wriggles very purposefully against him. “Well, firstly, I’m no lady. And secondly, my love, given the amount of money they were discussing, I’m tempted to shout it from the campus rooftops.”

He summons his last ounce of rational thought as she sets about undoing his shirt buttons.

“That – that would be bad… Security… Would break – security, ah, protocol…” She slides her cool hands up his chest and over his shoulders, and his brain shorts out completely.

Chapter End Notes

Melbourne University was, for a time, the first academic computing facility in Australia. In fact, it housed Australia’s first digital computer, CSIRAC, from 1955 until it was shut down in 1964. At one stage, the Department had more enrolled computation research students than the rest of the country combined. I figured with Illya’s background in surveillance and electronics, it would be a natural segue for him. The lab he’s in would have been the Computation Laboratory, which ran an IBM 7044 and a PDP-8 at the time.

Harold Holt, the Australian Prime Minister from January 1966 to December 1967, disappeared while swimming in the sea on December 17th 1967. He was declared presumed dead two days later.

The Tet Offensive, one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, was initiated by the North Vietnamese forces on January 30, 1968.

The Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria took place in June 1967, with long-lasting ramifications.

Spunk is Aussie slang for a hot guy. It’s entirely innocent! (So they say…)

I’ve set Gaby’s nadir in Uruguay, which was descending into political chaos in 1967-68. A Marxist guerrilla group called the Tupamaros were waging a campaign of “armed propaganda” – nonviolent acts against authority such as robbing banks and distributing the money among poor populations, to protest at corruption and inequality in a poor economic climate. In 1968, they started kidnapping political persons for ransom and eventually escalated to executing some of their hostages. Western powers supported the government against this radical socialist group – Uruguayan police
forces were instructed on torture techniques by an American FBI agent, who was
kidnapped and executed by the Tupamaros in 1970.

I’ve deliberately left it ambivalent what Gaby’s late-1967 mission was. The
Tupamaros were seen as Robin Hood figures on the side of the people (one of their
leaders even rose to become Uruguayan President between 2010 and 2015) and the
government they fought against was repressive and reactionary, increasingly
controlled by the military. After the clearly defined evil of THRUSH / the
Vinciguerras or the obvious need to help Illya escape the gulag, I wanted to allude to
the murkier side of espionage, with Western powers propping up military regimes or
corrupt governments.
Retiring

Chapter Notes

And behold - fluff. Well, something fluffier, anyway...

This was surprisingly hard to write, I've honestly got about 10 versions of it. Oof.

I'm posting this at the same time as Chapter 12, but would love to hear your thoughts on this as well as the Epilogue. (I'm a comment-hog, what can I say.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melbourne, October 1968

Gaby contemplates the HK Monaro GTS327 thoughtfully.

“Improve it,” she mutters to herself. “What does Firth want me to do – add wings?”

The launch date for the updated model isn’t until June, but Firth had been clear – he had his eyes set on winning the ‘69 Hardie-Ferodo 500 with his new team, and ambitions to make a mark both on the new multi-event ATCC and the rally circuit.

She’d spent the winter working in a few auto shops, refreshing her skills and familiarising herself with the Australian machines. Miss Fisher had introduced her to the Australian racing scene and she’d been to a few circuits around the country until she’d met Harry Firth at the ’68 Hardie-Ferodo 500 held earlier that month.

Unlike Alexander Vinciguerra, he was more impressed with her expertise than he was with her looks. He was also bloody good, known as a bush engineer for his ability to conjure astounding engines out of nothing. After a few days of tests masquerading as social conversations, he'd offered her an apprenticeship-cum-interview.

Which is why she’s here. He’d presented her with one of his team’s current, award-winning touring cars and given her a simple challenge; to pull out a half-second per lap off the car’s performance on their test track.

She’s managed three-tenths so far, although she suspects that one of those tenths is just due to her driving.

It is, frankly, a little daunting. Most of the men on Firth’s team have engineering degrees or spent years on the touring car circuit. She’s having to draw on memories she’s not used in over five years and is working with components that were unheard of in East Berlin. But if nothing else the past few years have taught her to be creative, to pull off the impossible.

She runs back through the variables she has to play with, trying to spot the incremental improvements hiding in the car’s current form. But inspiration is proving elusive.

It’s partly the fault of the weather. After days of rain, blue sky has finally arrived and there’s a pool of bright sunshine puddled just inside the open pedestrian section of the larger garage door. Beyond it, she can hear the sound of an engine revving and an argument brewing between two of
the engineers. She drifts over to watch the debate – something about the new gear box – but doesn’t really listen, just stands in the newly warm spring sunshine and lets her mind wander.

It wanders to Illya, of course. His wry smile seems to hang in the air in front of her eyes. Perhaps her subconscious is making up for the long months in South America she’d spent pushing every memory of him back, burying the joy and the anger and the love under a suffocating, emotionless blanket.

She’d been so determined to stamp out the fire in her heart that she had numbed herself to almost all her emotions. In some ways, the horrors of Montevideo had been a relief – it had restored her ability to feel, albeit a raw, enveloping rage against her torturers.

But afterwards, there had been an inevitable backlash. The rage had become a wildfire burning out of control, engulfing the good with the bad as it ripped through her internal support structures.

“Would you have returned, if it hadn’t been for Montevideo?”

It had come out of nowhere, his question. They’d been standing on the verandah outside her room at Miss Fisher’s, watching the sunset on a fresh spring evening a few weeks ago, his arms around her keeping out the evening chill.

She had paused, given the question the respect it deserved.

“I like to think so. On some level, I wanted to. But I was proud, and determined not to need you or anybody else. Anybody who might hurt me.”

He’d flinched slightly, arms tightening against her shoulders, betraying the guilt that, though she couldn’t see it, knew to be written on his face.

“I don’t know. It might have taken me longer.”

They promised each other honesty, even when it hurts. Still, she tries to soften the hard truth, leaning into his embrace and rubbing her cheek on his sleeve.

“Do you ever regret it? Melbourne was not your only choice. I – was not your only choice.”

She’d twisted round at that, tugging his arm so she could see his face.

“No, you weren’t. And yet here I am.”

The memory melds with the sunlight, warming her through. When she’d retired from the agency, she hadn’t really known what she wanted. She’d left with no clear direction, no obvious purpose. She had looked in the old, silvered mirror of her halfway house and felt herself collapsing behind her eyes. So she had given herself over to the fire, trusting that it would only consume what couldn’t be saved.

And when the rage had finally burnt itself out, she had sat in the ashes and finally faced up to the question: what next?

It had been an identity crisis that had drawn her back to Melbourne, an urge to see what her life could have been like if she’d stayed, if they’d both conquered their demons enough to try. For a few weeks, she had drifted around the city’s streets with the other fallen leaves, imagining herself in this café or that restaurant, deliberately avoiding the Russian elephant that followed her down every street and crouched in the corner of her cheap hotel room.
And when she’d given in, she’d joined the knot of girls outside his laboratory on a whim. Her plan had only been to visit his campus, to visualise where he spent his days. But the chatter of the girls had caught her attention and she’d found their carefree, innocent admiration contagious. And the opportunity to see him again, camouflaged by her companions, was too tempting to turn down.

She can still recall very precisely how her body had reacted as he’d emerged from the lab, scanning the cluster of girls as if he could see right through them to her hiding place. The tight tension of anticipation and apprehension in her gut suddenly lanced by the sharpness of the surprise, no less shocking for being expected.

She had been almost overwhelmed by the technicolour immediacy of him, as if her memories of him during her time away had been faded or warped. But then, he wasn’t the same man she had left, grey and battered from nine months of torture and trial. He had straightened as he’d finished locking the door, almost absurdly tall against the frame. Tall and broad, shoulder muscles moving easily under the fabric of his white shirt, his hair bleached even brighter gold by the sun. She remembers that his shirtsleeves had been rolled up, exposing strong, tanned forearms, and his collar was open, drawing her eyes to the smooth hollow of his throat and down, hinting at the flat, solid planes of his chest.

She wasn’t too proud to admit that she had reacted exactly like his other admirers, a sharp intake of breath, a light-headedness. To think that he was once hers had seemed impossible, somehow.

“Isn’t he gorgeous?” the girl next to her had sighed. “So moody – he never smiles. A regular Heathcliff.”

“I’d make him smile alright,” another girl had cut in. “Five minutes alone in that lab with him and he’d be grinning like the Cheshire Cat.”

The resulting giggle that rippled through the group had chased him away, breaking his spell on all the girls except her. She hadn’t meant to follow him home, hadn’t meant to speak to him, to let him in.

She hadn’t been expecting to stay.

But then he had looked at her and seen her. Seen her flaws and her scars and her smouldering anger and put words to them, and made them seem beautiful. And he had revealed what the fire had left behind, a little charred in places but still solid. Something tried and tested and unexpectedly resilient. A foundation for something more.

And if Illya is a kinder mirror than she sometimes deserves, then the gap is not so great that it feels uncomfortable. It’s like the Monaro she's working on now – he sees her a few hundredths of a second faster, giving her a challenge to meet, a direction and purpose for her fire.

She thinks back to his question. She hadn’t answered it as directly as she should have. In the six months since she returned, she hasn’t had a moment’s regret about choosing Melbourne, about choosing Illya. As Miss Fisher had told her once, life in Melbourne can be as exciting as she chooses to make it. Throwing the Monaro around the curves of the test track in search of those elusive seconds, the hum and roar of a car performing exactly as she intended, the urgent, intense joy of having Illya in her bed again, the quiet pleasure of slow reconnection.

It’s only UNCLE that she misses, and not because of the glamour and luxury that so improbably seemed to go hand-in-hand with their missions. It had been Illya and Solo, Waverly and Yael that had made spying more than threats and targets and missions. She misses her old friends.
She’s startled out of her reverie by the appearance of the chief mechanic.

“Schmidt, you’ve got a visitor.”

She turns, blinking as she readjusts to the shade of the garage interior.

“A visitor? Who?”

“Frankly, I’m not sure what to make of him. Didn’t give his name. Some American bloke asking for a little German mechanic called Gaby. Told him there’s no-one here by that name and he described you dead, ‘cept for that scar on y’neck.”

She tenses, forces herself to answer lightly as she moves back into the garage.

“ Weird. Did you tell him I was here?”

“I said I’d check with the manager. D’you know this fella?”

There are so few people who would ask for her at all, and even fewer who know her as Gaby, but only one who she hopes it will be. She’s not sure whether to trust her heart, which is leaping for joy, or her head, which is reminding her about the small pistol she keeps in the top drawer of her desk.

She comes through to the front of the garage, the grip of the gun bumping reassuringly in the pocket of her overalls.

“Yes?”

The face that greets her is more than she could have hoped for. He’s changed a little from how she remembers, his outfit a little more exuberant, his hair artfully dishevelled – far less the company man, far more the rogue thief.

His eyes, too are different. The awful sadness she recalls from Hong Kong has faded somewhat, and now there’s a carelessness, a gay abandon that she never saw in the CIA puppet.

“Solo?”

“Gaby! You look wonderful! Goodness, I’d forgotten how grease-stained overalls suited you.”

“You look just the same, you big peacock. Why didn’t you tell us you were coming? And why aren’t you using my cover name?”

“I don’t have it. Waverly kept the details of your covers pretty close to his chest, and the CIA cut off all my connections to him and Yael when I finally got out. I had to track you and Peril down the old-fashioned way.”

“Oh for pity’s sake, you’ve probably set off a national security alert now. Hang on.” She drags him to the garage phone and makes a quick call to their ASIO contact.

He reads the label on her overalls with interest. “You went back to Schmidt?”

She shrugs. “It’s common enough. I’ve had to become a Gisele though.”

He wrinkles his nose. “I think I’ll stick with Schmidt.”

“Suit yourself. Is that why you hadn’t been in touch? We were getting worried – you were meant to
have finished your sentence months ago.”

“I had to do extra time for good behaviour,” he deadpans, and she rolls her eyes at him. “No, really! It’s been a hell of a year and the CIA promised me a chunk of much-needed cash if I could help them out with some of the crap that’s been going on in Czechoslovakia.”

“You didn’t head home? We assumed you got back to New York and decided you were never going to leave again.”

Solo sighs, and she suddenly sees some of the weariness that she remembers from China, the despair of a man whose faith in people has been sorely tested.

“It’s been a hell of a year there too, to be honest. Kennedy, King, the war, the protests.” He shrugs. “Plus, I’d been away for so long, it didn’t really feel like home any more. So after I got my release forms, I came straight here.”

“Australia was covered as part of your parole?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

She decides she isn’t going to worry about that.

“So what’ve you been doing – wandering around Melbourne with a directory of car garages? Surely finding Illya on campus would have been easier?”

He shrugs. “I did stop by, but I didn’t fancy being the only man in his little fan club. They do know you exist, right?”

She laughs. “Firstly, you’re definitely not the only man in that fan club. The boys are just a bit more low-key. And secondly, yes – Illya invited me to the lab a few months ago to show me round. The breaking of hearts was practically audible.”

“Well, there are a few hardy souls still loitering around. You’ve got to admire their perseverance. I’d watch your step, Schmidt – they might try to eliminate the competition.”

She smiles breezily. “You don’t think I could take a few giddy co-eds?” She pauses. “Actually they’re mostly rather sweet – one of them told me that they knew he’d met someone special because he turned up one day practically beaming.”

“And let that be a salutary lesson to them all, never underestimate the power of a good fu–,”

She hits him before he can finish the sentence. He grins back at her, entirely unabashed.

“Anyway, I nobly walked away from the campus full of single, young students and came to find you instead. I do have history finding you in some grease-pit of a garage, so it seemed fitting.”

That earns him a second whack. “How dare you call this place a grease-pit?”

“If the glove fits, Süße.”

One of the team’s drivers chooses that moment to arrive. Tall, dark and confident, he strides past them, tossing Gaby a nod. Solo brightens up noticeably.

She sighs. “Come on then, I’ll give you a tour.”

To give him some credit, he’s not entirely focused on the pretty drivers (both men and women race
for Firth – Solo looks like he’s in seventh heaven). Once he’s finished flirting, they pitch up in her little side room with the Monaro while he quizzes her about the different races and car types, letting her talk him through Firth’s challenge and, more obliquely, her new dreams and career goals.

“If Firth lets me on the team, then that’s a big deal. The Hardie-Ferodo 500 is one of the biggest touring car races in the world…”

She can feel him watching her as much as he listens, can feel him comparing the exhausted, confused spy he left in Hong Kong and the passionate, enthusiastic mechanic he has found in Melbourne. The evaluation makes her itch internally, but she puts up with it. She’s been doing the same to him, after all.

Eventually she grinds to a halt, staring at the infuriatingly slow car in front of them.

“Not so bad for a girl from an East Berlin chop shop, then?”

“Not sure. I’ve got to pass this test first.”

He leans over the engine for a few moments, pretending to cast a critical eye over the moving parts.

“Easy,” he smiles. “Just cheat.”

She drives him back to Illya’s place in Carlton to complete their team reunion.

“So what is Peril’s name now?” he asks, one hand gripping the passenger door as she weaves her way through the rush hour traffic.

“Alexei Nikolaev. After Waverly and his father.”

Solo grimaces.

“The lack of imagination in your cover names is astounding. You should have let me pick them.”

She shudders at the thought.

“And why don’t you have a new identity?”

“I told you – subtlety isn’t my style. Plus, my background is my calling card – no-one wants to hire an ex-thief to advise them on security unless there’s evidence of how good that thief was.”

“Dear lord, what am I doing driving you to Illya’s house? ASIO are going to have a collective heart attack.”

“Just don’t shout my name around in public, and it’ll be fine. It’s not as if the various agencies don’t know that you’re both here, anyway. Changing your names was frankly pointless. No, the trick for you and Peril is to convince people that it’s best for everyone if Peril’s little Pandora’s box stays closed. And that messing with either of you equates to opening it.”

It’s her turn to grimace – it’s easy to forget the intricate mix of politics, diplomacy and intelligence
involved in letting them live their ostensibly ordinary lives.

“Well, the KGB don’t want any of the intel to be leaked, so they’re leaving us well alone. And the other main players don’t know about most of it. I mean, MI6 and the CIA know about some of it, and they probably suspect Illya has a lot more. But he’s made it clear that any further leaks will get shared indiscriminately, so there’s no first-mover advantage. And generally agencies prefer that no-one has information over everyone having it.”

“Peril played his cards well. You can always rely on the essential pettiness of human nature.”

His eyes drift towards the steering wheel and linger on her left hand.

“And speaking of human nature – I take it that Peril hasn’t gone for a third time lucky attempt with engagement rings?”

She rolls her eyes. “He has not.”

“But it doesn’t bother you.”

“Have I ever seemed like a girl who’s desperate to get married?”

“Fair point. Do you live together?”

She grits her teeth. She’d forgotten how irritating Solo can be.

“No. We’re taking it slowly. We spent almost two years apart, Solo, and I only came back a few months ago.”

“Six. You came back almost six months ago.”

He raises his eyebrows at her, and his needling hits a nerve.

“So? Don’t look at me like you’re some kind of expert. You don’t sleep with the same person for longer than six weeks, let alone six months.”

She had moved into Miss Fisher’s by mutual agreement, initially for the sake of their covers, and like any new couple, they’d gone for dinner dates on Lygon Street, ballet and concerts at the Palais Theatre and movies at the Astor. Now, Illya cycles his rusty bike over to St Kilda more nights than not, sitting like a dignified gentleman caller in Miss Fisher’s parlour making small talk with whoever else is visiting before she eventually drags him upstairs.

It’s a slightly artificial formality, but after that initial, intense, halcyon reconnection, they’d – she’d – felt it better to be cautious, to not rush something that felt both new and familiar, bone-deep and sensitive as the new skin on her scars. Neither of them have much experience at normal life, of that trick happy people have of trusting that good things will last. They’re both learning to share themselves in ways that feel uncomfortable. Of course it’s hard for Solo to understand, she thinks uncharitably, he’s instinctively distrustful of both hard work and vulnerability.

She looks across at him as they stop at a red light and finds his eyes resting lightly on her scar, visible as always above the top of her overalls.

“You waited a while after you left MI6, then, before you came back? I thought you resigned your post in January.”

She stares him down blankly, done sharing for the day.
“I had some stuff to sort out.”

He looks away as the light turns green.

“Don’t we all.”

She doesn’t ask for details. They’re practically in Carlton anyway, pulling up round the corner from Illya’s tiny house. It’s a little more loved than when she first saw it. In her occasional visits she’s seen various improvements; fresh paint on the walls, the weeds gone from the backyard, some nicer furniture. It’s still fairly spartan, but it had begun to feel more like someone’s home.

The warmer atmosphere of the house also translates to its owner. Illya completely forgets to be surly when Solo rolls through the door, eyes lighting up and sweeping Solo into a crushing hug for a good thirty seconds before he begins to berate them both for ignoring security protocols.

“That’s the equivalent of a red carpet welcome, I guess,” Solo laughs.

They end up in the little living room, and once Illya offers round wine, there’s a moment of awkward silence. She feels the weight of the last two years settle on them all, the differences between now and then underlining the hiatus in their friendship.

“So,” Solo says, leaning back in an armchair and narrowing his eyes at them both. “It pains me to admit it, but it looks like I owe Yael fifty bucks. I bet her that Peril would screw the whole thing up and I’d have to turn up and fix everything. And for almost two years, that looked like a solid bet. I can’t decide whether I’m pleased or disappointed in you both.”

There’s a moment of dangerous silence.

“You bet against me?!”

“Oh come on, Peril. You didn’t even go a week before you’d chased Gaby off. Honestly, no sane person would’ve backed your chances.”

“Clearly Yael did,” Gaby points out.

“Which only proves my point. The woman is certifiable. See these grey hairs? I never had a single one until I started working with her. Not even Peril managed that. D’you know she thinks that free jumping between buildings and scaling sheer walls a finger’s breadth away from gun emplacements are both perfectly reasonable methods of infiltration?”

“You took a zipline across the Berlin Wall in front of a full range of guns,” Illya counters.

“Yes, but I did that with Teller here covering me, and she was considerably more valuable than I was at the time.”

She throws a couch cushion at him. “Charming as always, Solo.”

And just like that, the tension dissipates. The years roll away as the memories flow. They could almost be hanging out at a charming bar in Tangiers, or recovering post-mission at a hotel in São Paulo. Almost.

Because in Morocco or Brazil, or on any of their missions, Illya had never been able to smile at her as he does now, to gently brush her cheek as he teases her, to brazenly admit that he’d almost lost a mark because he was too busy staring at her wearing a particularly beautiful dress.
“How could you expect me to not stare at you, my love? And I know you wore it on purpose – the split in that skirt was almost to your waist.”

Which is entirely beside the point, of course. She watches Solo watch Illya, sharply reminded of how changed he is. Every time he calls her ‘любимая моя’, every casual touch, every quiet smile. It’s not just that he’s more demonstrative, it’s the lack of tension in his shoulders, the ease with which he moves around the kitchen, good-naturedly sniping back as Solo critiques his cooking technique. She is so used to it now that it’s easy to forget the hunched, haunted, gaunt figure they had pulled out of that cell in Siberia.

Her hand drifts to her throat, tracing the long-faded bruises of his hands round her throat. This is the real Illya, she realises. She’d never really seen him before. He’s free, finally the master of his fate, the captain of his soul.

She looks up, suddenly aware of having drifted away from the conversation, and finds Solo’s eyes back on her. She stares him down, resisting the temptation to blush as she registers the dreamy expression now frozen on her face. Solo gently lifts an eyebrow at her before turning to Illya and answering the question she missed.

“Oh, I imagine Yael is having a grand time in the aftermath of the war. The country is euphoric, of course – the Jews can pray at the Temple wall for the first time in twenty years. But the implications for the intelligence services are immense. Yael is right in the thick of it. She’ll be running Mossad in thirty years, I reckon.”

That wipes the love-struck look off her face. It looks unlikely that their friend will get to visit for a while. The only one of them who isn’t retired, who still has a higher calling than friendship. The only one who is yet to be let down and betrayed by her country.

“How long did you work with her for?”

“About nine months. I got pulled away just before the conflict kicked off.”

“Nine months and she didn’t kill you? Cowboy, you are losing touch.”

“Excuse me, I’ll have you know that Yael and I are firm friends. She softens right up when you get a few vodkas into her.”

“I do not believe you.”

“Ok fine, she doesn’t soften up even after half a bottle of the good stuff. But I definitely won her over by getting her laid.”

That gets her attention.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t sound so judgemental, Teller. Turns out Tel Aviv has quite an interesting underground scene. And while I don’t have any proof, I’m eighty percent sure that our lovely cocktail waitress slipped Dayan her number.”

Illya just laughs and wanders off to get food out of the oven.

“Do you want to see a picture, Gaby? I have proof of our undying bond of friendship.”

He pulls out his wallet to show her a small picture of the two of them, Solo almost unrecognisable
under a turban and a heavy tan, one arm slung round Yael’s shoulders. He’s grinning roguishly at the camera but Yael’s scowling face is turned towards him, suggesting that he’s just said something inappropriate. The camera has captured her exasperation perfectly.

She reaches out and touches it lightly, as if the touch carries a protective charm to keep their awkward little friend safe.

Solo smiles and tucks the picture away in the wallet lining, but not fast enough for her to miss another memento stored away – the flash of some faded Chinese characters on a dog-eared piece of paper. His finger trails over the exposed ink for a moment, and her heart seizes in sympathy. She knows that, like Miss Fisher, Solo isn’t built for monogamy, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t carry the weight of his lost lovers, the pretty boys and girls he rarely speaks of, who kept him warm but died too young.

And she understands why he is here. More than just a visit to old friends, their team-mate has come to Melbourne in search of his own inner peace, the healing that both she and Illya have found in retirement.

She tests the theory over dinner. “How long do we have you here for?”

Solo just shrugs. “I haven’t decided, really. How long will it take to outstay my welcome, Peril?”

He leans back from the wobbly dining table and peers down the hall. “You do have a spare bedroom, right?”

She’s half expecting Illya to say no – she didn’t even think his spare room had a bed in it, but after dinner he shows them around and there it is. The brass frame is old-fashioned and rather tarnished, but the mattress is firm and soft. She and Solo test it by bouncing up and down, a little giddy from the wine they’ve been drinking, until Illya starts to fuss about possible wine-stains on the sheets and chivvies them out.

From there the evening devolves as additional bottles of wine are uncorked in celebration. At some point, she ends up back in the spare room, lying giddily on Solo’s new bed and watching the ceiling gently turning above her. The men are in the kitchen theoretically doing the dishes, although thinking about it, she can’t hear either running water or clanking of china.

She hauls herself off the bed and totters down the corridor. Her engrained instincts bring her to a halt just outside the living room door as her ears pick up snippets of a whispered conversation.

“Please say this is paid for, Cowboy.”

“How are we defining ‘paid for’, Peril? Because if you’re counting sexual favours then definitely yes, I paid for it.”

She doesn’t catch Illya’s response.

“The Duchess’ll never miss it, trust me. And it’s perfect, admit it.”

“Fine. Yes, it is perfect.” There’s a long pause. “Thank you, Cowboy.”

“Well, get on with it then. I’m beginning to lose patience with you both.”

She chooses that moment to appear unsteadily through the door, her mind struggling to make sense of what she’s overheard. There’s a strange twist in her gut which only intensifies when she sees Illya’s guilty face. It makes her feel uncomfortable, somehow. They committed to honesty and here he is, keeping secrets. She frowns and starts to ask questions, swaying determinedly towards him.
At least, she thinks that’s what she was going to do. Suddenly Solo is in front of her, sweeping her up and round into a strange parody of a waltz.

“So, Süße, what do you do for fun in this town? And don’t give me any of Illya’s chess rubbish.” He jerks his thumb at Illya, scowling at the dishes. “Has he started listening to police scanners yet?”

She lets him spin her, the thread of her concentration snapping. “Oh, our social life is very full.” She smiles as an idea hits her. “We haven’t introduced you to Miss Fisher yet, have we?”

She wakes up in her own bed in St Kilda the next morning, with a vague memory of a half-remembered exchange and Illya’s guilty face. But the details are lost under the hangover haze, and given that she is late for work, she prioritises thanking Driver for collecting her and her car last night over probing her subconscious.

There isn’t much time to linger on it over the next few days, either. There’s an opportunity to test her Monaro’s performance at the track on Saturday and in the days leading up to it, she has little space to worry about anything outside of engines and tyre pressure and wind resistance.

So engrossed is she in her task, that it doesn’t really register when Illya and Solo don’t turn up at St Kilda for three days in a row. She’s so focused on her Monaro that she only vaguely registers their weak excuses. Which means she doesn’t think twice about driving over to Carlton from the track on Saturday afternoon. It’s only as she’s hammering on Illya’s door that she remembers that it has been five days since she saw him properly.

He takes an age to open the door. She knows he’s there – his old bike is locked to the porch railings and anyway she can hear someone, probably Solo, swearing inside.

When Illya eventually answers it, she is immediately suspicious. He looks exhausted, the dark circles under his eyes so pronounced that they look bruised. He’s wearing an old, grubby shirt and clearly hasn’t shaved for at least two days.

“Ga – Gisele? What are you doing here?”

"Nice to see you too, Alexei."

He leans slightly awkwardly across the doorway, making it impossible for her to enter. She narrows her eyes and tries to sidle round him, but Solo suddenly appears at his shoulder, effectively blocking her view of the hall.

"Schmidt, this is an unexpected pleasure."

Her suspicions intensify.

“You mean I need an excuse to visit my boyfriend and his annoying housemate? Lucky for you, I have one – the Monaro broke its former track record by six-tenths of a second today, so you are looking at the newest engineer on the Holden Dealer Team roster.”

That gets a reaction. Both men’s faces light up, and she can’t resist smiling in response.
“You did it, Süße? Congratulations – I knew you’d pull it off.”

“I am so proud of you, малютка. It is well deserved.”

“Did you cheat?”

That gets the smile off her face.

“Christ, Mr Deveny – no I did not cheat. Well, are you going to invite me in? I’ve barely seen you all week and I want to celebrate with you both.”

But Illya just shifts uncomfortably and doesn’t stand aside.

“I am sorry, любимая моя, is not good time. I am heading back to campus in a few minutes. There is very time-sensitive experiment running and I need to check progress.”

“I see,” she says icily, suspicion beginning to char and smoke. “And you, Deveny. What’s your excuse?”

“I’ve got a date, darling. With a gorgeous waitress I got talking to at the Tolarno last night.”

“But of you are terrible liars. Alexei, you’re hiding something, and we promised not to do that.”

But it has no effect. Illya looks guilty and apologetic, but won’t budge. Solo just laughs at her and heads back inside. There’s a healthy little fire burning now, irritation quickly deepening into annoyance.

“I will come see you tomorrow, малютка. I promise. I know we have seen little of each other this week, I will make up to you.”

The two of them are clearly up to something, and if Illya thinks such a weak apology without a proper explanation is going to cut it, he’s got another think coming.

“Alexei, what are you up to?”

“Nothing, my love. Cowboy and I have just been – catching up. It has been long time, you know.”

“Catching up.”

Illya stiffens at her tone, the underlying rumble of a restless volcano. But, like an idiot, he keeps digging.

“Yes, catching up. Men stuff.”

“Men... Stuff...”

Despite current behaviour, Illya’s not stupid and he can’t possibly miss the outrage lacing each syllable. Whatever he’s hiding, it must be worth it, because he manages to nod and cringe a little at the same time.

“I promise, Gisele, I will make up to you tomorrow.”

She erupts.

“Oh no, don’t let me get in the way of this beautiful friendship. If Mr Deveny’s company is so absorbing, why don’t the two of you just get married? He’s already living with you, and you’re
clearly perfect for each other.”

He tries to laugh her out of it. “And where would that leave you, little one?”

“Free to get on with my work, Alexei. Don’t think I’m waiting for some man to give me a ring. You’ve already done that – twice actually – so perhaps it’s Cowboy’s turn.”

She doesn’t wait to see his face twist and fall, she tosses her last barb at him over her shoulder as she’s marching back to the road. She’s angry enough to drive around the corner, park, and go creeping down the alley that runs along the back of the houses. Unfortunately, Illya has done such a good job of raising the walls of his yard that a man twice her height wouldn’t be able to see in.

As she comes back to the main road, she spots Illya cycling off towards the university, just as he said he would. She’s sure he’s only doing it because he assumes, correctly, that she’s still watching and that infuriates her even more. She’s tempted to follow him, but his bicycle is a good tactical choice. A pedestrian shadow can’t keep up, whereas tailing him in a car would stand out.

She fumes all the way back to St Kilda, throwing her car round the familiar streets. It’s not just that they’re obviously up to something – although if it transpires that trouble has followed Solo to Melbourne and they haven’t involved her then she will personally hang both of them off St Kilda pier as shark-bait. No, it’s not what they’re getting up to that bothers her. It’s that they’re not letting her be part of it.

It’s only when she’s coming into the neighbourhood, down the same road Miss Fisher’s driver brought her the first time she came to Melbourne, that a new, seemingly unrelated thought hits her. The salt tang of the sea whips through the car window, and it strikes her how familiar the road and the view has become. Every turn she makes brings up another sight or smell that sparks a memory of the past six months – walks on the beach with Phryne, Dot and an assortment of her clan, being dragged to Russian bakeries on Carlisle Street with Illya, retaliating with kaffee und kuchen in the German cake shops on Acland Street. Now summer is approaching, it’s only a matter of time before Hugh makes good on his threat to make Illya learn to play beach cricket.

Somewhere in the past few months, Melbourne has stopped being one of a few dozen cities she’s spent time in since Solo whisked her away from East Berlin. Living with Phryne has allowed her to see the city as her hostess sees it, full of mystery and magic and mayhem. And while Miss Fisher’s memories are borrowed property, she’s slowly creating memories and attachments of her own. She doesn’t think there’s a suburb or a scenic spot she and Illya haven’t been dragged to. Phryne is a force of nature, with a terrifyingly full social calendar and a dizzyingly diverse range of friends.

She chases that thought as she absentmindedly parks and heads into Miss Fisher’s. It’s not just the effect of her gregarious hostess; the city itself has charmed her. She likes Melbourne’s seasons, its architecture, the unexpected diversity of the neighbourhoods – Chinese, Russians, Turks and a whole cavalcade of Italians, Greeks and assorted Southern European nationalities who frequently take her, with her dark eyes and olive skin, to be one of them. She likes the slight undercurrent of danger about the country – the ever-changing sea, the lethal spiders, the vast, unforgiving Outback to the north-east. This slight sense of peril manifests in a practical matter-of-factness in the national temperament, a refreshingly blunt directness of manner and speech that reminds her of Berlin.

She feels almost at home here now. But Melbourne is not quite home, not yet. She adores Miss Fisher, but the lovely house in St Kilda is a temporary lodging. Her room isn’t truly hers. She is slowly putting down roots - new job, new friends, new memories, but she’ll never fully settle in this life until she has a proper home. Until she moves in with Illya.

It’s a terrifying, attractive, seductive thought, a home. One that conjures recollections of greasy
overalls, tobacco-stained fingers, rough hugs and brusque kisses. Or an even hazier memory of faint perfume, a sing-song voice, a feeling more than a visual image. Mother.

The memory causes a discordant ache, a childish sense of loss. It tugs at her emotions, summons the little voice she always thought was there to protect her, the one she has finally learned not to trust.

Her hand unconsciously travels to the battered engagement ring around her neck. He’d presented it to her awkwardly, the day she had returned, back on a chain as if to avoid misunderstanding. He is always so careful not to ask too much of her.

And of course, that’s what’s eating at her. Illya hasn’t asked her to move in – and she wants to. The realisation bursts over her like a sudden wave, and she kicks herself for being so slow. Of course she wants to move in with him. That’s why she snapped at Solo when he had asked about it the day he came back, why it had been so easy for Illya to rile her up. (Although man stuff? Man stuff! That will need to be properly addressed.)

But more importantly, he hasn’t asked her. He hasn’t pushed her, or seemed impatient or frustrated at having to cycle to and from St Kilda for months on end. And – to make matters worse – he let Solo stay without a second thought. And he hasn’t asked her. Her fingers twitch at the chain around her neck and it pulls where it’s caught in some hair.

The mature thing to do would simply be to talk to him about it. To tell him that she’s ready, once she’s finished chewing him out for whatever little scheme he and Solo have got themselves mixed up in. If he’s not ready, they can discuss it and make a plan. She’s a big girl, and no matter what the little voice in her head tells her, she can trust Illya. With the possible exception of the last few days, he’s been consistently attentive and affectionate.

She shifts in the parlour armchair. More than affectionate. She finds it hard to believe that he is as oblivious to other women as he seems, because he is anything but unaware of her. The past five days constitutes the longest spell they’ve gone without sex since she came back, excluding the usual biological gaps. It turns out she needn’t have worried about sustaining passion without the adrenalin jolts of near-death experiences.

No, Illya doesn’t need anything as dramatic as that. Her mind treacherously supplies a case in point, the morning a couple of weeks ago when they’d overslept after a night of particularly inventive activities. Illya had woken up, gorgeously rumpled and late for work, and had grabbed the wrong shirt – the one she’d stolen off him over the winter and, as the weather teetered between warm and cool, often wore to combat the evening chill while sitting out on the verandah.

The phone in Miss Fisher’s hallway had rung at midday.

“Illya?”

“Good. You are home. Is anyone else there?”

“No, it’s just me today. Is everything ok?”

“Yes. Yes – just. Stay there."

He’d arrived under thirty minutes later. She’d opened the door and he’d wordlessly picked her up and carried her up the stairs, one hand supporting her as she instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist, the other already working at the zip of her dress.

“Illya? What are you doing?”
He hadn’t replied immediately, too busy closing the bedroom door and pressing her up against it, burying his face into her neck.

“Illya, what’s got into y– ohh... Yes. God, Illya – yes. Wait, wait... Slow – ah – slow down!”

He’d practically snarled.

“This shirt smells of you. Every time I move... All morning. Please, Gaby. I need – I can’t think. I need...”

She shifts again in the chair. Damn, now she’s realised she’s ready to move in, she can’t stop thinking about the associated benefits. She idly entertains some ideas of what it might do to him to find her scent on his pillows, in his bed.

A gentle cough scatters her thoughts, and she looks up to find Miss Fisher watching her with amusement. She tries to force down the heat in her cheeks through sheer will, thanking her lucky stars that her skin tone hides the worst of her blush.

“Good day?”

“What? Oh – yes, thank you. Well, sort of. Illya and Solo are hiding something from me, and it’s making me a bit crazy.”

“Men,” her host smiles sympathetically. “Can’t live with ‘em, can’t hit ‘em with an axe.”

She laughs. "Don't tempt me.'"

“So,” Phryne probes, “nothing else of note happened today?”

“Oh yes – Firth offered me the job. But I’m guessing that you already knew that.”

“He may have called me, yes. Congratulations my dear, it’s very well-deserved. Now hurry up and change – we have a celebratory reservation at the Tolarno for seven pm. You, me, Mac, Dot and Jane. The men are not invited.”

Gaby smiles. You can always trust Miss Fisher to know how to anticipate a situation.

It’s no wonder that she oversleeps. Mac and Phryne may be touching eighty but that doesn’t seem to have slowed them down. And while Dot tapped out at eleven pm, Phryne’s former ward Jane and Dot’s two youngest daughters helped keep the celebration alive until the wee small hours.

So when she finally peels herself out of bed in search of coffee, she finds that she’s missed a visit from Illya. Like the observant angel that he is, Driver only passes on this information after he’s served her coffee.

“Mr Nikolaev presented his sincerest apologies that he was unable to celebrate with you last night, and asked if he could make it up to you with a dinner tonight at his residence in Carlton.”

“Did he look apologetic, Driver?”

“Very much so, Ms Schmidt. And extremely tired, if I may be so bold.”

Illya is apologetic on the phone, but he also sounds odd, even jumpy. He instructs her to arrive at eight pm and is strangely specific about it in a way which tempts her to arrive late just to frustrate him. But when it comes round to it, she’s too curious and annoyed to wait longer than she has to. She parks her car on his street at seven fifty-nine.

This time, there’s no delay in him opening the door. It swings open almost instantly, revealing Illya in a neatly pressed shirt, sleeves rolled up and collar open, just as it had been on the day that she’d returned. His house smells amazing, or perhaps it’s just him. Although the dark circles are still under his eyes, he’s freshly shaved and the smile on his face when he sees her wipes away any evidence of his fatigue. She almost forgets to be annoyed.

He fidgets – clearly unsure whether he’s in too much trouble to be allowed a kiss – before enveloping her in a hug and ushering her inside.

Solo appears in the hallway, tugging off an apron and brushing a kiss to her cheek.

“You’re not staying for dinner?”

“Sorry, Teller – you’re stuck with Peril tonight. I can only apologise.”

He grins unrepentantly at her, and she narrows her eyes as he disappears out the door.

“Illya – what is going on?”

He just smiles and leads her down the hallway. Her heels click loudly on the polished wood floor and she suddenly notices that the threadbare carpet has vanished. Ahah.

She could punch him, honestly. Of all the bloody stupid, completely pointless, irritatingly adorable things for him to do.

Testing her hypothesis, she opens the first door on her left – Illya’s master bedroom. The floor here is also polished wood, overlaid with richly patterned rugs. The centre of the room is taken up by a large, old-fashioned brass bedstead, as in Solo’s room, and she catches a glimpse of white linen and scattered red rose petals before Illya whisks the door closed and chivvies her down the hall, a telltale flush suggesting she’s ruined part of his surprise.

She starts to protest slightly – she’s contrary enough to want to disrupt any well-laid plans, but he steers her inexorably past Solo’s door to the end of the hall and then on into his kitchen and living room.

Whatever she was planning to say disappears from her brain. Whatever improvements he’d slowly been making over the past few months have been sent into overdrive in the last five days. The spartan space she’d visited at the start of the week has been transformed. The kitchen fittings have been cleaned impeccably and the old linoleum replaced. New pots and pans hang over the oven, where whatever Solo has prepared is bubbling away, smelling meaty and spicy and thankfully nothing like feet.

She wanders through to the rest of the living room. There are new blinds and new rugs, a full bookcase and proper china. Fresh flowers and candles adorn a beautifully set dining table. The uncomfortable sofa has vanished and the replacement is deep and inviting. Someone – she’d bet Solo – has found a comfortably worn and cracked leather armchair and footstool combination.

She smiles. None of it matches, exactly, and most of it is second-hand, but that just emphasises the
atmosphere of warmth and restfulness. It’s not a clean, sharp showroom, not a bachelor pad or an elegant parlour. Everything here is meant to be lived in, to be loved, to be used.

Her fingers brush over the back of the armchair as she moves through the room. He’s left the back door open, and as she draws closer the aroma of Solo’s cooking mixes with the scent of jasmine and lavender.

Outside, the grey concrete has vanished below a layer of gravel, while on each side, the concrete has been pulled away to allow climbing roses and star jasmine to be planted. The transplanted vines are still taking to their new surroundings but there are already sprays of early flowers, new shoots already starting to twine around wooden supports. The climbing plants are offset with pots of mint, sage, rosemary and lavender. He’s put lanterns out to boost the fading evening light, and the whole garden seems to glow, warm light illuminating velvety red petals and pale white blooms.

It finally occurs to her that she has been exploring the place in silence, but when she turns to Illya he doesn’t seem to mind. He is leaning against the back doorframe, watching her take it all in.

“Illya, it’s – it’s absolutely beautiful. But why the sudden rush to do all this? And why couldn’t I have helped?”

He ducks his head apologetically, hands in his pockets, and scuffs his toes in the gravel.

“I – I don’t have much to offer you, Gaby. A life of security alerts and false names, a half-finished doctorate and three applications for grants. No car, tiny home, saving for six months to make improvements, borrowing from Solo to finish –,”

“No, don’t be ridiculous.”

He stops her. “Wait, please. I know – I know it is not much, but I want to ask… would you consider perhaps living here, one day? With – with me? It would make me very happy.”

She really does hit him at this point, he’s being stupid enough to deserve it. “Yes, you idiot. Of course I’ll move in. I would have moved in without all this work – I would have moved in if you’d not so much as repainted the front door!”

His face lights up, brighter than any of the lanterns around them, and he’s out in the garden and spinning her round, lifting her off her feet. “You will?”

She laughs as he sets her back down, slightly dizzy from his exuberance. “Of course I will. I’ll move in tomorrow, unless you have some ridiculous notion about living in sin together.”

It takes a second for him to translate the expression, but when he does, his reaction is surprisingly strong.

“What? No, of course I don’t –,” He flails for a moment. “I thought – I thought you did not want to get married.”

“What?” she parrots back at him. “When did I say – oh…”

Her parting shot from yesterday: *Don’t think I’m waiting for some man to give me a ring. You’ve already done that – twice actually.*

Oh dear. It’s not as if she’s set against the idea. She had assumed at some stage that they probably would, she just hadn’t really thought about it. But of course he would take her seriously. She resists the urge to rub her temples in exasperation.
“Stop worrying about what I want, Illya. I’m asking what you want.”

“I – I – a good socialist does not care about bourgeois traditions like marriage,” he tries. As a performance, it’s entirely unconvincing. “And as you said, I have not had much luck giving you rings.”

Her hand instinctively moves to the pearl ring resting against her breastbone. There had been a time when she wouldn’t have thought twice about wearing it. Years when she’d worn it every day, only removing it as a mission required. It had only been Illya’s abduction by the KGB that had changed things, forcing her to move it onto the chain when she’d gone to steal him from Siberia.

And now? She had told herself that it’s merely a keepsake, too bulky to be worn while she’s elbow-deep in an engine. And it had never been an engagement ring, not really. It had been a prop, a fraud – a monitoring device, as it turned out. Wearing it again would seem strange, like wearing a memory of a past life. It’s not the ring he would choose for me now.

The thought arrives without warning, and in its wake the half-heard conversation that’s been nagging at her all week finally surfaces in her brain. Something stolen from a duchess, something secret, something perfect. She glances down at Illya’s hand, shifting uncomfortably in his pocket, clearly fiddling with a suspiciously small object.

She makes the decision almost without thinking, dropping to one knee on the gravel. In retrospect, it’s a ridiculous gesture – her head is now level with his upper thigh. It would be crude if it weren’t awkwardly comical.

“Illya – will you marry me?”

“What?”

“Come on, I know Solo stole a ring for me and I know it’s in your pocket. For spies, you’re not that subtle.”

“Cowboy is never subtle.”

She waves away his admittedly good point.

“Whatever. I want to marry you, Illya. I want to move in with you and I want to marry you. I don’t care if the house is small or if you don’t make much money. I’ll make the money, if we need it. But I want a life with you, with my cars and your computers and children if we must. I don’t need glamour or danger or anything else your idiotic brain might start worrying about. Keeping one step ahead of the KGB or any other fools who want to come after us is all the danger I need.” She pauses. “Unless you count car racing, but I maintain that it’s really not that dangerous if you’re in control...”

Later, it will occur to her that it isn’t perhaps the most romantic of proposals. But right now, with her heart pounding in her ears, her neck cricked back and her knee beginning to ache a bit on the sharp stones, it feels like she has declared herself as honestly as she possibly can.

Illya seems to have frozen above her, staring at her as if his brain can’t quite comprehend what his ears have heard.

“Illya? My knee is beginning to hurt here.”

Illya unfreezes. She is swept to her feet with a vigour that makes her head spin a little, so fast that she almost misses him whisking something small and sparkling from his pocket. She doesn’t even
look at the ring as he slides it onto her finger, instead choosing to look up at him, his eyes shining bright in the light spilling out of the open door, his failed attempt to keep a broad smile off his face.

“There, now we are engaged. Again.”

She rolls her eyes, laughs and kisses him, hooking her hands around his neck to pull him down to her. The fingers of her right hand brush over the unfamiliar edges of the ring. Which reminds her…

“Ilya, you didn’t think I wanted to get married. So why was the ring in your pocket?”

He pulls back a little, and looks down at her with an almost entirely serious expression.

“I was KGB’s best agent, малютка. Always well prepared.”

January 1969

The ring draws her eye every time she turns the page of the book, catching the light in a way she is still not used to. In the strong sunlight, the ruby at its centre is alive with fire, held in check only by the cooling circle of diamonds around its periphery. During the day, it lives with the pearl ring on her chain in her overalls, far too beautiful to expose to the grease and grime of her job.

The simple gold band on her right hand however, will never leave her finger, and was chosen to be as plain as possible for that very reason.

She looks across at Illya and catches him looking at his own wedding band. He glances up at her and smiles. She holds his gaze for a beat too long, and his sunny grin fades a little as his expression darkens with intent. He lays aside his book and her pulse jumps as his eyes slowly and unhurriedly scan down her body.

“Have you come round to the idea of the bikini then?” she teases, stretching out along the length of her sun lounger.

He rolls himself up and across to her, his left hand tangling with the fingers of her right so that his ring clicks gently against hers.

“I never dislike bikini,” he mutters, slowly tracing his right index finger down the fading scars on her torso. His touch sends a shiver running through her skin despite the heat. “I just think is too little to wear in public, and too much to wear only for me.”

“Well, we’re not in public now,” she points out, gesturing with her free hand at the deserted pool. Miss Fisher had insisted on throwing them a wedding party at her cousin Guy’s enormous house in Elsternwick. And what enormous estate in Victoria is complete without a private pool?

“I am aware of this,” Illya rumbles and she feels her body respond, hips arching up and shoulders rolling back as his fingers slip around her ribs to pull at the strings fastening the back of her bikini top.

Her eyes drift closed as his left hand releases hers and settles encouragingly on her upper thigh.

“That settles it,” a voice declares. “I can’t possibly stay in your spare room in these conditions. I’ll never get any sleep. I shall be moving into Miss Fisher’s until you both realise how married people are meant to behave and get separate beds.”
Illya growls and sags back on to his own sunbed, primly throwing a towel across his swimming shorts and leaving her to awkwardly retie her own bikini top.

Solo strolls down the steps to the pool area, smirking. He cuts an image of decadent debauchery in last night’s half-unbuttoned shirt, complete with lipstick stains, sunglasses, and a pair of boxers. The look is completed by a bottle of champagne hanging from one hand and three glasses in the other.

“Are you sure Phryne’s invitation still stands?” she asks. “I’m not sure how much Dot will take to the idea of her youngest daughter’s deflowerer staying with her godmother.”

He shrugs. “Don’t be so dramatic, Gaby. Nobody did anything they didn’t enthusiastically consent to, several times. And either the delightful Harriet is a very quick study, or last night was definitely not her first time.”

“Careful, Cowboy – if you are having to make this clarification, it suggests you are too old to be pursuing them.”

“Oh shut up, Peril. You’re eight years older than your wife. Don’t give me cradle-robbing lectures.” He collapses heavily in a third lounger. “This is the thanks I get for bringing you champagne by the pool.”

He waves the bottle vaguely at them both. Illya just grimaces and returns to his book.

“For goodness sake, Peril, you’re never going to get a body like mine if you don’t properly indulge now and again.”

He pours himself a glass and leans back. “It’s not as if Dot will have to suffer me for too long anyway. Phryne has kindly given my name to a number of her European contacts in the art world. I’m due in Basel to meet with the director of the Kunstmuseum next month.”

Her mouth twists. “Leaving so soon?”

“I’ll be back, Süße, don’t worry. Phryne and I have lots of hell-raising to do.”

She smiles a little at that – she knew it had been a mistake to introduce them. But Solo’s promise can’t dull the ache of him leaving again, which in turn reminds her of their other absent friends. A little pain amidst the joy, a touch of bitterness to balance the sweet.

Her eyes prickle as she remembers the two unexpected gifts that had been delivered just in time for their small ceremony. A beautiful silver menorah, all delicate arms, had arrived in a lovely rosewood box with no postmark and a simple, unsigned note: For good friends, who never let the light go out.

And then the slim volumes of poems, beautifully bound in leather. Rilke, Shakespeare, Pushkin and Neruda, searing expressions of love and life across four languages. This gift had been accompanied by an elegantly hand-written, unbearably polite letter of congratulation and best wishes, as well as a promise to visit Phryne and her growing collection of waifs and strays at Waverly’s earliest convenience.

She returns to her own cheap paperback to cover the change in her expression, blinking away the unwanted tears. Unfortunately, this brings the title into Solo’s view.

“The Three Musketeers – you’re finally reading it!” he exclaims. “Isn’t it great? It’s basically us, if we were all male, French and lived in the eighteenth century.”
He’s had this theory ever since Geneva. Illya flatly denies seeing a connection, and Gaby had refused to read it, on principle.

“I still don’t see it,” she says. “There are four musketeers anyway, so it’s a terrible analogy for our team. Unless you’re counting Yael. And she’s not d’Artagnan.”

“Cowboy is clearly Porthos,” rumbles Illya. “All appetite and no taste.”

“The hell I am! You’re obviously Aramis – too pious for his own good.”

“And that makes me Athos then? The one that keeps you both in line?” She looks over her sunglasses at them both. “That sounds about right, actually.”

She reaches forward and pours herself a glass of champagne. “All for one, and one for all? I’ll drink to that.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve tweaked the timelines just a wee bit – Harry Firth didn’t leave Ford to join the new Holden Dealer Racing team until early 1969, and in November and December 1968 was still driving for Ford. But what’s a few months in fanfiction? The rest of the general info should be accurate – Holden were based in Firth’s old workshop in Auburn, Melbourne, and had significant success in 1969 and into the 1970s in various touring car races and in rallycross.

The ATCC is the Australian Touring Car Championship.

The trouble in Czechoslovakia that Solo refers to is the Prague Spring, which culminated in a Russian invasion in August 1968. And 1968 was a pretty tumultuous year in the US, with the assassinations of both Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and fierce Civil Rights and Vietnam War protests.

Любимая моя = “My beloved”. Illya finally has another option than just little one (малютка)

Gaby borrows the final couplet of W.E. Henley’s Invictus to describe Illya – “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”

Kaffee und kuchen is afternoon coffee and cake – a German tradition I am totally on board with.

The Tolarno Hotel was a bohemian hangout for artists and other locals in St Kilda in the 1960s. Also the places Illya and Gaby go on dates should be period-accurate.

“Can’t live with ‘em, can’t hit ‘em with an axe,” is a Miss Fisher original line from series 3. So true…

A traditional way to wear wedding rings in Germany is on the right-hand ring finger. The engagement ring stays on the left.

By the by, based on Dot’s vague age in the TV show, her youngest daughter would be
at least 23... just to be clear!

"All appetite and no taste" is a Johnny Depp quote.
I wrote this Epilogue waaaayyyy back in Spring, and only had to edit it slightly to finish it off this week. And clearly it required 11 chapters of angst before I could get to this point...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

West Berlin, 9 November 1989

They make a charming pair, the small blonde girl and the tall dark boy excitedly pushing their way through the crowds near Bornholmer Straße. Even if she weren’t looking for them, they would stand out. The girl’s breath hangs in the air as she chatters excitedly away, her hair shining under the street lights, the carefree vitality drawing glances from strangers around her.

The observer winces at their lack of caution. At least a hundred people would remember the girl later, if asked. It doesn’t help that she and her companion are the only people speaking English in the vicinity. The observer cocks her head slightly to catch their voices better – they speak with a distinctive twang that stamps their nationality unmistakeably on them.

“Mischa, come on. I want to get closer!”

“Slow down, Ally. If you get lost, Dad’ll kill me.”

The girl rolls her eyes – a familiar expression on a less familiar face – and turns to a man in the crowd.

“Entschuldigen Sie bitte, wie weit sind wir von der Mauer?”

Her accent is decent, but a little awkward. The man smiles at her impatience.

“Es ist nicht weit. Wo kommen Sie her?”

“Australia,” she smiles. “Aber meine Mutter ist Deutsch.”

“You have come a long way! But you speak German very well.” The man has kindly switched to English and the girl beams, all youth and joy and charm.

“We’re almost there,” the girl calls to the tall boy behind her, and their observer takes note of him properly for the first time. He’s older than his sister, not quite fully grown but still slightly awkward, unsure of how to hold his height. He’s not a forbidding presence, exactly, but the West Berliner still starts a little as he looms over them.

“Come on, Mischa. Mum said we needed to see it for her.”

The boy smiles then, and his face is transformed. The German relaxes instantly.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he says, all politeness. “My little sister is extremely excited.”
The man laughs. “We are all excited, my friends. This is a historic day.”

They nod and giggle and push off again, weaving through the crowds at such a pace that for a moment the watcher wonders if she’ll be able to keep up with them. Her left knee twinges a little as she eases her way past people, her heart rate rising more than is acceptable. Too much time in meetings, behind desks. She’s getting old.

The boy’s bulk means they get further forward than she expected them to but he hoists his sister onto his shoulders, again making it easy for her to spot them. The girl pulls out a camera and huddles into her coat as the cold night air catches her, above the crowd.

She eases closer to them. Their attention is fixed on the brightly lit, forbidding concrete structure ahead and she doubts even if they did look round, that they would recognize her. It’s been years since they last met and that thought, echoing the twinge in her knee, is yet another reminder of the passage of time.

As it turns out, they’ve made it just in time – her earpiece buzzes a few minutes later and she strains to catch the update over the din of the gathered masses.

“They’re bowing to the inevitable – Jäger is giving in. It’ll go at any moment.”

She turns her eyes to the checkpoint, and a few minutes later a crowd of East Berliners swarms through. There’s an almighty cheer, an emotional outpouring as decades of separation get washed away by the human flood. It’s impossible not to feel the joy herself. A moment of pure release, the uncompromised righting of a wrong. There have been precious few of those in her life, and she allows herself a genuine smile, a moment of optimism for the future while change is so plainly in the air.

The boy rummages in his bag and pulls out some cans of beer. He passes one up to his sister, “Only one, mind – you’re technically underage,” then pushes forward carefully to share them with the first few Ossis that reach them.

The girl’s eyes are shining, snapping pictures as tears roll down her cheeks. “They would have loved this, Mischa. They should be here.”

“They’ll come back one day. Dad said it wasn’t a surprise that they were considered too much of a security risk right now. We’re here for them. That’s what matters.”

The observer feels a touch on her shoulder, and she looks round to see a familiar face. He’s no less attractive, even though he must be pushing sixty.

“Ms Dayan, I hoped I would find you here.”

“Hello Solo, I’ve been expecting you. Waverly got in touch – sharp as ever, despite his age.”

He nods towards the siblings. “Peril asked me to keep an eye on them.”

She smiles. “Gaby asked me the same thing. She sent me a photograph – children change so quickly. I would barely have recognised them.”

Solo looks back at their godchildren. “They’re not really children any more. They’re practically adults now. Last time I visited, Ally was caught sneaking in from a nightclub at four am. Peril was incandescent.”

“You helped her sneak out, didn’t you.” She doesn’t even bother making it a question.
He raises an inscrutable eyebrow. “I may have hinted at a couple of flaws in her father’s perimeter monitoring system.”

She allows herself an exasperated eye-roll. He thinks he’s such a rogue. She debates telling him about Gaby’s scribbled confession last year, admitting that she’d been letting Mischa compete in the illegal drag races held near their old house in Carlton. *How bad a mother am I, Yael? But given how I spent my youth, I’d be such a hypocrite if I didn’t let him go. And he’s brilliant, you know, so calm under pressure. He reminds me of you.*

She’s mildly surprised Illya hasn’t had a heart attack by now.

“You should visit more, you know,” Solo cuts in, reading her face with the ease of long practice. “They’d love to see you again.”

“I know,” she sighs. “It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s – there’s always another crisis.”

“Perhaps it’s time to leave the crises to someone else, Yael.”

It sounds more acceptable when he says it, somehow. She turns it round in her head a few times, trying the idea for size.

“Perhaps.”

The two spies stand in silence for a while, observing the gaiety in front of them, each lost in their own thoughts.

“Well, we’ve done our duty,” Solo announces. “They seem fine to me.”

He pulls a bottle of champagne out of a leather case. “And it’s too momentous a night to spend it babysitting.”

She laughs; he never changes. “Don’t you have more amenable women to share that with?”

“Actually, I’ve got a rather lovely young thing called Heinrich staying with me. But he’s off enjoying the occasion with friends, and this isn’t a night to spend with the young. There are too many memories, too much nostalgia for that.”

She looks back at the sea of humanity. There are people dancing in the floodlights illuminating the top of the Wall. The girl – Ally – has descended from her brother’s shoulders and is hugging a perfect stranger. Even Mischa’s reserve has been broken, shaking hands and stumbling over German phrases with the latest arrivals. Their uncomplicated joy feels almost painfully bright. It snags on surfaces of her careful, professional life that she thought had long been polished smooth.

“You may be right.”

“I’m always right.” He conjures a couple of glasses from somewhere in his bag. “Hold these. And this. And this. Ah – here we go.”

The cork pops, and she holds out the two glasses.

“A toast,” he says. “To the most exasperating Russian and the stubbornest German I’ve ever known.”

“To UNCLE,” she says. “L’chaim.”

“As you say, my dear. To life.”
“Entschuldigen Sie bitte, wie weit sind wir von der Mauer?” = Excuse me, please – how far to the Wall?
“Es ist nicht weit. Wo kommen Sie her?” = It’s not far – where are you from?
“Aber meine Mutter ist Deutsch.” = But my mother is German.
(Apologies for any mistakes in the above!)

The night the Wall came down really was a great party!

(Which still appears not go anywhere when I try to click it. Any help appreciated, the internet has not helped me out here!)

I have assumed that the ASIO would have strongly advised Illya and Gaby not to travel to Berlin for the fall of the Wall. Tensions would have been pretty high, and I figure they would both have been under quite close surveillance by all sorts of people at the time. (By the by, let’s just conveniently ignore the fact that both Ally and Mischa would be a couple of weeks away from sitting exams in school / university in early November. Or, if you prefer, envisage a pile of revision notes sitting back in their West Berlin hotel room...)
Author's Note

Please feel free to imagine whatever future lives you want for our intrepid four, but the following is my own little head canon – read if you wish!

Illya and Gaby:

The development of computers would give Illya lots of scope to use that brain not his fists, and I imagine Gaby being an extremely proficient test car driver and team mechanic. There were a number of very successful female racing drivers in Australia Touring motorsport at the time, particularly Christine Gibson (née Cole), so theoretically she could have raced too, but I doubt that would have been approved by the ASIO, as it would have been pretty high profile!

Of course, you can also envisage them having several scrapes with local KGB spies, criminal elements and all sorts if you like! Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries teaches us that Melbourne can be a very dangerous place…

Although the Epilogue assumes they aren’t able to travel to Germany, I don’t see them restricted to Melbourne forever. Gaby’s job would have taken her all over the country and eventually the world, and while it would have been trickier for Illya to travel before the USSR began to crumble, that’s about to change. So my personal head canon is that he mostly stays in Melbourne and brings up the kids while Gaby travels for work, but now that their kids are growing up they plan to visit Solo in New York and do some proper travel. I can totally see Gaby wanting to climb Kilimanjaro or hike the Inca Trail, dragging Illya along behind her.

Solo:

Solo is obviously a frequent visitor. I see him living a luxurious life advising art galleries and private collections on security, perhaps helping some slightly backdoor deals take place, fraternising with the rich and beautiful. I would never presume to write an OC that could keep him interested for too long, and I can’t help thinking he would continue have a weakness for pretty younger men. I’m also open to him having a slightly unconventional relationship with Gaby and Illya when he comes to stay, but I’ve never written a threesome before and I was not about to start with this fic. Christ it was difficult enough as it was!

Yael:

I cannot tell you how happy I am that some of you took Yael into your hearts and I cannot apologise enough for not giving her a glorious happily ever after. I’m so sorry – she’s just too contrary and difficult for that! The intervening years between her departure in Chapter Eight and the Epilogue are spent climbing the ranks in Mossad, switching to a non-active agent role as she hits middle-age, but still generally kicking ass. I like to imagine she works her way through a new set of security details every few months and still delights in ditching them whenever she fancies doing her own thing.

The history of her agency means her life isn’t without its controversies, and I don’t mean to imply that she’s an entirely heroic character – while Gaby finds the murkier side of espionage dehumanising, Yael is able to cope with the morally questionable actions she has to either undertake or authorise.

I do think that in the Epilogue, we see a woman who, in her early fifties, is coming to the realisation that she’s achieved what she wanted to do in her career, and is finding that she’s tired of
the responsibilities of her role. I particularly enjoyed writing the slow development of friendship between her and Solo in this fic, and I can completely imagine him encouraging her to take early retirement and then introducing her to all his queer friends. Now it’s the 1990s (almost), perhaps she can find the out-and-proud relationship she’s always wanted. I hope so!

**Final thanks:**

My heartfelt thanks to every person who commented, gave kudos, bookmarked or subscribed to this work and to all of the fics in my trilogy. It’s full of mistakes and missteps, and compared to some of the great stories I’ve read in this fandom, it’s quite a modest (if long) achievement, but I had the most wonderful time writing it and every endorsement meant a great deal. *L’chaim*, everyone.

P.S. According to the film dossiers, Illya is 58 and Gaby is 50 in 1989. If Ally is 17 and Mischa is 19, then she was born in 1972 and he was born in 1970. You do not want to know how panicked I got trying to work out whether they would be old enough to travel to Europe alone for the fall of the Wall, and if that would work with my fic. Timelines, man – yeesh.

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