

**despite the passage**

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# despite the passage

by [endquestionmark](#)

## Summary

Illya has been waiting for something to happen for a very long time.

## Notes

It is 1963, and a program of cross-cultural collaboration brings Illya Kuryakin — promoted from soloist for the occasion — and Napoleon Solo — a principal teetering on the knife-edge of infamy — together in Berlin at the height of the Cold War for an experimental production aimed at easing tensions between East and West.

Credit where credit is due: This story would not have happened without [Nat](#) and [Lena](#), who met my every objection with "you gotta", and made horrified noises every time I did, in fact, gotta.

Warnings: This is ballet. Characters knowingly and unknowingly destroy their own minds and bodies, as well as the minds and bodies of others. Their interactions can only be described optimistically as risk-aware, and are certainly not safe or sane. This story contains baroque body horror beyond the literal, depersonalization and derealization issues in the extreme, and genre-typical body image and perception issues.

In brief: the thinking monster's Aronofsky.

It is not the sun which wakes Illya.

The blinds are open, but the sky is only just beginning to lighten, and he looks at the ceiling with unfocused eyes, and waits for something to happen.

Illya has been waiting for something to happen for a very long time.

After a while — ten minutes, at most, but he already feels ill with inactivity — Illya gets up. His mornings are a long, linear progression: Illya showers, joints stiff with cold and inertia, and turns off the water as soon as he feels himself relaxing into its warmth. He dresses, in worn-out leggings and a clean shirt. He opens the blinds, although the sun is not yet up, and will not rise for another thirty minutes at minimum.

Illya stretches, in the space in front of the window. He cracks his hips, first, and carefully tests his balance, easing his weight from one side to the other. Leaning on the sill, he uses the heel of one foot to crack the toes of the other, putting his weight behind it, and then the middle, and shifts carefully again to do the opposite. He pulls one ankle back, leaning into the stretch in his thigh, and then the other. He stares out the window, and forgets what he is doing.

It is a comforting ritual. By the time that Illya rouses himself, the sky is light, and the sunrise is imminent — New Year's Eve, 1962 — and class does not start for another hour, at least.

Illya takes his bag and goes to the studio anyway.

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This early, the studio is still cold; Illya pulls the sleeves of his sweater down past his wrists, and sets his teeth, and ignores the way that the chill creeps in at every exposed seam. He folds over into a static stretch — hamstrings — for a long count, and then another — hip flexors — for twice that, and knows that he should wait until he is warm.

Patience is not one of Illya's strong suits.

He watches the rest of the class drift in, in couples and clusters, and listens to their low murmur. None of them will think it remarkable that Illya is here so early. They are well used to him, and no longer bother to speculate. They have all watched each other grow and change, bodies pulling like rough clay, tearing and lengthening and becoming stranger by the day. Growing pains and undue stress on young joints had made Illya's irregularities impossible to ignore: they have all seen him curled in the corner around aching knees and hips, the elongation of bone far outstripping the elasticity of connective tissue. Illya has put a foot wrong often enough as a soloist that they have all watched him crumple, leg suddenly gone slack, with the pain of a dislocated hip. Too tall, they say, too quiet, too angry, but never enough. So uncultured, they say, you wouldn't think it of the son of such — of course, but

you know how it takes them — well, yes. It always happens like that, doesn't it, locked up tight. He should have gone too, they say; it might have been a kindness. Shame about that one, they say. Shame about—

—well. Shame, anyway.

Illya no longer bothers to listen, now, beyond the tenor of voices and the tone of the room.

The teacher enters the studio, and the class falls silent.

“Shall we begin?” she says.

It is not a question. On cue, Illya stands, and waits.

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Class is unremarkable. Barre, center, adagio, petit and grand allegro, working from the corner, and then an additional hour of partner work: Illya is paired with a girl from the corps, whose name he does not know, and who does not do him the kindness of pretending likewise. She looks up at him and frowns, and does not bother to disguise her disappointment.

Illya puts one foot in front of the other. He goes through all the correct motions, and brings nothing to their collaboration but a sort of clockwork reliability. He is there to hold her by the waist when she turns, and there to lift her on cue, and there to hold her ankles when she asks, as she stretches during a five-minute break. She asks as if she would rather not. Illya would also prefer not to touch her beyond what is absolutely necessary, a matter of personal discomfort rather than any particular dislike. He obeys, nevertheless, and as soon as she is done, he leans away. Brusquely, she does the same; if she takes it as an insult, it is one which she returns to far greater effect.

The studio door opens. The room falls silent. Oleg enters, cigarette between his lips, and nods at the teacher. He tugs at the lapels of his coat, and looks around the studio.

He does not call Illya by name. Oleg does not have to do anything so obvious: he nods at Illya, and jerks his head at the door, and Illya gets to his feet and goes.

“I apologize,” Oleg says, behind Illya, “for the interruption.”

Oleg closes the door behind him when he leaves.

“Come,” he says, and does not wait to see if Illya is following him.

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In Oleg's office, Illya waits to be offered a seat. Finally, Oleg gestures, and sits behind his desk, and smokes for a moment in silence before he speaks. There is a program, he tells Illya, of cross-cultural collaboration; Oleg's contempt for the idea is obvious in his tone, and the curl of his lip. An English choreographer, and an American principal, and a German company, as close to the center as possible, Oleg says. In such dangerous times, he says, it will be good to put the political aside. It will be to their credit. Illya will be promoted to match; Illya will make them all proud, Oleg says, although he never uses Illya's name. Proud: Illya does not flinch at the word, if only through force of long habit.

The value of such a public demonstration of comradeship, Oleg says, is something that he is sure does not need to be stressed. An easing of tensions will be of far greater value than a single production, surpassing anything that they can do separately.

Of course, Oleg says, it is not in their interests to come second. Illya knows that, doesn't he. Illya understands.

He does.

Illya will be traveling alone, Oleg says. He will be representing more than a company, more than an art form: he will be representing all of them, everything for which they have worked and sacrificed. He will leave in a week for—

Illya has long since stopped listening.

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Only a week later, it takes Illya a moment upon waking to remember where he is — to recall the hours of instruction, and the bag already packed for him, and the incomparable sensation of watching lights fall away beneath the wing of a plane — and then the realization spills across him like sunlight, though the sky is still dark. Finally, a change. Finally, he does not have to wait any longer.

Principal: it is a word that Illya has tested for fit quietly, in the relative privacy of his own head. He finds it overlarge, an expectation which he knows he must fulfill, though he is less than certain of his ability.

He gets up. He goes down the hall to the shower, and takes a minute to decipher its workings. He allows himself an extra half-minute of warmth, letting the hot water leach the tension of travel from his shoulders, and takes his time drying off and dressing.

Illya opens the blinds, and looks out the window, and catches his breath. He leans forward, as if drawn, and looks at the sleeping city as if he can learn it in one morning, the created constellations of a new sky. Illya lets himself believe, for a moment, that he will have time to do anything but dance, working harder — to be better — than ever before. The room in which he is staying is above the studios, which are in turn located in the extension to the rear of the theater. He has already found a studio in which he can practice after hours, at the very

end of the hallway, where he is not likely to be disturbed. The likelihood that Illya will have any time at all to do anything besides dance and sleep is minimal.

Still, the city is beautiful when it is quiet, like an empty stage, and Illya imagines that only he is awake to see it.

He stretches, less aware of his body than he could be, and does not forget where he is or look away from the window for the entire time.

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The studio, five floors down, is warmer than Illya is used to, and he peels off his sweater once he has finished warming up. The room fills slowly, loud with chatter that Illya only understands peripherally. When he tries to follow any single thread of conversation, he loses his place. Illya resigns himself to only the vaguest understanding until he falls back into the rhythm of the language.

Nobody knows him, here, at least. Gossip is insidious, particularly in a company of dancers who work and live and sleep together, as they all do, but Illya can indulge in the fiction that he is a complete unknown. Here, nobody looks at him and sees his family. Here, Illya's name is entirely his own.

"Up," the teacher says, clapping his hands, and turns to the door. "Your choreographer." There is a polite murmuring, and Illya ducks his head, an abbreviated reverence. The choreographer is, briefly, nondescript, the most elegant sort of understatement. Grey tweed and glasses and deep crowsfeet, visible when he smiles: he is entirely unremarkable, and Illya finds himself immediately on edge. "Mr. Waverly," he says, "would you start us off with a few words?"

"Thank you," Waverly says, "I will," and he looks around. Illya gets the impression that he already knows who is present, and is simply shuffling faces like papers in his mind. "We seem to be short a principal," he goes on, "but I'm sure you all understand the importance of what we are doing — for art, yes, but for peace as well — and the experimental nature of the entire production." He takes a few steps into the center of the room. "To reflect the stakes, we will be working with themes of national tension, and and the paradigms at play, but I won't bore you with that just yet." Waverly smiles. "To work, then," he says, "and to unlikely alliances."

The following silence is broken, after a moment, by polite applause. The teacher looks to Waverly.

"Well, carry on," Waverly says, and crosses the room to lean against the piano. He looks at his watch. "I think I'll wait for our other principal to put in an appearance."

The American, Illya remembers, suddenly, his opposite and his opposition: Illya doubts that a dancer trained in the West will pose any sort of threat, but he supposes that he should attempt

to at least perform some sort of interest.

“Places,” the teacher calls, and Illya rests one hand on the barre and waits.

The studio door opens again.

Illya’s first impression is of a smile, and disembodied movement. His next is of entirely abstract understanding: no wonder this is the American who has been picked to represent the West. Broad shoulders, and a trim waist, and dark hair; his eyes are silvered glass, and his smile is razor-sharp, and the room is centered around him as soon as he walks in.

“Solo,” Waverly says. “Good of you to join us.”

“I hope I haven’t missed anything,” Solo says, and bows a perfect reverence to the entire studio.

“Nothing of consequence,” Waverly says. “Our principals, all: Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin,” he adds, and offers them to the room with a sweep of his arm. “Introduce yourselves in your own time, and let’s not lose any more time to dramatic entrances, shall we.”

Napoleon takes his place at the barre as if he is used to walking into rooms which immediately become empty of air as a consequence. He keeps his eyes forward, and waits in perfect stillness, but something about the blankness of Napoleon’s expression suggests to Illya that he enjoys being known. He is the sort of person who comes into a room and enjoys knowing that every person there is looking at him, and takes even the most scandalous of rumors as a compliment. Napoleon is the sort to leave a swathe of cinders and ash as he goes, irresistible even as he is ruinous, smoke rising in his wake.

The music starts, and Illya feels Napoleon’s gaze as if it is a physical pressure at the back of his skull.

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By the end of the day, Illya is exhausted. He always feels like this at the start of a season, as if he has been struggling across shifting sand, trying to track reactions and instructions and predict what Waverly wants before he needs to ask. He slumps against the wall to catch his breath, and does not open his eyes until the studio is much quieter.

When he does, Illya realizes that he and Napoleon are the only ones left in the room.

“I did some reading on the flight,” Napoleon says, his tone deceptively casual. “And then the other flight, and then the drive, and then in the taxi, which got lost.” He is sitting, legs crossed, against the opposite wall, and as Illya watches, Napoleon pushes himself to his feet, gathering his things. “Do you know,” Napoleon says, “I had never heard of you before. I thought I should do some homework.”

“I had not heard of you,” Illya retorts, heart sinking. So this is Napoleon in the absence of an audience: no less performative, and far more pointed, and entirely intolerable. He had hoped for better. No doubt Napoleon feels the same.

“You’ll flatter me,” Napoleon says drily. “No, you know, there wasn’t much to find on Illya Kuryakin, unlikely promotion.” He picks up his bag, and turns to face Illya again. Illya pushes himself to his feet. He has no desire to face Napoleon at a disadvantage. “Hardly the ideal, even on your side of the Curtain, are you,” Napoleon says, advancing a step at a time. “Far too tall, and far too unknown, but that isn’t the case at all, is it?” The distance between them shrinks, half and half and half again. “No,” Napoleon says. “Now, I’m sure you’re aware, but the Kuryakin name isn’t precisely one to be proud of, is it.” He stops, barely at arm’s length. Illya could step forward and look down at Napoleon. Illya could call his bluff.

Illya stands frozen, held in place by Napoleon’s gaze and his words, and Napoleon smiles.

“What a lucky coincidence,” he says, “that you were so young when your father was sent away. The perfect age to enter an academy, and I’m sure that your mother’s — well — connections didn’t hurt, when it came to overlooking certain proportional disadvantages—”

Rage rises up and roars through Illya, an inferno, and he holds himself still, though he is shaking with fury.

“—but then,” Napoleon says. “I’m sure you’re well aware of all that.” His smile is still in place, if slightly more indicative of satisfaction. Turning away, he says: “I’m sure I’m absolutely commonplace by comparison.”

As soon as the door closes behind Napoleon, Illya puts his fist through the mirror, glass falling away in in splinters, and forces himself to hold it there for a moment before he draws his hand back and considers it. His knuckles are swelling already, bruised-warm and bloody; there are slivers of glass visible, shining wetly through shredded skin.

Illya picks out the largest of the pieces and drops them, still filmed with blood, atop the shards spilled on the floor, a reflective shine of dust still in the air. His hand will need to be bandaged, awkwardly at best, and impossible to hide; it had been an ill-considered impulse.

Illya does not regret it. Given a choice between a bad option and a worse one, Illya knows what he will choose, every time.

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Class the next day is in a different studio, so Illya can only guess as to whether Waverly is aware of the broken mirror, or Illya’s part in its destruction. During a pause, Napoleon’s gaze catches on Illya’s knuckles, wrapped clumsily in gauze and tape, before he looks away, a fluid gesture of indifference. It is not until partner work, when Waverly pairs them separately, that Napoleon — contrarian to his core — bothers to display any sort of concern.



“Now that looks regrettable,” he says, and takes Illya’s hand in his before Illya can recoil. “And not very neatly done at all. Allow me—” and, supremely presumptuous, Napoleon unwraps the bandage from Illya’s hand. Illya tries to pull away. “—We can’t have that,” Napoleon goes on, pinning Illya in place with his eyes, and catches Illya’s wrist as if he is a recalcitrant child. “Hold still. At least it looks clean. No, wait—”

When Napoleon, without further warning, digs his nails into the pulped flesh over the point of Illya’s first knuckle, Illya has to bite back a scream.

“—much better,” Napoleon says, and holds up his fingertip for Illya’s consideration. There might be glass glittering under his nail, or it could simply be blood: Illya finds it impossible to tell, reeling as he is from pain. Napoleon rebandages Illya’s knuckles, neatly, and ties it at the center of his palm, wiping his fingertips on the crumpled tape and discarding it in Illya’s bag. He waits.

Illya stares at him.

“Well, don’t thank me, then,” Napoleon says, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

They begin with tours de promenade, and then progress to turns proper; Illya watches Napoleon’s partner, effervescent and enchanted, as she pirouettes, waist turning under his hands, and then sweeps her working leg to second. She is spotting her turns on Napoleon’s smile, Illya realizes, as his own partner comes to a halt in his arms.

“One last round,” the teacher calls, and Illya automatically loosens his grip to allow his partner room to work.

Napoleon is so close by, and terribly distracting when he smiles like that, eyes on the girl’s throat, laughing as she turns.

Illya allows his partner to drift, just slightly, as she turns, and her fouetté catches Napoleon squarely in the ribs.

Instantly, Napoleon folds with theatrical timing, and his partner stumbles a few steps before she catches herself. “Solo,” Waverly calls, and Napoleon holds out a hand; his partner lays a hand on his back and makes worried noises. The entire room is looking at Napoleon, and Illya realizes that he has gained nothing by being petty besides giving Napoleon an audience.

After a moment, Napoleon straightens up. “I’m all right,” he says, hand on his ribs, and meets Illya’s narrowed eyes with an artless smile.

At the end of the morning’s rehearsal, the corps fusses around Napoleon, taking the excuse to talk and touch and catch a second of starlight apiece. One of them — dark-haired, and perhaps Illya’s partner, though he cannot quite recall — looks at Napoleon with genuine concern, and the smile that Napoleon gives her is entirely different, and openly considering.

Illya fumes.

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For the next week, Illya watches Napoleon, examining him for flaws.

In rehearsal, Napoleon is perfect, never a step out of a place or a line any less than beautifully elongated, not a single movement any less than fluid. He dances through the entrée of the grand pas, a whirlwind courtship of the audience: it is an allegro flurry of display, irrepressible and high-spirited. By the ballabile, the studio seems to be spinning around him, the corps partnered and impelling, enthralling in movement and enticing participation. Napoleon's proficiency irritates Illya more than incompetence would. Over the course of a week in the studio, Illya can find no loose thread at which to pull, and no imperfection in Napoleon's facade. Illya wants to peel away at Napoleon's perfection to prove it superficial, but suspects that he will find nothing but more layers underneath.

For all that he wants to criticize — the choreography owes a great deal to Messerer, but Napoleon is no student of the Bolshoi; there is a refinement to his movements that precludes the possibility — Illya cannot look away for long enough to find his thoughts. There is an inexorability to the rush of steps, the whirl of bodies, and so by the end of the coda, when the corps draws back, Illya is not caught off guard so much as carried away. Napoleon more than takes up the space, anyway, glorious and grandiose and still, somehow, gamine; he is magnetic as he turns through the air, a series of double sauts de basque that brings him, at last, to Illya's feet on one knee, head thrown back.

It is, for the space of a breath, perfect, though Illya is not: breathing, that is, until Napoleon curls in on himself, an entirely involuntary motion, and he remembers. "Right," Waverly says, taking off his glasses. "Well done, all, not bad, but please do remember, you're not in some pastoral watercolor. Some Toulouse-Lautrec, if you will, not so much Impressionism, all right?" He raises an eyebrow at Napoleon in silent query.

"Just a cramp, sir," Napoleon says, knee still pulled to his chest. He has both hands wrapped around his foot, and Illya tilts his head, all too familiar with the tugging agony of a contracted muscle. He had been taught to walk it off, flex and point until the ache faded and then work through it more carefully, though caution was not something he was willing to allow himself, and not something which he could afford regardless.

Napoleon sits up a little, instead, and slips his thumbs under the canvas of his shoe, and that, strangely, is when Illya has to suppress a wince. The way that the color has gone from Napoleon's cheeks, and the tight press of his mouth, and the line between his brows: it is too close to watching someone pick at a hangnail, or a scab. Years of living in dormitories and being measured and evaluated and watched have stripped away any bashfulness that Illya might have come to associate with nudity, but pain is still too intimate for him to observe comfortably. The battered fabric may as well be Napoleon's skin for all that it sets Illya's spine wire-taut. The corps is in motion again, a shuffling flock in his peripheral vision, and Waverly is making corrections. There is no reason for Illya to wait and watch; he should make sure that he does not cool down, stretch or stand elsewhere at the very least.

When Illya looks up from the arch of Napoleon's foot, and the implicit press of his thumbs, Napoleon is watching him.

Illya does not flinch away, not quite, but he turns away abruptly, and in the mirror, he sees Napoleon bend his head again, as if he had never looked up. He flexes his foot as if he had never caught Illya watching, and stands, a fluid stretch with no caution to it at all, though he is still white in the face. Napoleon carries none of the weight that injury conveys, and betrays none of the hesitation that usually comes with recent pain. He, like Illya, has been taught that there are worse possibilities than discomfort. He, unlike Illya, can afford to ignore both.

Waverly has them run the grand pas twice more before they break for lunch, and keeps Napoleon half an hour later to run the coda one more time. Illya takes his time, stretching while he is still warm, and considers. Without the corps as a buffer, Napoleon is no less pivotal, but he loses a certain vitality. The room whirls less, to begin with, and the studio is drenched with the last of the late sun through the long windows. Napoleon looks best in stark lights, where they can give his face dimension; onstage, in the wings, trailed by the spotlight, he is as volatile as myth. In the studio, he looks as if he has been carved from marble, atonal and waiting for an audience for whom he can come to life.

He is beautiful, though. Illya is not given to self-preservation — has pushed through too much pain for it, and has given up too many choices — but failing to acknowledge Napoleon's ability seems, to him, like a more fatal error than most. Napoleon looks as if he is dancing with the light itself, moving as if supported by the air, and even the whisper of his feet on the floor too unobtrusive to break the illusion. Illya watches him, and feels it like a fist around his heart.

For all that he is, undoubtedly, unspeakably beautiful and impossible to look away from, though, Napoleon is not there, impersonal as a muted recording and every bit as arresting. He throws himself into the final sequence, body a perfect hollow through each turn, and Illya thinks that Napoleon could very easily disappear into the light with nothing to show that he was ever present except for Illya's held breath, and silence in place of a thudding footfall.

Illya does not hold his breath. Napoleon alights and slides to one knee, arms wide in triumph. The music dissipates with a final chime, and Illya meets Napoleon's eyes; there is nobody there. He is gone.

"Thank you, Solo," Waverly says. "Now, let's move on from the choreography to the character, shall we?"

"Sir," Napoleon says, absently, and Waverly sighs.

"Take lunch," he says. "Take the afternoon. Sit in and watch. We'll be running the grand adage again; see if you find some inspiration in the negative space of the corps, why don't you." It is not a question. Napoleon's nod is not an answer. He gets to his feet, still that odd absence to him. Illya has been told, often, that he fails to inhabit a role, but it is because he brings too much of himself to rehearsal. Looking at Napoleon makes Illya think of a room from which all the furniture has been removed, and which has consequently acquired an echo. When the door swings to after him, Illya feels that the studio is less empty than it was before, and it takes him a moment to shake the sensation.

"Sir?" he says to Waverly.

“Take lunch,” Waverly repeats, “and when the corps have remembered that they must actively spot their turns, we’ll run your second variation.” He smiles, absolutely impersonal. “It would be your first, but in light of this morning I think that would benefit from some extra time, don’t you?”

“Sir,” Illya says, and then remembers. “Yes. Sir.”

He leaves Waverly in the studio, leaning against the piano and stark against the windows. Halfway down the hallway, Illya feels it pressing at his ribs again, the feeling which he cannot name and does not wish to put into words. It is not jealousy, because Illya will not do himself the discredit of ignoring years of devoting his life to dance; it is not covetousness, because a word cannot contain the magnitude of Illya’s want. With every fiber of his being — muscle to scar tissue, blood and bone — Illya aches, and does not know what for; he feels starved, and feels it like a yawning chasm in his chest.

Illya wonders if Napoleon feels this way, and if that was the echo which he saw in Napoleon’s eyes, lucid in one moment and flat mirror glass in the next.

He flattens the thought to nothing — too much of himself in rehearsal; too much of himself in the steps; too much of himself in his head, now, it would seem — and goes in search of food and fresh air.

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The afternoon is no more frustrating than any other. Illya moves like an automaton, a marionette wielded by unskilled hands; he has the mobility, and the strength, especially with the long hours that he has invested, and the risks he has been taking, but even he can tell that it is not good enough. When Waverly waves the accompanist to silence, Illya does not know what he is about to say, but only that it will be the same criticism that has been leveled at him for more than a decade now. He can hear it already — too fierce, too mechanical, too much as if he has something to prove; has he read the notes? Has he thought about what they mean? — and always, the same confusion, fading into disappointment: they thought better of him, and he has failed to fulfill expectations. It always makes Illya desperate, to see that disappointment, as if he would do anything to avoid it, even after all these years. He should be used to it. He should not take it to heart; he should trust in his own abilities. He should work harder.

“There’s something missing,” Waverly says, instead, when the light is nearly gone, which is simply a new articulation of the same sentiment. “You’ve got to meet Solo on his terms if you want to keep him interested, yes? You have to beat him at his own game first.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, over his glasses. “Where’s the focus? You want him to watch your every move, you want him to be impressed, you want him to be angry; you don’t want him to be able to look away. You aren’t dancing for points, Kuryakin. There’s a bit more than that at stake here.” He pushes his glasses up, not even bothering to look at Illya, gesturing to the accompanist. “Again, please.”

Illya repeats the variation, and can feel the discontinuity of it; in the mirror, he looks like a pinioned bird, pulled endlessly down. There is a weight to his limbs that he cannot shake. Illya has always been able to take refuge in motion, the mindless repetition of exercises at the barre and the smooth mechanism of movement, like a machine with all its working parts in order. He is eminently unsuited to cabrioles, anyway, double or otherwise. There is a buoyancy to the step that eludes Illya, and which he is not particularly interested in achieving anyway. Waverly is waiting, though, silent and inscrutable, so Illya flings himself into the jump, and wants more than anything else to get it right, if only so that he can stop.

From the moment when his foot leaves the floor, Illya knows that it is not enough. He feels as if he is straining upward against lines, ropes tethering him to the floor, and making little headway. In the split second before he lands, unbearably leaden and cumbersome, Illya sees himself in the mirror. There is something unbearably plain about the language of his body, if not his face: some lessons he has learned better than others. It is the look of a small child, intolerably artless and unaffected and so desperately yearning. Illya reads it in every line of himself, and so impact is almost a relief when it knocks all the way up through his spine. He is horrified, in the abstract way that he once was as a student, watching corps members tape their feet in the hallway, and in the way that he still is when it comes to his own body failing to comply with him, but finishing the turn carries Illya away from his reflection again, and he is safe.

Waverly looks less frustrated than resigned, at this point, but he attempts a smile anyway. Illya wishes that he would not. "That's all for today," he says, and turns to the corps. "Dismissed." Illya does not watch them leave, uninterested in accidentally seeing their faces; he does not need to be reminded of his own inadequacy in a kaleidoscopic display of various disillusionments. It is only then, somehow, that he remembers Waverly's instructions to Napoleon: sit, watch. Napoleon's is not among the faces left in the studio. Napoleon has managed it, at last, and disappeared into a reflection, if not the last weak wash of the light itself. Somehow, that is much worse; if Napoleon is nowhere to be seen, then he might be anywhere. His absence sets Illya's skin crawling in a way that his presence does not. Waverly turns to Illya, who refocuses on the movement and on his face, and braces himself.

All Waverly says, though, is: "It's been a long day." Illya watches him cross the studio to speak with the accompanist, unsure of whether he has been dismissed, and whether it would be worse to leave if this is not the case or to stay if, in fact, it is. Waverly glances, back, though, saving him from the decision, and says, "Tomorrow, then."

Illya ducks him a half-bow, a cursory reverence, and thinks: tomorrow, again, another chance to prove himself worthy of time and trust, which he will inevitably fail to do. Waverly could not have been more cruel if he had tried.

By the time he leaves the studio, the light has failed completely, and the hallways are full of shadows. Illya glances at his multiplicity of selves, and does not rush on his way through, but does not particularly linger with the echoes either.

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In the studio at the end of the hallway that night, Illya stretches, and is aware that he is only doing it so thoroughly in order to delay the inevitable. He has only turned on half of the lights in the studio, and leans into the pull of his hips, the ache of muscle and the warning tightness of his flexors, even after an entire day of work, as if it will make him any less awkward and attenuated in his movements. His second variation is an answer to Napoleon's entrance, delayed until after their first pas de deux; in it, Illya takes Napoleon's movements and turns them back on him, an escalation of interest and competition.

As choreography goes, it is particularly lacking in subtlety, but makes up for it in sheer display. Illya is required to soar, evoking the scale and sweeping generality of an embodied archetype. He is meant to be more than mortal, more than individual, more than dance or story. He is not to be human, but something eternal and changeless, capable of weathering the centuries. Illya has never had an easy time embodying anyone but himself, too constrained by his form, and bound to it and limited as a result. He has never been forced to push this far past his known competencies, beyond where natural proficiency — albeit the bare minimum — and his relentless momentum in pursuit of improvement — by far the greater factor in his ability — have carried him.

None of that matters. It does not matter that, twice in the past week, Illya has blinked awake as if shaken, the pain in his hips too sharp to ignore and too extreme for him to process for a long second before he has been able to shift, and work his flexors out of spasm. It does not matter that he has not been to see the company masseuse in the last three weeks, and can feel the way that he is slowly accruing damage, small agonies more resistant and slower to heal with every day that passes. The ruin of Illya's body — of the choices that he has made for himself, and the ones that were made for him, and that were not choices at all — is given to a greater cause. Illya will not honor the things that he gave up, and the things that were given up for him, by being any less than perfect. He will not give them meaning through failure.

Illya stands, and begins his second variation.

In the half-lit mirrors, there is something else to his movements. It could be the slow creep of exhaustion from a long day of rehearsals, or the overlapping edges of reflected shadows; Illya thinks that it is neither, or perhaps both, and avoids looking at his reflection regardless. It was enough to see himself so guileless, so exposed and raw, once, and he never wants to do it again. Illya never wants to see that look of hopeless longing on his face again, and does not want to think about what he had reached for so desperately. Perhaps it had been the failing light, or a word of approval, or simply some result to show for all his work and all his wanting. With the studio half-dark, Illya can focus on his form, and the way his lines seem to extend beyond the confines of his body, reshaping the lines of the floor and the perspective of the mirrors, and find something salvageable in his work.

Meet Solo on his own terms, Waverly had said; beat him at his own game. With his face in shadow, and the light casting him in stark contrasts, Illya thinks that he might be able to catch Napoleon off guard for once. He slides into motion, and watches his reflection out of the corner of his eye, and does not find it as difficult as usual to consider his own quality of movement. Too tired to hurt, beyond the generalized ache that he has grown used to, and too absorbed to stop, Illya falls into a fondu, knee hitting the floor a little harder than he would like. Before he can anticipate the final sequence of steps, culminating in the double cabriole

that feels, suddenly, acutely urgent — if Illya cannot manage it now, after so much work, and here, with the night buoying him up, then he will never be able to; he will never be good enough — there is an echo, a few seconds delayed.

Illya pauses, and listens, aware that the moment and his chance are slipping away from him, and it comes again, a muted thud against the mirror. Perhaps someone is practicing in the studio next door. Illya is surely not the only one aware of the repercussions of failure, not so visibly, in such difficult times. He must not be the only one who prefers to preempt unquiet dreams with physical exhaustion. There is nothing remarkable about any of this, and nothing that means that he should rise and cross the room quietly rather than finish the variation, for better or worse.

It takes Illya half a moment to consider all of this, and the rest of the moment to understand that he will do it anyway. He catches the studio door on the heel of his hand, and does not let it slam, and slips into the shadows of the hallway, much deeper now that the studios are dark and have no light to lend, and lets them carry him along until he can see into the next studio over, through the window in the door. Once there, it takes Illya another moment to understand the tangle of limbs — twisted skirt, and bent knee, and angled elbow — and another to remember that he should not be looking.

One of the girls from the corps is pressed back against the barre, dark hair curling around her face and one hand flat against the mirror. Illya thinks that he has seen her before, or perhaps brushed past her in the hallway, but then perhaps she was in rehearsal with him earlier in the day. He has certainly never seen her like this, eyes closed tight and back arched and one leg draped over the shoulder of the man kneeling at her feet, entirely candid in her posture and her physicality. She looks as if her strings have been cut, and Illya is seeing her move on her own for the first time. Following the line of her body down, Illya notices that the ribbons of her shoe are undone and trailing, and it is only then that the intimacy of the moment — and how wrong it is for him to be watching, and how unwanted; how similar it is to the way that Napoleon, doubled up by a cramp, had met Illya's eyes unblinkingly — hits Illya, a blow to the chest.

Illya does not want to think about Napoleon. Illya wants to stretch, and sleep, and wake in the morning with more work to do. In the morning, the present will be past, and therefore inconsequential. Having considered him, though, Illya cannot shake the thought. He wants to drift away again, become incorporeal and flee back to the solid assurances of mirrors and movement, but something about the surge of the man's shoulders has barbs to it; something about it has caught under Illya's skin. He has never seen Napoleon move like that, and yet he knows immediately that nobody else could express the same half-feral grace, viscerally obscene and unspeakably captivating.

Napoleon does it again — moves, the long shudder of something crawling out of its skin — and it hits Illya right in the gut. When Illya was a student, barely even daring to dream of the corps, his teachers used to use other pupils as examples, demonstrating through execution. "Again," they would say, and again, in front of the mirrors: a perfect *rond de jambe*, a grand *battement* worth working one's feet bloody to attain. Waverly in rehearsal, gaze skipping over Illya like a reflection. "Again."

It is what Illya thinks of now, watching the way Napoleon moves, the way his scapulae pull tight under his skin, too close and then too far. *Again*. Illya wants to see it again, and to hold it in his mind, a film negative to run back and forth until he has memorized every detail. There is a horrible grace to Napoleon's movement, the barely-visible hook of his jaw and the stillness of his hand on the girl's waist, like some sort of predator pinning its kill. Illya does not want to watch. He cannot look away. He wants to pull the motions apart a muscle group at a time, learn them so that they lose their ability to transfix him.

Not just him, either; the girl clutches at the barre — the noise he must have heard, or maybe her head thumping back against the wall; Illya glances unbidden at the swan-clean line of her bare throat — and her other hand flutters over Napoleon's head, tremolo death throes before she makes a sound he can hear even through the closed door. It looks like helplessness, vocalized; it looks like the most desirable thing in the world, somehow, in the moment. She sinks her fingers into Napoleon's hair, and Illya realizes that he does not want to see Napoleon's face, even twice-reflected through silvered glass and plain. He does not want to know what Napoleon looks like when his movements alone are enough to drive through Illya's sternum and hold him pinned. Illya is unsure that he can stand up to it without, somehow, losing himself in the process.

As easily as he slid into the hallway shadow cast by the oblique light next door, Illya slides out of it, and closes the studio door quietly. It is late, even by his standards. He should sleep, or at least be still for a while, or at least — *Again*. — try. Illya stretches, and tries, even if he is unsuccessful, to ignore the hammering of his pulse the whole while, and to think of nothing at all.

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The next morning, Illya arrives at the studio early, and works some of the tightness from his back. He draws a knee to his chest and pulls, twisting from the hips, to no avail: the muscles running along his spine, deep in the concavity of his back, are pulled taut and locked into contraction. Illya arches into the discomfort, and the vertebrae between his shoulders crack, a minimal improvement. By the time that he has worked his way upwards, working to release the persistent tension tugging between his ribs, the studio has come to life as dancers filter in — still bleary-eyed from waking — to stretch and sew their shoes. Illya twists at the shoulders, legs bent and crossed at the knees, so he only sees the door open from the corner of his eye, but he does not miss the way that the room goes quiet. The silence starts with a sentence broken off midway through a word, and washes through the studio with breathless rapidity until the only sound is that of Napoleon's footfalls as he finds a spot at the barre.

Napoleon, Illya realizes, has picked a spot directly opposite a familiar face, though Illya cannot bring himself to look at her, not after having seen her so utterly exposed. Her dark hair is pulled away from her face, now, but the line of her leg is the same, the bend of her knee in front of her as she measures ribbon. Thinking of the way that she had looked in half-shadow — beautiful in disarray — makes Illya wonder what it would be like to be so openly undone. Once begun, he cannot stop thinking about it, and so he does not look at her, and instead



listens in the sudden echoing quiet. Napoleon's feet brush the floor, tracing semicircles, and the studio remains silent around him. He is a single dynamic point amidst their static forms. With one leg raised on the barre, Napoleon folds forward, and there is the snip of blades, the first sound in ten minutes.

For a moment, Illya thinks that it is Napoleon — become some new horror — or perhaps a remnant of the previous night, and the infidelity of lingering shadows. An inch of ribbon flutters to the floor, though, and the girl sets one sewn shoe aside, heel still inside-out. Illya darts a glance at it, half-afraid of what he will see, but unworn, it is simply satin and thread. There is none of the same naked intimacy to the ribbons that had so badly unnerved him the night before. Illya relaxes slightly in relief, and watches Napoleon float his leg effortlessly from the barre and return to first. One arm curved above his head, Napoleon leans back and back and back until he is hanging in a beautiful cambré. The trajectory of his spine is agonizingly tight, exquisite in its extremity, but still Napoleon arches, moving incrementally until Illya thinks that he must fold.

A crack — flat and deadened and, worst of all, utterly nondescript — echoes through the studio.

Illya's horror is, briefly, a moment of absolute weightless clarity in his chest before his ribs seize tight. Napoleon is still moving, though, returning to the upright position with the same deliberate, controlled grace with which he had arched back. This time, when Illya looks at the corps member, he cannot avoid her expression: it is one of fury, plain and simple, an outward expression of inward sentiment. It is not Napoleon at whom she is angry, Illya thinks, but herself; she is holding the second shoe of the pair in her hands, and she has snapped the shank raggedly where the arch of her foot will force it to bend. Illya may not understand the feeling, but he certainly understands the gesture, vicious and visceral as it is. As he watches, she twists at the excess material until it comes loose, and places it neatly by the scrap of ribbon.

When Illya looks back at Napoleon — paired shoes, two to a pas — he is looking at the girl with absolutely nothing in his expression to indicate a response. Instead, he pushes his hair from his face, an entirely natural gesture if not for some quality to the movement, a certain sense of premeditation. Regardless, it seems to have some significance that Illya cannot recognize. She blanches, looking down, and pulls the heel of the finished shoe back into place, as if she has suddenly become aware of their audience.

Napoleon is not smiling, when Illya looks back, but there is a sense of satisfaction to him nevertheless. Illya gets to his feet, one hand on the barre, and cannot express even to himself the depth of his disquietude, or why. Napoleon, he thinks; it is Napoleon, nothing more to it. Napoleon is disquieting, undoubtedly, and actively unsettling. Napoleon, if given half the chance, will throw Illya so badly off-balance that he will be unable to right himself.

Illya refuses to be unbalanced. He focuses on his movements, and the work yet to be done that day, and lets everything besides that dwindle to nothing.

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After morning class, Illya and Napoleon are scheduled to rehearse their first pas de deux, immediately following Illya's entrance. Rather than attempting to evoke any variation on the partnership typical to such a duet, or at a minimum the mutual construction of it, Waverly has composed their pas as an expression of watchfulness. When Napoleon's steps — hyperbolic to a point just short of parody — threaten to become caricature, Illya is set in motion to balance him. When the onus of action and aggression is shifted to Illya, Napoleon circles him, a progression of steps beginning as an embellishment until he eventually upstages Illya as the focal point of the movement. It is not so much an exchange of primacy as a sequence of escalating supplantations.

Like all crescendoes, though, it must end somewhere, with a misstep or an antagonism so severe that there is no possible response. The penultimate sequence of the coda is Napoleon's, of course. There is no mistaking who Waverly has chosen to highlight, saving the most intricate choreography for Napoleon and relegating to Illya the traditionally masculine role of glorified support. Illya must concede that he would be uncomfortable dancing any other part, though not that he would be unable to match Napoleon's speed and ability if pressed. Regardless, this is how Waverly has chosen to deploy the two of them; it is not for Illya to question his instructions, but rather simply to realize them. Napoleon turns, a quick series of chaînés as Illya lunges to meet him; shoulder flush to Illya's chest, he rises into arabesque, and without waiting for Illya's support, swoops into poisson, legs swept back.

"Thank you," Waverly says, and as Illya freezes, nods once. "Hold that, please."

Illya would prefer to do nothing of the sort. With one arm around Napoleon's waist, and the other following the line of his gracilis up the inside of his thigh, he is far too close for any of this to be abstract. His thumb rests immediately at the dip of Napoleon's adductors, the visible hollow at the join of his hip, and Illya thinks idly of how easy it would be for him to press at the edge with his fingertips. He knows how much it would hurt, and the visceral, involuntary quality of the pain, an external pressure where only an internal one has previously existed. Illya can imagine how Napoleon would react, too: not by instinctively recoiling, as anybody else would, but with detached curiosity. Illya knows too well, and too personally, the impulse to press at a greening bruise — to push at the fluid-filled swell of a blister — to place the pad of his thumb over the rawness at the top of his metatarsal, yellowing layers of callus torn away like old vellum, until the sensation is overwhelming beyond description. If Illya were to push — just so — he knows that Napoleon's eyes would go opaque rather than transparent. Instead of becoming abruptly absent, he would be inarguably present, but no less inscrutable. Illya knows it, and hates the certainty with which he does.

"Allongé," Waverly says, and Napoleon extends his arm, a long sweep up that must accentuate the line of his throat. Illya, holding still, can only see the nape of Napoleon's neck, and the absolute compression of his back, muscles pulled tight as if he is about to take flight. Illya could dig his fingers in and separate them into layers, segment Napoleon a movement at a time. Illya wants to, badly. Instead, Illya breathes, controlled and counting. "Good. Now, Solo, look back — very good — and catch his eye," Waverly says, and adds: "Let him know that he hasn't won."

Illya knows that he has not won. The slight pinch in his side that indicates a leverage of muscle rather than technique tells him so, as does the phantom twitch of his fingers. It would be so very, very easy to press, and to watch Napoleon go reflexively rigid in distress. It would be so simple, and a secret for two; nobody would ever know. He does not need to meet Napoleon's eyes to know this. He does not need to be told. He does not need to make claws of his fingertips.

Napoleon gasps between his teeth, a hissed inhalation, and Waverly frowns. "You can let him down, Kuryakin," he says, patronizing in his irritation. "That's quite enough." Illya does, supporting Napoleon as he straightens, and watches as he immediately shifts his weight to one side. "What was that?" Waverly demands.

"Nothing," Napoleon says through gritted teeth. "Poor placement. Sir," he adds, almost as an afterthought, and Illya hates that too — that even in pain, Napoleon finds it in himself to affect casualness — with an acid sharpness.

Whatever had happened, it had not been his fault, Illya thinks, with a certainty that decreases even as he considers it. He had simply thought about the possibility, the phantom impulse; he had not moved, had barely breathed, too focused on the pose, surely. Napoleon must have shifted — but not him, Illya thinks, almost desperately — had he? Surely not.

Napoleon is still looking at him edgewise, though.

For a moment, Illya thinks that Napoleon is smiling, corner of his mouth drawn back — smile or snarl, no matter — but once again: surely not. Surely this is not Napoleon's pain point, where Illya can take him to pieces with sufficient pressure. Surely Napoleon is too uninterrupted a construction for that.

The thought that he might not be is too precious for Illya to consider directly. If he looks straight at it, the possibility will slip away, like something in the corner of his eye.

"Again," Waverly says, and Illya is in motion again before he knows it. His unconscious response is both a conditioned inevitability and a distraction for which he is grateful: the movement allows Illya to smooth out his reflexive shudder at the word.

In the course of the remaining hour of rehearsal, Napoleon does not wince once.

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Dismissed for the afternoon, with no rehearsals scheduled for the rest of the day, Illya goes in search of Napoleon, and is not quite sure why. He wants to pin Napoleon to the wall until Napoleon admits that Illya had not hurt him at all; he wants to dig his fingers into the muscle of Napoleon's thigh until Napoleon is shocked silent by the agony of it; he wants to drive the point of a question through the center of Napoleon's chest, and let answers spill out between his fingers, not even bothering to catch them. Illya wants a great deal, and has no idea how to stop, or even what it is that he wants that is so terrible to begin with. If it has to do with

Napoleon, he reasons, it must be awful by association. Even if what he wants is Napoleon unstrung, lines stark and broken, no more or less than: there, Illya thinks, lies the problem. No more or less than what? Himself? Napoleon is already, somehow, both too much and too little for that to be the case. Human? Illya's mind slides away from the question, frictionless and impossible.

The studio at the end of the hall is empty, which is no surprise; the one next to it is likewise deserted, though Illya cannot say whether he is relieved by this, or disappointed. Down a floor, the corps is divided, but Napoleon is once again absent. Down again, and the lights below ground level are unreliable, fluorescent tubes flickering audibly. By the halfway point of the hallway, Illya is carrying new tension in his jaw and the points of his scapulae, and the lights seem to hum in time with the ache of it. Illya feels indistinct around the edges, as if he, too, is wavering with the susurrations: one moment distinct, the next distorted, like a secondhand signal. It whines at the edge of his perception, like a crescendo of plucked wire.

None of the rooms are lit until the end of the hallway. Illya has not been here before, but he remembers it vaguely from signs, and the directory on the ground floor as the physical therapy room, and has to fight down even more unease. He has not been here in weeks, and knows that sooner or later he will be unable to avoid questioning on the matter, or, worse, an injury which will render the point moot regardless. The door is slightly ajar, and Illya breathes, releases the tension in his jaw, and pushes it open.

At first, Illya thinks that he is wrong, and that the room is empty. Even the masseuse is gone, the side of the room nearest to Illya — dedicated to tables and counters — unlit. It takes him a moment to recognize, on the other side of the room, a tiled alcove, half-curtained off, and the wavering light cast on the draped fabric from either side, an interplay of shadow that sets him thoroughly on edge. Of course: ice for swelling and soreness. Illya can almost feel the chill of it from across the room, leaching the heat from his core, and finds himself overcome by inertia, waiting for some external impetus to act upon him. "Well, don't just stand there," Napoleon calls, voice unmistakable even across the room, somehow at once both flattened and echoing, and there it is.

Illya crosses the room as if compelled, though he still cannot say why — why he is here, why he is listening, why he is doing what Napoleon tells him to — and his footsteps ring out, even through canvas. The curtain conceals a tub, enamel chipping and visible plumbing dark and oxidized. The tub, Illya thinks, conceals Napoleon; his instinct, however, is to run, and to slam the door, and to barricade it closed. Illya puts one foot in front of the other, and does not know why, and is filled with a visceral dread of coming to a halt, and being able to see beyond the splatter of shadow on the curtain. It rises like fluid through his lungs. Illya forces himself to keep breathing, even as he is sure that his panic must spill, viscous and obscene, from his lips, and seep from his nostrils in a slow, sickening drip.

When Napoleon curls a hand over the edge of the bathtub, Illya manages, barely, to suppress his startle reflex. He does not bolt, though he wants to, desperately so. Instead Illya looks at the way that Napoleon's fingers are tinged cyanosis-blue at the tips, and thinks that he could be looking at the hand of a corpse, if the lighting was just a little less generous. Napoleon pushes the curtain back, and settles back into the water, melting ice clicking around him, and tilts his head back. The lines of his throat are pronounced like this, and Illya realizes that

Napoleon's jaw must be clenched against the cold, to keep his teeth from chattering. Illya looks at the tight-pressed line of Napoleon's mouth, faintly pink at the bow and shading into translucence at the corners. Half-unwilling, he follows the line of Napoleon's jaw to his throat, and then down to where he is distorted at the waterline into an impossible wash of river-ice color, frozen through. Illya wants to touch him — the angle of his knee, the faint tremor in his abdomen, the prominence of his throat — until his fingers go numb, and he loses all sense of cold. He follows Napoleon's arm back up to his fingers, and the drops at his fingertips which he has neglected to shake away, and thinks of the austere cleanliness of winter.

Napoleon's eyes are still closed when Illya manages to drag his eyes back up to Napoleon's face, a small mercy, but his expression is unmeasurably different. There is a certain complacency to him now, perhaps the curve of his smile, or the tension gone from his shoulders, as if it is bleeding into the water, and leaving him lax. "I didn't mean that you should come and just stand here instead," Napoleon says, and Illya wants to tangle a hand into his hair — curling, now, a little, into his eyes — and simply push, and see if Napoleon would fight or if he would simply go, bubbles rising until they stopped.

He takes a reflexive step back. "In rehearsal," Illya manages. "What was that?"

"Slip of the hip," Napoleon offers, too glib, and one of the drops slides from his fingertips, splashes, an almost imperceptible sound. Even with the room echoing around them, Illya cannot help but hear it. "Lazy stretching, loose poisson." He extends his fingers, splaying them, and opens his eyes. "These things happen, you know."

"Not with me they don't," Illya says, less matter-of-fact than he would like. "Never with me."

Napoleon sits up then, surging upright, and Illya does not think about the pull of his shoulders, or the line of his throat, or a studio half-lit, just like the alcove. "You," he says, and tilts his head, expression a mockery of concern, "have really got to work on this perfectionist business." Napoleon pushes his hair out of his eyes, and holds out a hand; Illya stares at him blankly for a moment. "Towel," Napoleon says, smiling around the syllable, and Illya sees it on the back of a chair. He rolls his eyes and tosses it at Napoleon with a flick of his wrist, even his movements conserved. "Thank you," Napoleon says, and stands, water sluicing from him in sheets like some great predator, to wrap the towel around his waist, not bothering to dry himself. By all rights he should be ungainly from cold and cramp, but his movements as he steps out of the tub are as precise as always, if a little more rote than usual. Illya feels the tension return to his shoulders, the background hum of the lights buzzing in his jaw once again.

"What are you doing?" Illya says, stupidly.

"I don't actually enjoy hypothermia," Napoleon says. "If you do, though, you're welcome to it." He offers the alcove, with a hand. "I do, however, enjoy having a capable partner," Napoleon adds, and crosses the room past the tables to the counter, where his clothes are folded, "and I suspect that you enjoy a challenge."

"I enjoy competence," Illya spits, "and you certainly cannot help with that."

“And that is where you would be wrong,” Napoleon says, entirely unconcerned, as he pulls on grey pants, loose at his hips and comfortably worn. Illya forces himself to watch Napoleon’s shoulders, as much as the movement perturbs him, as the lesser of available choices, and looks away a bare half-second before Napoleon turns around. “You need unsettling,” Napoleon says, definitely.

“You do not unsettle me,” Illya says, disdain reflexive and wholly irrational.

“Good,” says Napoleon. “There’s a studio I know on the next floor up, then. It’s quiet, and we won’t be disturbed.” He leaves the towel by the sink, half-folded, and does not bother to dress further, but gestures at the door. “Shall we?”

A studio, quiet: this, probably, is what Napoleon says every time, and Illya is suddenly certain that he can meet Napoleon and match him. He refuses to yield. Illya holds the door on the tips of his fingers, not looking back, and all the way back up the hallway, he cannot hear the hum of the lights over the roaring in his ears.

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The studio is, certainly, quiet, and the door lock clicks when Napoleon lets it swing to, waving Illya into the center of the floor. There are no smudges on the mirrors. Illya could have sworn that he had seen a handprint, the beginnings of a distorted reflection, the last time he had looked into the room, but then perhaps it was too much work and too little food and too little sleep. Perhaps he had been looking too hard and seeing too little beyond the foreground, and trailing ribbons — still the worst part of it all, somehow — and his fear of actually meeting Napoleon’s eyes, reflected or otherwise.

“Right there,” Napoleon says, and Illya watches him in the mirrors, as he draws back the curtains and slides a window closed. As Napoleon circles the studio, Illya turns so that he never quite faces Napoleon squarely, but only presents a three-quarters profile; a smaller target, feet whispering against the floorboards as he pivots. He shifts his weight to the balls of his feet, skittish, and Napoleon clicks his tongue, apparently satisfied. “Good,” he says. “You don’t mind if we start with *adagio*, do you?” He sketches out, a movement at a time: from the corner, one step at a time, *tendu* curving up one side at a time through *port de bras*, perfect and parenthetical — classical, high fifth, and Napoleon is still colorless with cold, but no less articulate for it — *temps lié*, arms up through fourth, and Napoleon looks as if he is about to take flight, caught spreading his wings. Illya thinks that he is translucent, like bone china, and twice as breakable for it. He follows Napoleon’s hands up again, along the tight line of his body as he rises into *demi-pointe*, and hangs there for a moment. The room is absolutely still, all the air somehow gone, until Napoleon breathes and sinks, sweeping one leg up into a perfect right-angled attitude.

“Arabesque,” Napoleon says, as if to himself, and follows suit, brushing through first and holding for a heartbeat again, before crossing back over into fifth through a quick *pas de bourrée*, as neatly as if he were shuffling cards and not still washed-out of warmth. “Chassé?” Napoleon asks. “Or would you rather just step—” he says, turning and unfolding. “—And

arabesque?" A pause, while he considers, and then: "No, let's not overcomplicate things just yet," Napoleon says, suddenly present again, any lingering reverie gone. "How does that look?"

Illya scoffs, though not as dismissively as he would like. "Not very unsettling," he says. It certainly presents no challenge, a half-hearted problem to give the most delicate of students.

"No," Napoleon says, and holds up a band of cloth, edges frayed; he must have gotten it from the counter in the basement when Illya had looked away, or perhaps he had carried it with him all along. Perhaps Illya has played directly into his hands. "That's why I have this," he goes on, and Illya wishes that he had not chosen to stand in the corner, and does nothing to escape. Instead, he watches Napoleon approach once in the light and once in the mirrors, twinned and inexorable, until he is so close that Illya must pick one to look at. Reluctantly, Illya turns away from the reflection. "Shall I?" Napoleon asks.

It makes sense, with Napoleon so close, and no heat coming off of him at all, for Illya to bend his head half a degree, and allow Napoleon to wrap the cloth around his eyes. It makes sense that Napoleon pulls his head down further as he ties the blindfold at the back of Illya's head, fingers never brushing Illya's skin, and then that he is gone, imperceptible in the sudden claustrophobic dark. When Illya opens his eyes, the masses of shadow and clotted light and dark are worse than nothing at all, and so he closes them again. The corner is at his back; the studio is open in front of him. He could, at any point, remove the blindfold, and leave the room, if he wanted. The possibility seems impossible, though, too vast and terrible for Illya to truly contemplate.

"Perfect," Napoleon says.

Illya jerks his head to the side, blindly seeking Napoleon's voice, and Napoleon laughs, the sound omnidirectional in the stifling dark, following. "All right," he says, and Illya tightens his jaw, and does not snarl, the way he wants to so urgently. "Here's a hint: step."

Illya does, and hates every inch of it, expecting at any minute — broken glass, perhaps, or the floor to fall away — some empty horror, at any rate, unavoidable and unknowable until he is already too far gone to catch himself. Because he has been well-taught, he steps anyway, letting the movement sweep up into the opening of his arms and the lift of his jaw. Because he has not yet fallen, Illya turns, arms rising into high fifth, and relaxes a little, and the moment that he does, Napoleon is so close behind him that he can feel the whisper of his breath. "Not so fast," Napoleon murmurs, smile audible, and Illya goes shocked-rigid for a moment. "No need to rush. Temps," he says, "lié," and by the final flat vowel, he is gone again, nothing but the tension in Illya's spine to show that he was ever there. It pulls, as Illya sweeps downwards, and then tugs again as he reaches, arms spread, open and vulnerable.

Rising into fifth, Illya knows that something is wrong, and Napoleon's silence only makes him more certain; at the very top, when Illya feels as if he is drawn upwards on threads, Napoleon hums quietly. It could be consideration or criticism, or it could simply be the wind, but an excess of caution has served Illya well, and he holds there until Napoleon is nearby again, a perceptible weight to his presence somehow. "More," Napoleon says, and Illya wants to lash out and break his nose; Illya wants to snap his tendons and unstring him; Illya wants to leave his lovely lines jagged and useless. He wants to have held Napoleon under, haloed by

ice. It would have been so easy, and so simple. Illya wants a great deal, and with his eyes covered, is not quite so afraid of admitting it.

Instead, he reaches, pulls tighter through his core and his thighs, ache settling deep in his hips, and waits.

“Better,” Napoleon says, and Illya understands the extension of it, the endless moment of apex and weightlessness, before he breathes and sinks. “Up,” Napoleon says, and Illya draws his foot up along his supporting leg, extends forward and through. “Hold,” Napoleon says, from everywhere and nowhere, and Illya does, and does, and does. It hurts, but then: what is worthwhile that does not?

“À la seconde, I think,” Napoleon says, and Illya should be at the barre — he should have a partner — he should walk away. He should stop listening. He should think, at least, about what Napoleon is asking of him, instead of simply doing.

Instead, Illya sweeps his leg back down, en cloche by halves, and then traces back up, ankle to knee, and then higher, and higher still. “Extend — now,” Napoleon says, considered and deliberate, and Illya does, every degree of movement agonizing, and then there he is. It is the closest to faultless that he has ever been. His ankle aches, but his foot is beautifully winged; his hip hurts in a way that he cannot articulate, and would not want to, but has not risen; his turnout is immaculate, if pain is any indication of perfection. With one arm in high fifth, and the other flung out for balance, Illya feels as if he is worth looking at, for once, a breathless, blinding tableau. He wonders if this is how Napoleon feels all the time.

“Up,” Napoleon says, and taps two fingers under Illya’s chin.

His fingers are still shockingly cold. Illya jerks back, and falls as if thrown, once again uncoordinated and imperfect; the impact of his foot on the floor jars him all the way up his spine, and lingers at his hip, and of course this was too much to ask. Of course a single moment of empty suspension, unearned, was more than Illya could expect. He evaluates: the soreness is nothing that he cannot ignore; the deeper ache is a little more worrying, but no more important in the face of that stillness, and the possibility of achieving it again. Illya will simply have to make peace with suffering slightly more for a few days — nothing he has not done before — in silence.

Napoleon hums again, and Illya abruptly remembers that he is not alone in the studio. Once again, he cannot identify the tenor of the sound; it could express amusement or approval in equal measure. Illya is suddenly sick of waiting, and sick of guessing. He pulls at the knot of the blindfold, and then simply pulls it off, still tied. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust, though, and by the time he has blinked away the worst of the sunspots, Illya is the only one in the studio. The door is closed, though not locked, when he tests it. There is no sign of Napoleon’s presence, not even the warmth of a previous hand on the doorknob. One of the curtains has come loose, and is flapping in the breeze — had Napoleon closed the window? — Illya could have sworn that he had.

He crosses the studio again to do so, and ignores the way that he wants to press under his chin, to sear away Napoleon’s lingering fingerprints. The urge to bite — to snap at



Napoleon's hand, snarl at his touch — has, at least, passed with the moment. Illya will not indulge Napoleon further, even if he is the only one who will know.

When he leaves, the door locks behind him.

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Passing the corps, consolidated now in one studio and moving in smooth unison, Illya works to make sure that his walk is fluid, betraying nothing of the pain in his hip. The joint feels as if it is on the edge of being unseated, flexor gone loose with overuse, and Illya can almost feel the scrape of femur against os coxa, the brittle edge of the socket chipping and and crumbling. He has worked through worse pain, and refuses to make a display of himself, unbalanced as he is, in front of everyone; he refuses to stumble where they can see. Faintly, the accompaniment tails off, and Waverly holds up a hand, turning to the door. Every gaze in the room follows him.

Illya's first response is, after all these years, still the same: he braces himself for bad news, and flattens his instinctive apprehension to nothing, nothing, nothing, a density sinking through his diaphragm and turning his legs to lead. The worst, he reminds himself, has already happened; anything else is an inevitability. Anything else is more than he deserves: more generosity, more kindness, more chances. He has always known that he is using up borrowed time as it is. He squares his shoulders, and settles his weight without wincing, and waits.

"Kuryakin," Waverly says, and lets the studio door close behind him. He crosses his arms and leans against the jamb, shoulders up, brow furrowed, and does not look Illya in the eye. Instead, his gaze is somewhere in the middle distance, as if he is seeing straight through Illya and finding him inconsequential: so much muscle, so much meat, so much faulty wiring. "Have you got a minute?"

Illya nods, reflexive, before the question even registers, and Waverly echoes the gesture — pleased, Illya thinks, or whatever passes for the sentiment in Waverly's paper-dry estimation — and pushes up his glasses. "Yes," Waverly says. "About your variation. The trouble is, I think, that you aren't quite inhabiting the part, are you?"

"Sir," Illya starts, and Waverly tilts his head and waits for him to stop. He does.

"No, you aren't," Waverly says, entirely factual. "You aren't here because you checked all the boxes, you know," he says, and gestures, hand describing a neat vertical. "Yes, we spoke to your teachers, yes, I've read your file, yes, we know." Illya stiffens, and apprehension blooms through his chest, snakes between his ribs like cold fog. There are a lot of possibilities, when it comes to what Waverly knows. None of them are appealing. "You, Kuryakin, are no ordinary principal," Waverly says, and points directly at Illya with two fingers; traces the same vertical, and bisects him efficiently. "You're bright. Conventionally, certainly," Waverly shrugs, "but beyond that: brilliant in the original sense. Twice as much so as your typical colleague, and quite a prize." He meets Illya's eyes, and smiles. "I think you could be

extraordinary, really,” Waverly says, and Illya feels the weight of that single word far more keenly than he could any rebuke or ultimatum.

“Sir,” he says again, this time in acknowledgement.

“Think about it, Kuryakin,” Waverly says, and tilts away from the wall, cursory and quick. “The part, of course, but brilliance as well.” He straightens, and adds: “Let go a little, why don’t you.”

Waverly’s smile is still in place, but his eyes are reflective and opaque. Illya, trying to read Waverly’s expression, finds himself unsettled. There is simultaneously a familiarity to the sensation that sets his hackles up and a surety which makes him wary. He wants to give Waverly a wide, wide berth.

“Yes,” Illya says, “sir.”

“Well,” Waverly says, one hand on the door handle, over his shoulder. “Don’t let me keep you.”

Illya ducks his head, and turns away, and puts one foot in front of the other. Even long after the door is closed, and the accompaniment has resumed, he is counting steps in his head, and listening behind him for any sign of pursuit.

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Waverly wants him to go out, Illya suspects, and take in the sun and the sights, or at least the last of the warmth before the cold sets in for good. He is in the mood for none of these, and instead returns to his room, which is still too empty to be properly messy. Six floors up, the light lasts longer than it does in the studios, and he has hours of day still to pass. Illya wants nothing more than to sleep off the fury and humiliation that still linger, flaring back into life every time he takes a step. An ice bath would help, if not for the way that the sensation of Napoleon’s touch has also lingered, and the way that Illya cannot quite put aside the image of his hand in Napoleon’s hair — like the girl that night, he thinks, unbidden — drawn to touch him like a moth to a flame. Less involuntary, as gestures go, but no less helpless: the urge to push, and to see if Napoleon would simply fold, had been all but irresistible.

No ice, then. Illya manages to control the way that he sinks onto the bed, which seems to be the extent to which his body will cooperate. He undresses without getting up, uncoordinated and awkward, and kicks the resultant tangle of fabric onto the floor. Having come to rest, Illya feels as if he will never move again, and will simply calcify in place, every limb turned to stone.

By all rights, he should have no trouble sleeping. Illya is physically exhausted, and practiced at ignoring uneasy thoughts in order to avoid them later on. It could be an hour or it could be ten minutes, or maybe days have passed; the light in the room is precisely the same, and will never change, Illya thinks, in a fit of frustration and fatalism. He is oddly charged, for all that

the smallest movements cause his body to seize with pain, and it takes him a moment to understand, face pressed into the pillow. Illya has never been particularly good at anticipating his body when it comes to expressions of desire, or at least this sort of drive, and has always found it a source of frustration rather than — pleasure, he supposes, though even the thought is abstract, or — release, certainly. He has never been on easy terms with this.

Illya's body is not particularly of consequence to him, in any case; it is a tool, and a means by which he may articulate something greater than himself alone. Through the years, it has caused him pain, and hindered him more than it has helped. His long-legged shadow, too tall and too thin, hips out of joint more often than not, is someone that Illya has tried very hard to forget. As a child — still not sure of himself, no more a resident of his body than Illya grown — he had dreamt, more often than he would admit, now, of being an orphan. More than orphaned: Illya had dreamt of having sprung fully formed from the juncture of rosin and canvas, and the progeny of intersecting reflections, untouchable and empty and inhumanly perfect. In the dorms, practicing late into the night, he had thought himself close, and until the blankets had been pulled from his face each morning he had almost been able to believe it.

Illya had been nearly able to convince himself, again and again, that loving dance with his whole being would earn him some degree of reciprocity, some miracle of swan feathers that would render him neither too ungainly nor too driven to succeed. As one of innumerable students vying for the corps — through agonizing hours of practice and the ache of improvement, all nothing next to what they might be given a part in creating — Illya had been able to consider himself as a matter of discipline alone. The training had been hard, but the art — and, no less, Illya's ability to believe that his parents had never been traitors, because they had never existed — had more than made up for it. Telling himself stories at night, Illya had thought it kinder for himself to have come from nothing rather than to have come from less. He had chosen to become nobody, not worth a wasted glance, rather than feel the weight — in the hallways, in the mirrors, in the studio — of knowing eyes.

When she had started looking, then, Illya had noticed.

She had not been much older than him, although none of them had looked their age, bodies slowed in development by regulated portions and punishing hours, and she had not looked at him in the same way the other students. In her gaze, Illya had seen not curiosity, but interest. In doing so, he had learned the difference between the two for the first time. Curiosity was attention with no intention of understanding, and to be avoided; interest was the nebulous opposite, and all the more dangerously compelling for it.

Her gaze had not weighed on him any less, but Illya had thought that he might be able to want it, this time.

One evening, she had pulled him aside by the elbow, and into a room full of empty shelves, emptied of shoes and the door left unlocked, and she had placed his hands on her hips, and she had looked him in the eye.

Afterwards, he had not quite been able to look at her: the brusqueness with which she retied her skirt, and twisted her hair back into a bun, and dusted herself off, and the half-glance she cast back at him. It had been nowhere near as terrible as Illya had expected, he told himself. It

had been inevitable. It had to happen someday. No doubt she had chosen Illya for his awkwardness, or the unlikeliness of his refusal, or simply as a challenge: regardless, for some reason that had been nothing to do with him at all, in the end. Watching his shadow in the moonlight that night, he had felt entirely unchanged, and yet still, somehow, less of a person.

With the setting sun glowing through his eyelids, now, and heaviness permeating his body, Illya is as present as he has ever been, and perhaps as he ever will be. He arches and presses his hips into the bed, unconscious of his movements until sensation makes its way back up his spine. He never thinks of anyone or anything in particular, typically, but rather of simple rhythms: his pulse, the way that he aches, the roughness of his breath. He thinks of extending his leg, an isolated unhinging at the knee, and of hanging suspended and perfect. He thinks of patterns of movement, and the shuffle of feet, and the drip of water, and, lost, forgets to be impersonal. Illya works a hand down between his body and the sheets, soreness flaring across his shoulders, and thinks of flickering lights; he thinks of draped cloth, and viscous tension, and compulsion, hand working, and forgets to be alarmed. Lip caught between his teeth, Illya thinks of Napoleon, as dully luminous as river ice, and just as still — blue at the lips, he thinks, and the fingertips; eyes closed, and lids translucent — and forgets not to think of bubbles, rising, and Napoleon's hair between his fingers, and the curve of Napoleon's skull under his palm. Shocked breathless as if by a blow to the ribs, Illya gasps and comes, wholly reflexive and involuntary.

When he is, once again, more than a bundle of nerve impulses, and has begun to work some of the jolting stiffness from his body, Illya turns his face into the pillow. A new instance of innate betrayal, mind or body, is simply another to add to the ever-growing list, but the heat in his face lingers, and so does the shame. Humiliation is next to crest over him, followed by horror, slower to dawn but no less overwhelming — crashing over Illya and pulling at him, dragging him under — and then, blessedly, darkness rises, and Illya grasps for it, seizes hold, slips away and stops thinking altogether.

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Illya does not see Napoleon until the next afternoon, for which he is grateful beyond words. Waverly wants them to run the final sequence of their pas de deux again, though, for which he is not. Illya arrives on time, instead of early, so that he will not have to wait in an empty studio with Napoleon — still an empty studio, perhaps, but an inhospitable one nevertheless — and feels the ache of his hip, still, a settled pain rather than one which flares unpredictably. It is nothing. He has danced on worse. Illya repeats these to himself, as if it will make them any less destructive, as truths go. He should have stretched in the hallway, at least, or at a minimum he should have iced the joint during his lunch break instead of working through it. Illya knows that he cannot afford such risks, but he can equally not afford to waste time on his body when his technique is in such dire need of improvement.

“All warmed up?” Waverly says as he enters, trailed by the accompanist, and does not wait for a reply. Napoleon, sitting by the wall, rises in a single fluid motion; Illya, mirroring him, keeps his face carefully blank of pain. “No time to lose, then,” Waverly says. “We’ll start

with the adage, just to get some idea of where you stand, and then skip to the coda.” He spreads his hands. “All on the same page? Good. If you will,” he adds, to the accompanist, and crosses his arms.

The adage goes smoothly, or as well as can be expected; Napoleon does not intentionally unnerve Illya, any more so than usual, and Illya counts his breaths, deep and even, until they fall into a rhythm of their own accord. “Not bad,” Waverly says, “a little more work, I think, but not a bad start.” He attempts, without much joy, a smile. “On to the coda, then.”

Illya is too busy moving to the count to force himself to breathe to it as well, which is a small blessing, but does little for his coordination. He catches Napoleon’s wrist with the tips of his fingers, instead of the solid grip that Waverly wants, and barely manages to keep his balance while doing so; his articulation feels clumsy and his lines are graceless; Napoleon spins towards him, and Illya thinks for a moment that they will miss each other altogether. It is even worse than the previous day’s rehearsal, when Illya had not been quite so unmoored, let alone so uneasy at the thought of touching Napoleon.

“Arabesque,” Waverly barks, unrelenting, and then: “Poisson, now,” and Napoleon pitches forward into Illya’s arms. For a moment, Illya is unsure of his grip, and terrified; then he catches Napoleon at the knee, and flattens his hand across Napoleon’s diaphragm, and for a moment, he thinks that things will be all right.

Napoleon slips from Illya’s grasp, as insubstantial as smoke.

The moment stretches, because it makes no sense: Illya had Napoleon in his hands, and was braced firmly against his weight and mass, and then Illya did not. There should be more to a fall, Illya thinks, than the simple facts of gravity; there should be more to it than the dull thud of bone against wood, and the sudden lightness where Illya has only just automatically straightened, and the renewed stab of pain in his hip.

Napoleon curls up then, reflexively, from where he has landed, on one elbow with his knees barely bent enough to have softened his landing. “Solo,” Waverly says, and even his expression of concern — genuine or not — looks put-upon. “Are you all right?”

It takes Napoleon a moment to answer. He pushes himself to his knees, and tests his elbow with his fingertips and then through its range of motion, and he rolls his head back and pauses. He touches two fingers to the spot just above his ear, pressing tentatively. “I think so,” Napoleon says, but for a long moment he does not move, and Waverly frowns.

“Are you sure?” Waverly says, and pushes up his glasses. “I’d rather not lose time if at all possible,” he adds, “but of course your wellbeing is of the highest concern.” His eyes are flat and opaque.

“I — don’t know,” Napoleon says, finally, looking up, eyes wide and confused. “I think — I’m tired,” he says, and Illya is shocked at how badly he wants to hurt Napoleon, to make him reveal the lie for what it is. He and Waverly, both using words to mean the exact opposite: Illya wants to snarl, and be vicious in the face of their genteel duplicity. He had not dropped Napoleon. Waverly is looking at Illya as if he is a child, incapable of understanding what he

has done, and it makes Illya want to be wild. It makes Illya wish that he had dropped Napoleon, after all.

Illya is certain of very little, but he is certain of this: Napoleon had been secure in his grasp, until he had moved, and then Napoleon had fallen. Just as Illya had not pressed — had wanted to, yes, with a voracity that had bordered on starvation, but had not translated the impulse into action — at the line of Napoleon's hip, Illya had not let Napoleon fall. He is better than that. Illya must believe that he is better than that.

He looks down at Napoleon, all tousled hair and wide blue eyes, and wants to hurt him. Illya wants to backhand Napoleon across the face, so viciously that he can feel the phantom movement even as he suppresses the urge to force Napoleon's hand and make him stop playing the broken-winged bird.

"I think we had better call it an afternoon," Waverly says, no longer bothering to hide his irritation. "Kuryakin," he says, brusquely, "keep an eye on Solo, will you? Don't let him sleep just yet," Waverly says, as if this sort of thing happens every day. He says it with such offhand indifference, as if he is not suggesting that Napoleon is concussed at the very least. "Both of you, take tomorrow off, and sit in, and try not to injure Solo further, if you can manage it," he adds, to Illya and — unbelievably — turns away. "That's it," Waverly says, over his shoulder. "I trust you can handle that without too much trouble, Kuryakin?"

"Sir," Illya says, too dumbfounded to protest.

Waverly does not tell them to get out, but the words hang unspoken in the air nonetheless.

"I think I need a hand," Napoleon says, looking up at Illya — and there it is, again, that empty delight in his eyes — with a flash of amusement, and a sense that he has caught Illya looking. "Help me up?"

Illya pulls Napoleon to his feet none too gently, and grits his teeth, and lets Napoleon lean on him until the door to Napoleon's room is closed behind them, and Napoleon is curled on his side on top of the covers.

It is only then that Illya remembers to be cautious. Looking at the curl of Napoleon's fingers in the sheets, and the curve of his back, and the lazy smile playing about his lips, Illya thinks that it may already be too late.

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For the first hour, Illya simply takes stock. Napoleon's room is bare, but then he has only occupied it for two weeks; perhaps he has not had time to unpack, or his things have not yet arrived. Surely Napoleon would not live like this by choice, no signs of life in the room save a coat hanging on the back of the door and Napoleon himself, undeniably present. The bedside table is bare, as is the counter by the door. The chest of drawers, the same cheap construction of veneer over particleboard as the one in Illya's room, might be empty, for all

that Illya can tell. Napoleon might have only just hung up his coat for the first time, or perhaps it is not his room at all, and he has simply happened into it and claimed it by way of occupation. Illya sits with his back to the wall opposite Napoleon's bed, knees drawn up, and feels as if the blank walls are watching him.

An hour after that — as far as Illya can tell, though he is less than certain of the passage of time, particularly when the sun sets as quickly as it always does so early in the year — it occurs to Illya that Napoleon has not moved in more than thirty minutes.

He listens, but Illya cannot hear Napoleon breathing. Fighting the irrational panic squeezing at his ribs, Illya leans over, and tries to make out the rise and fall of Napoleon's chest to no avail. Napoleon has been still, it seems to Illya, for a very long time. Illya looks at Napoleon's hands, twisted in the sheets, and tries to remember when Napoleon had last shifted, and lets his eyes follow the crook of Napoleon's elbow, up along his throat, up to his face.

Napoleon's eyes are open.

Illya freezes, as if caught in the act, and then straightens, scowling.

"You look tired," Napoleon says, deceptively mild. "Sure you don't want to go? I'll be fine, really."

"No," Illya says, before he can think better of it. Napoleon is giving him an excuse to leave, if Illya wants, and knows it; Illya does too, and has turned it down out of spite, and has trapped himself in the process. Too late, now, but then Illya has nobody to blame but himself for that.

"At least take the chair," Napoleon says, entirely unmoving save for his smile. "If you insist on running yourself ragged, try to do it in style. It's a perfectly acceptable chair, and your back will thank me."

"No," Illya says again, stubbornly. "I don't want it." He realizes how childish it sounds as soon as he says it, and sets his jaw.

Napoleon snorts. "Don't say I didn't try," he says.

Illya does not reply, and Napoleon falls silent. For another hour, Illya says nothing, and Napoleon does not move.

Illya remembers, suddenly, playing at sleep as a child, and thinking that an hour had passed when he had only been motionless for a quarter of that time. Illya had never been much good at lying still, and tended towards an overactive imagination, often waking tangled in sheets and half out of bed. These days, Illya is too tired to shift in his sleep, and blinks awake in the same position as if no time at all has passed. He cannot imagine that Napoleon has the patience to pretend to sleep for so long, but Napoleon's breathing is deep and even, and Illya is too tired to wonder. He looks at the way Napoleon is curled in on himself, simultaneously at ease and on guard.

For just a moment, Illya doubts himself.

He had wanted to hurt Napoleon so badly, and had not been frightened by it at the time; it had seemed so natural, with Napoleon at his feet, and as easy as breathing. It would have been so beautifully easy.

It would, Illya thinks, have been so beautiful. Broken lines and the darkening flush of a bruise, and Napoleon would have looked up at Illya with bright, bright eyes: Illya is sure of it. The boundary between desire and decision is unclear to Illya, when it comes to Napoleon, and the mere thought is appalling to him. Illya draws his shoulders up in misery and puts the thought from his mind, but the revulsion lingers, even in the dark.

Sick with fear, Illya lets his head fall to the side, and closes his eyes against the headache pressing at his temples.

At some point, he falls asleep.

When Illya wakes, it is because his hand feels pierced through, and he realizes that he is curled over in a way that cuts off the blood flow at his wrist. Strangely, he is not shivering; Illya's shoulders hurt, and his neck aches, but he shifts his arm, and does not open his eyes, and lets himself drowse.

Somewhere in the room, there is a rustle of sheets, and Illya does not so much think as he knows, with an immediacy born of instinct: Napoleon is watching him.

Illya does not open his eyes, and he does not move, and he lets his breathing settle again, back into the steady rhythm of light sleep. If he looks up this time, and catches Napoleon, Illya will regret it: he is certain, and cannot explain why. It is like looking in a mirror, and catching the faintest flash of motion in the corner of his eye. Illya wants to turn, and to make sure that nothing is there. Illya wants to look away, and pretend that he has seen nothing to begin with. Illya knows that he will look, though, and wants to believe that it is all a matter of imagination, and — half-elated with terror — knows that it is not. Illya should turn away, and hold still until the danger has passed.

Illya knows that he will not.

When Illya finally opens his eyes, Napoleon is arranged on the bed, uncurled slightly, and his eyes are closed, and his breathing is deep and even.

Illya pushes the blanket from his shoulders — Napoleon must have wrapped it around him during the night, though Illya has no memory of it — and Napoleon stirs, languid and lazy. "Told you," he says, voice sleep-rough, as Illya stretches, wincing at the way that his neck cracks.

"You'll live," Illya says, unsympathetic.

"So I will," Napoleon says, and Illya remembers, suddenly, Waverly telling him to keep an eye on Napoleon, and to keep him awake. Napoleon smirks, reading the thought from Illya's face, and says: "I won't tell if you don't."



Of course not, Illya thinks. That would be too kind, and too simple. Napoleon is neither. Napoleon looks at Illya — really looks — and finds something of greater interest to himself than a simple accumulation of damage. It frightens Illya that he can so easily predict Napoleon, and yet at the same time he takes a strange pride in it. They are two emptinesses, acknowledging each other.

Pushing himself to his feet, Illya shakes some feeling back into his fingers, and does not look at Napoleon. “Don’t be late,” he says, instead, and goes in search of a shower to leach some of the cramp from his shoulders.

Illya does not regain sensation in his hand until he reaches the very end of the hallway.

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Sitting at Illya’s feet in the studio that afternoon — and under orders to observe rather than exerting himself — Napoleon moves. Illya marks it without reacting, a matter of awareness rather than apprehension, and so it takes a moment for him to understand Napoleon’s purpose in shifting his weight. It is not Napoleon’s touch which Illya registers first, then, but the warmth of his hand on Illya’s arch, and the subsequent absence of pain, far more striking than proximity or pressure. For a moment, he relaxes into it, relieved. Contact that is casually personal — neither clinical nor compassionate enough to set Illya on edge — is rare enough in Illya’s life that he has come to crave it. The danger is not in how badly Illya wants to be touched, and how specifically, but in how he has taught himself to forget this, and how it therefore catches him unawares every time.

Hard on the heels of relief comes the realization, absolutely electric, that Napoleon could end Illya’s career right now, if he so wanted. There are so many parts to a foot, and all held in unnatural balance for the sake of technique. From hallux to metatarsals to calcaneus, there is so much that can go wrong, and so much that already has. Stress fractures, sprains, shin splints: Illya has worked through every possible permutation of agony, accruing wear all the while. He is acutely aware of Napoleon’s fingers, curved around the arch of his foot in a steady exertion of pressure, although Illya is still a step behind, and unsure whether he has frozen from apprehension or anticipation. The room may as well be empty, for all the attention that he is paying the mirrored pas de huit. Napoleon’s face is turned away, and he is to all appearances absorbed in the exercise, hand laid casually upon Illya’s foot — toying with him, Illya realizes abruptly — as if on bare muscle and raw nerve. Something of Illya’s nervous tension must translate into physicality, because Napoleon tilts his head just enough to catch Illya’s eye, and smiles.

The room, for Illya, tilts.

It does not disorient him so much as realign foundations, so subtly that he cannot tell, after the fact, that anything has changed: it makes sense that his gaze has always caught on the crook of Napoleon’s mouth. It makes sense that he accepts Napoleon’s touch, and the threat that it implies, without pause. It makes sense that Illya is, nevertheless, petrified, too

viscerally shocked to either pull back or push Napoleon away. (His hand in Napoleon's hair: it is a risk that Illya would not be willing to take, regardless.)

It only lasts for a moment of looking-glass stillness, this strange paradigm, as if caught between one frame of film and the next, and then Illya comes to, as if flickering back into place. What is he doing, letting Napoleon touch him? What is he doing letting Napoleon touch his feet, rather; Illya jerks back, and leaves Napoleon empty-handed. The ache in his fascia returns almost immediately, and Illya takes a moment to readjust, and to convince himself that it is the best of the possible outcomes. It is better to be in manageable pain than to rely on Napoleon's whims for momentary relief, certainly; far better, anyway, Illya thinks, to keep his manifested aberrations out of sight, and to keep his discomfort tucked away for himself alone. There is too much to be had of Illya from his pain that he would not give otherwise, willingly or not.

"Solo," Waverly says, far closer than Illya had thought, and Illya realizes that the studio has in fact fallen silent in actuality, dancers come to rest. Napoleon looks up, and lets his hand fall to the floor, palm still facing upwards. Illya could put his weight into his heel and crush Napoleon's knuckles, if he was quick.

He holds still. Waverly jerks his chin from Napoleon the door. "My office," he says shortly, already in motion, and does not wait for Napoleon's response.

Napoleon slants a mocking smirk at Illya and stands smoothly, hand still hanging as if he has forgotten that it is there — let alone part of his body — let alone part of him. Once in motion, he is a fluid entity, a whole; in stillness, Napoleon seems to fall into an assembly of parts. The door closes after him, and Illya points his toes, flexes back; point and flex, point and flex, an easy rhythm within which he can lose himself, and a way to cauterize the remnants of Napoleon's touch. He ignores the panopticon of mirrors and dancers, and sinks to stretch on the floor, one side and then the other, and waits for Napoleon to seep, like slow poison, from his skin.

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A week later, Illya can barely walk.

He swings his legs out of bed, and forces himself to his feet, and nearly overbalances; catching himself is almost more painful than falling would have been. His calf is knotted tight from ankle to knee, pain tugging at him with every step, and Illya thinks of Napoleon holding his foot, and of poison, gone rank in a healed wound. He makes it to the counter — hips tight, tension strung from his tarsals through his core — and uses it to crack his hips, twin suppressed shots in the dark, lifting one bent leg after the other to the edge and leaning forward until he can move a little more easily. With his fingertips, Illya presses at his calf, assessing whether or not he will be able to dance through the pain. It is a moot point anyway; when he rotates his leg back to the ground, Illya feels the impact, controlled as it is, all the way up his spine, and grits his teeth against it.

All the way down the hall, Illya works to keep his face blank, not betraying the way that every step jars him. He cannot quite manage a natural pace — his foot drags, slightly, and he leans away to compensate — but Illya can keep the pain from his face, if he tries.

Walking down the stairs is beyond agonizing.

By the time that Illya reaches the physical therapy room, he is no longer bothering to conceal his limp, and he knows that his jaw is visibly tight, and that his shoulders are drawn up. Illya knows what he looks like, curled in on himself, from too many incidents in the studio. Like this, he looks like a wounded animal, vicious with fear and pain, dragging himself into the corner.

The masseuse helps Illya to a table, and asks him well-meaning questions to which he grits out answers in as few words as possible.

It is only when she takes his calf into her hands — “Flex,” she says, “just like that,” and nods in satisfaction — that Illya realizes that she does not know him, and has never worked on him before, and has no idea how to handle him so that he will not snarl.

She gentles Illya, which he cannot stand, and starts slow, pressing gently at what feel like bullets beneath his skin, lying under muscle and close to the bone. Illya tolerates it for as long as he can — five deep breaths in, and four out — and snaps on the fifth exhale. “Get on with it,” he says, and instantly regrets it as her eyes widen. “Please,” Illya adds, and her expression goes closed-off and cold. Just another high-strung mayfly, her face says: one more lost cause.

“All right,” she says, “but it’ll be easier if you don’t hold your breath,” and then she digs her thumbs in so hard that Illya’s vision goes white. She waits until he starts breathing — albeit shallowly — and does it again, and this time she does not pause, but keeps working until Illya’s knuckles are white on the edge of the table, and he cannot focus to see any more than a blur.

When she finally stops — hours later, it seems — Illya finds that his memory of the pain fades quickly. He tries to recall it and fails, although his calf still aches faintly, sore and warm as if it is already bruising.

“Let me take a look at your hips,” she says. “If you’re having problems and turning out at the knee to compensate, that’s going to overwork your calves.”

Illya, unmoored by tenderness, lets her, and she frowns. “It’s always the tall ones,” she says reproachfully, manipulating the joint. “Shooting stars, all of you. Too stubborn for your own good.” She brushes the tips of her fingers over his iliac crest — just the barest touch — and Illya recognizes it, far too late, for the warning that it is.

“This,” she says, “is going to hurt.”

“Keep going,” he says, and she presses into his hip flexor — thumbs on his psoas, right at the join of his pelvis — and Illya goes cold all over.

“Tell me if you need me to stop,” she says. “It’s all right, you know.”

“Keep going,” Illya says, again, through his teeth.

“You can’t freeze up, then,” she says. “Just relax, there you are—”

Illya does not cry. His hearing is the next to go, fading until all that is left is the thud of his own pulse; he makes noises, between his teeth, which sound more animal than human; he jerks under her hands, as involuntarily as if she has run a current through his center of mass, but at least Illya has this. At least he can say that he does not cry.

“—you’re already pushing it,” she says, when a small eternity has passed and Illya is able to listen again. “If you wait this long again, next time will be even worse.” She pauses, hands on her hips. “Take it easy, will you?”

Illya nods. She shakes her head. They both know that he is lying.

When Illya walks out, newly aware of his body, he lets the morning slip from his memory: it is a stolen, selfish kindness, and one which Illya knows that he does not deserve.

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For the next six days, nothing happens.

Illya goes to class, and goes to rehearsal, and improves at a glacial pace, if at all. It certainly makes no difference to Waverly, who keeps him late day after day — “Don’t push yourself,” he says, a mutually accepted fiction for the sake of propriety — and looks more and more stymied every time. Illya puts in even longer hours on his own, long after he should be asleep, and fights tooth and nail for every inch of progress that he makes.

Napoleon comes to class, of course, and is present for rehearsal, and somehow still manages to find ways to improve. To Illya, who would give up years of his life for half of Napoleon’s natural ability, the adaptations that Napoleon makes according to Waverly’s instructions are negligible at best. Napoleon is beautiful and empty, all movement and no substance. Napoleon is immaterial.

“You could stand to learn something from each other,” Waverly says, once, although he has already dismissed Napoleon, so Illya has to conclude that Waverly has timed the thought to maximize the insult. Illya is far too aware that, given Napoleon’s proportionality and innate grace, he could do just as well. He has neither, and must make do.

If Waverly said the same thing to Napoleon, Illya thinks, Napoleon would smile politely, and slant his eyes to the side to look at Illya, and his reply would have absolutely no intonation of any sort. “I’m sure I will,” Napoleon would say, or “I look forward to it,” or any of half a hundred equally meaningless niceties, as dry as paper and twice as pointed. Because he is not Napoleon, Illya cannot help but take it too much to heart, and Waverly is at least decent enough to let the blow land. He does not offer platitudes, or empty praise; Waverly understands that Illya will simply take any of these as further injury, as if he is composed

entirely of damage, no inch of skin left unbruised or unbroken. No matter what Waverly says or does, Illya will take the blow and forge ahead, head down and eyes lowered.

Waverly never tries, though, to soften his words, and Illya repeats them to himself — *could stand to learn, from each other, you could, you* — in the same way that he would press at a bruise, until the ache of it is old and stale.

Illya sleeps; Illya dances; the days become, once again, unremarkable and uniform. Napoleon comes and goes, a flicker in the mirror. Illya works, and works, and works.

He is not happy, but he is not uncertain. The two are similar enough.

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On the seventh day — the irony does not escape Illya — Waverly interrupts morning class. It is the first of the month, and winter is dragging at everyone's heels, slowing them down and draining them of life. He waits until they have finished at the barre, and have cleared the center of the studio, and does not do anything as obvious as clearing his throat, or clapping his hands, but simply waits for the room to fall silent. It does, of course.

"If you've been following the program," Waverly says, "and I trust that you have, you'll be aware that a week from today, you are expected to make yourselves available."

Illya looks around the studio, relieved to see other blank faces, and Waverly pauses. "We are hosting a gala," he says. "Patrons will be in attendance. I trust you need no further explanation, at least." He looks around inquisitively. "I'm sure you'll all be very charming," Waverly adds, hands open to the room. "I don't need to remind you of the importance of keeping our patrons satisfied," he says. "Smiles and champagne all round."

He certainly does not need to remind Illya. Too tall and too awkward, Illya is used to being stationed discreetly at galas, out of the way and treated as a piece of scenery rather than a star. Before, he has never been remarkable enough to be pushed into the spotlight; now, Illya realizes that he will be unable to take refuge in small talk with well-meaning bores, and must himself become an object of attraction. Illya — he and Napoleon, but for the first time, Illya in his own right — is the money.

A suit, Illya realizes; he will need a suit. No doubt Waverly will provide one, cut to his specifications. No doubt Waverly has already taken it into account. The thought is not unpleasant, when Illya considers it; if he is to be a commodity, Illya prefers at least to be one worth the price. If Illya is to be considered an asset rather than an individual, at least he can appraise himself accordingly.

"Back to work," Waverly says, "and don't forget to smile."

Illya does not bother to try. He has no desire to bare his teeth before it becomes absolutely necessary.

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On the morning of the gala, Illya lies in bed, and stares, unseeing, at the opposite wall, and cannot bring himself to become any more animate. His suit is hanging on the back of the door, in a bag which Illya has carefully avoided opening, and he has class, and afterwards he has rehearsal, and he should visit the masseuse in the afternoon, and so on, a litany of obligations that seems insurmountable and endless. Illya knows that he should get up, but he feels as if all of his strings have been cut, and he cannot move of his own volition. If he does not dress, he will be late for class; if he does not see the masseuse, he will likely incur not only injury but her anger, and Illya is prepared to cope with neither.

Instead, Illya lies in bed, and thinks of inquisitive hands — the masseuse's gentle touch; Napoleon's hand on his foot; a hand at his elbow, long ago — and wishes that he could become less than apathetic. Illya wishes that he could become somehow insensate. Illya is too well-trained; he will not snap at casual touches, or curious smiles, or covetous eyes. He simply wishes that he could not feel them, as well.

Illya forces himself to stand, and to shower, and to dress; he is early to class, and he stretches, and he goes through all the motions, and does not miss a single cue. Napoleon asks Illya a question, which he does not hear; by Napoleon's response, he answers with all the right noises, and acts according to expectations. Illya watches himself in the mirror, and fails to meet his own eyes. There is nobody there.

By the start of rehearsal, Illya is gone, gone, gone.

He catches Napoleon's wrist, and feels nothing; he drifts with the music, and feels nothing; he watches Waverly speak, and notes his adjustments, and feels nothing. If Illya repeats it to himself, over and over, it will be true. He no longer exists as a person. He is no longer his own. He is, in a word, gone.

Nobody can take from Illya what he has already cut out and cauterized.

Illya is not detached — nowhere near as deadened as he would like; Illya would be so much happier, he is certain, if he could simply interrupt the beating of his heart, even if just for the night — but he is numb.

It will have to do.

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Illya takes the garment bag down from the back of his door, where it has been hanging for days now, and lays it on his bed. He looks at it, entirely innocuous and unremarkable, for a long minute; the bag is nondescript, heavy waxed canvas flattening the contents, and should

be no reason for Illya to feel as resigned as he does. He reminds himself that this is just another costume. Tonight, he is playing just one more role, of the many he has assumed throughout his life — from loyal son to loyal member — and the rest is simply embellishment. Illya unzips the bag, and lays the suit on top of it, and reflects that at least he is not expected to wear tails, or a waistcoat, or a dress uniform which he has not earned. At least this particular costume provides coverage. At least this form of humiliation is nothing new.

His familiarity with formalwear does not decrease the extent to which Illya feels like an especially articulate mannequin, though, or perhaps some sort of pedigreed performing animal. It certainly does not improve his composure. Illya washes his face, and feels as if he is readying himself for dressage. By the time that he is fastening his cufflinks, Illya feels as if there are strings at his wrists to match those fixed to his shoulders and the piano wire threaded through his spine to keep him upright and silent. He knows, already, that he will be poor entertainment save as a spectacle, a sideshow amidst the swans.

There is a knock at his door.

“Busy,” Illya says shortly, only for the knocking to be repeated. After a moment, and another round of knocking, he concedes. Anybody persistent enough to keep waiting is most likely somebody Illya would be unwise to irritate. He leaves his bow tie hanging loose at his collar, and opens the door.

“A bit informal, aren’t you?” Napoleon says, before the door is even halfway open.

Illya tries to close it in his face.

Napoleon insinuates himself, though, as he always does, and manages to angle his body into the room. By the time that Illya has closed the door, he is leaning against the counter, legs crossed in front of him and shoulders back. He looks horribly at home in full white tie, and for the first time it occurs to Illya to wonder why they are not dressed alike. A matched pair of principals is an aesthetically pleasing prize for any company. Napoleon wears tails as if the cut had been invented specifically for him, and looks as if he knows it. Illya, in his own double-breasted jacket, feels like a child trying to wear clothes that are still a size too big. He is suddenly very aware of the fact that he is barefoot.

“Unless you have a better idea,” Illya says, instead, and gestures with one hand, as one would at a wayward cat or unwanted child. “Get out.”

“I always have a better idea,” Napoleon says, and his smile is all the warning that he gives Illya before Napoleon’s hands are busy at his throat, a momentary and moving pressure. Illya instinctively freezes, and Napoleon is gone again, dropping the bow tie on the counter. “Not that it’s difficult,” he adds, “to have a better idea than that,” and works at the knot of his own tie, pulling it free and threading it between his fingers before he approaches Illya again. Napoleon loops his tie around Illya’s neck, deftly tucking it under his collar, and then Illya gets lost in the whisper of silk and the slide of fingertips and the skill with which Napoleon works. When he forces himself to focus again, Napoleon is tightening the knot, and presses it up to Illya’s collar before he steps back.

“Much better,” he says approvingly, and undoes the button at the top of his own collar, and then the next one, tugging until the crispness is gone from the slanted angles of cloth, and the only lines left to look at are those of his throat. It is comparable in speed to an illusionist’s sleight, or a pickpocket’s lift. One moment Illya is as he should be, and the next, he is pulled apart at the seams, and Napoleon has changed the rules, already out of sight. “You do see what they’re doing, don’t you,” Napoleon goes on, without even bothering to look at Illya. Instead, he leans into the mirror, and runs a hand through his hair. “White tie for the Westerner and black for the — well,” Napoleon says, and smirks, as if he cannot quite manage to suppress his self-satisfaction. “For the bloc — if you will.” He straightens up, and looks at Illya. “What do you think?”

Illya thinks that Napoleon looks indecent, with his throat so incrementally bared, but sufficiently discreetly so that to point it out would require Illya to admit that he has noticed. Napoleon, never one for patience, nods in approval, and carries on. “You could be, oh, some diplomat, or maybe an architect, on a cultural exchange to see firsthand the dangers of decadence,” he says to Illya, smile never reaching his eyes. “Now, as for myself, I’ve always fancied the idea of nobility; some lost branch on the inbred family tree, perhaps—”

“Yes, we know who you would be,” Illya interrupts, suddenly fed up with Napoleon’s posturing. He knows that rewarding Napoleon with a reaction will only goad him further, but Illya is suddenly impatient. He has never suffered from stage fright, but rather a certain restiveness with the approach of the opening curtain, and tonight is no exception. Having allowed his nerves to get the better of him, Illya steels himself for more provocation, physical and otherwise, but Napoleon has gone still, as if caught by a photographer’s flash. His smile is still an affectation through and through, but his eyes are no longer inert. If Illya did not know better, he would think Napoleon’s expression to be one of appreciation.

A moment passes, and another, and Napoleon has not yet looked away, his expression now one of delight. “Do you know,” he says, instead, “I think you might not be wrong this time.” He opens the door, and, half-gone already, turns back to look at his work one last time. “Much better,” Napoleon says, again, and finally lets the door close.

Illya, left alone, feels the knot of his tie flush to his throat like a noose, like hands, like a — and he tilts his head absently, hoping to ease the pressure at his — collar.

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The plaza in front of the theater is already ablaze when Illya arrives, light spilling from the great bay of windows overlooking the doors and splashing across the square cobbles. It is an approach designed from every angle to leave guests wonderstruck, and even Illya, used to such deliberations, lets it sweep him away for a moment. It really is beautiful, like crystallized flame between bare branches in the coldest time of the year, and he is hesitant to submerge himself and break the spell. The tide of guests pulls Illya along, though, and through the doors, and buoys him up until he is on the other side of the glass, looking out.



“There you are,” Waverly says, and even he looks somehow different in the banked golden glow. There is a warmth to his features that Illya has never seen before, and a certain generosity of benevolence. Waverly looks like somebody who it would be easy to trust, and easy to believe in. Looking at him, Illya suddenly understands why Oleg had given him away so easily, and put up so little in the way of resistance. Waverly looks like some sort of enchanter, entirely inscrutable and omnipotent. “Don’t get misplaced, Kuryakin, we’ve got to introduce you properly — new principals for a new peace and so on — once Solo decides to grace us with his presence.” He taps the edge of his flute with a fingertip. “I don’t suppose you’d know where he is, would you?”

Illya opens his mouth, but Waverly does not wait for his reply, adding: “Prone to an entrance, is our Solo.” Illya does not protest the phrasing. Napoleon may be nothing to do with him, but he certainly is something of Waverly’s, whatever that means. They all are, really, particularly when on exhibition like this, ready to be passed around like so many favors, presented and pressed. Illya’s tie is still too tight where Napoleon had adjusted it, but he still finds himself unwilling, somehow, to correct the pressure at his throat. Waverly looks around the room, gaze catching by the bar, and nods offhandedly at Illya. “Stay put,” he advises, turning away, and Illya immediately loses sight of him, just one more unassuming patron in the crowd. This is just one more occasion, he thinks in relief, no better or worse than any other.

“You look tense,” Napoleon says, directly behind Illya — whose back is to the window; surely he would have noticed any approach — who pivots, reflexively spotting the turn and saving his gaze for last. Napoleon is still there when Illya looks, to his dismay, but not his surprise. “I can help with that, you know.”

“Help,” Illya says, disbelieving. “This is helping?” He turns away. “No, thank you.”

“This,” Napoleon says, “is helping,” and he angles himself to catch a waiter’s eye, lifting two glasses of champagne from a tray. “Not to mention something to hold when Waverly throws you to the wolves,” he adds. “Maybe that way you won’t be so inclined to put up a fight.”

“I am no—” Illya begins, and loses track of the word that he wants. Prey? Certainly not; that goes without saying. Bait? That implies a trap, and Waverly already has what he wants in the palm of his hand; to keep it, all he needs to do is close his fist.

“—Enticement?” Napoleon says. “You really don’t know, do you.” He smiles. Illya wants, with blinding intensity, to bloody Napoleon’s nose, or perhaps to split his lip. “You’re quite the acquisition,” Napoleon goes on, and puts his own glass aside to take Illya by the wrist and wrap his fingers around the stem of the other. “An absolute trophy, I’d imagine, for any one of these magpies, let alone, well.” He is still holding Illya’s wrist with one hand, grip loose, and has reacquired his champagne with the other. Toys, both of them, Illya thinks nonsensically, and jerks his hand from Napoleon’s grasp. “Waverly,” Napoleon says, as if finishing his thought. Illya is lost for a moment, struggling to make sense of the enjambment, before he sees Waverly, who is once again a distinct entity in the crowd. There is a quality to his movements that distinguishes him from the rest of the patrons and their purposeless circling.

“See their teeth?” Napoleon says, much nearer this time. Illya has learned to suppress the way that he would otherwise startle. It is a tendency for which he is particularly thankful when Napoleon speaks again, so close that he may as well be pressed to Illya’s side. “I can make it easier,” Napoleon says, and uncurls his fingers, the contents of his palm reflecting dully — washing out the light, rendering it chalky — for a second before he closes his hand again. “Let go,” he murmurs. “I promise: I don’t bite.”

Capsules, Illya realizes; Napoleon is holding capsules, rolling them in his palm like change. What they are is irrelevant, and so he does not ask. “No,” Illya says, “thank you,” and Napoleon shrugs.

“Suit yourself,” he says, and picks one up between his first and second fingers, pressing them to his lips like a kiss. Illya can tell by the set of Napoleon’s jaw that he is holding the capsule on his tongue, like a coin, for a moment before he tilts his head back and swallows, eyes closed.

For a moment, Napoleon does not move, and then he opens his eyes and smiles, businesslike. He takes the other between his thumb and forefinger, and works his nail into the seam of it, handing his champagne flute to Illya. “Hold this,” Napoleon says, and separates the capsule into halves over the glass, powder dissipating into the bubbles. He drops the halves of the shell into an empty flute on a passing tray. “Thank you,” he says, as the chime of glass rings through the room, cutting through the polite low chatter, and turns. “We’re wanted.”

Napoleon tows Illya across the room by his elbow, setting him off-balance, though it is hardly necessary for them to move. Waverly is very good at setting a scene, and has already done most of the work for them. The crowd falls silent. “Thank you,” Waverly begins, champagne in hand and arms open, “for being here tonight, especially on such a cold evening.” He smiles. “Your patronage means the world to us, particularly in such tense times. Art has always served as a reprieve, even in the darkest days—”

None of what Waverly is saying is genuine, particularly, and all of it is designed to flatter, but Waverly says it as if he expects it to be true, and so it is. Looking out at the crowd, Illya can see his belief reflected back, and realizes, in quick succession, three things, as Waverly spins his words to a close. First, Waverly will conclude with a toast, as is traditional; second, Illya is still holding Napoleon’s glass, although Napoleon’s hands are now free. Third, and worst of all: Illya no longer remembers which glass is his, and the liquid in both is clear. There is no way to tell which is which.

“—and so I present,” Waverly says, “your principals, without whom this would be impossible.” He steps aside, sweeping his hand out to indicate Napoleon and Illya, a hint of his previous training to the gesture. “To finding common ground,” Waverly says, “and a new golden era,” and raises his glass.

There is no time. Napoleon plucks the glass from Illya’s left hand, and waits, and Illya thinks: what could be the harm, anyway, of taking this one chance. At least he has forgotten why he should be objecting to this entire farce of an occasion. At least they are drowning in gold. At least Napoleon is smiling — if not for him, then for the patrons, but at least there is life in his eyes — at least it is beautiful, Illya thinks.

He raises his glass, and tilts it against Napoleon's, and drinks.

The polite applause of the guests sounds like the roar of a swell, and the pressure at Illya's throat loosens. He feels the undertow tugging at his ankles, and takes another sip.

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It might be ten minutes later, or it might be an hour: when everything is so vivid, Illya has difficulty keeping track of time. He dances, of course, as is expected of him, with one of the taller members of the corps. She leans into his shoulder, and laughs when he lifts her to his shoulder, hands at her waist, and afterwards she smiles at him over her shoulder on her way to the open bar. Illya could follow, if he wanted, and bury his own smile in the juncture of her neck, and follow the curve of her body down. It is a giddy realization, intoxicating in the way that only the most dangerous thoughts are: he could. He could have this. He could let himself, if he wanted.

As the floor fills, patrons allowing themselves to be persuaded into dancing, Illya drifts. In the ebb and flow of movement, he finds himself pushed further and further, and does not resist. Illya finds that he enjoys the press of casual contact, and the endless momentum of small conversations and offhand touches. Here, a donor touches his elbow, and coaxes a momentary exchange on Waverly's technique as a choreographer; here, an aesthete presses against him to allow a waiter room to pass, and lays a hand on his shoulder in apology; here, a patron who Illya does not know, and who offers him no introduction, offers Illya her hand to kiss, and draws him aside.

"I wonder where Alexander found you," she says, and Illya finds himself distracted by the satin of her gloves, and the way they crease at her wrist, like overdrawn veins. It takes him a moment to realize that she is talking about Waverly — of course, found him, but she says it as if Illya is something to be coveted — and he luxuriates in the tone of her voice. Her hair is a dark spill down the column of her throat, over the ivory of her dress, and he follows it up with his eyes, and does not raise them to meet hers. She has not moved her hand from Illya's; he has not yet let it go, suddenly desperate not to disappoint. "A vision, truly," she says, and turns. The columns at the edges of the atrium in which Illya has found himself, and also her, are draped with white, dividing the hall. The resultant spaces are divided by the play of shadows and the dreamlike billow of cloth in the vast stillness. She leads Illya to one of the chaises that have been set out, or rather: she goes to one, and Illya follows, under no compulsion but his own curiosity. She sits with her feet tucked beneath her and motions for him to do the same.

"Tell me," she says, "do they really have you dancing from sunrise to sunset?" The corner of her mouth curls upwards. Illya keeps his eyes downcast, having not been given permission to look at her, and reads her meaning from her body instead. She takes his hand in both of hers and traces the lines of his wrist, fingertips ghosting over his tendons. "Such devotion," she goes on, "and all to ballet. Don't you get, well." She pauses, and turns Illya's hand over, stroking between his knuckles, and Illya understands suddenly what she is about to say. He understands why Waverly had watched them from the bar, tumbler in hand, and deliberately

turned away to resume his conversation. He understands why there are curtains between the columns, and why the chaises are placed so that they are concealed from each other, and why the hall is lit to cast shadows in every direction.

Illya understands what is expected of him, suddenly — her hand in his, the expectant curve of her smile, the nudge of her foot against his thigh — and realizes, dully, that drowning in gold ends no differently. He has always done what is expected of him. He has never disappointed. To do so would be worse than dying, worse than her hand on his cheek as she leans forward, entirely certain and complacent, worse than a half-glance cast back at him — nothing to do with him at all, Illya thinks — and he holds as still as he can, though her touch feels like a corrosion. “You’re trembling,” she says. “Don’t worry, darling, I’ll take care of you—”

The shadows on the curtain behind her coalesce, suddenly, and Napoleon is there.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “am I interrupting?”

She startles, but regains her composure with admirable speed. Illya feels suddenly as if he should have his back to a wall, or perhaps simply edge away while the two of them are distracted. She considers Napoleon, and Illya looks up for the first time to see the open greed in her expression, and the opacity of her dark eyes. He is thoroughly outmatched, and entirely at sea. Illya wants nothing more than to be touched, suddenly, whether by her gloved hands or Napoleon’s, bare, at his nape and under his jaw and along his throat. He wants to be gentled, and made pliable. Narrowing her eyes at Napoleon, she turns, finally, to contemplate Illya. He is too lost to look away, even as her gaze sears him to the bone. “I see I was mistaken,” she says, then, and rises, graceful even in forfeit.

Napoleon smiles. “Not at all,” he says. “I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same.”

She snorts. “You should know better than to leave such a prize lying around,” she says, admonishing, and does not look at Illya again.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Napoleon says, as if he means the precise opposite, and she smiles.

“Yes,” she says. “I’m sure. Well, do take care of him.”

The sound of her footsteps fades quickly, or perhaps Illya is simply distracted by Napoleon’s proximity, and the way that the physical — usually so mundane — is suddenly overwhelming. “You look like you could do with a change of setting,” Napoleon says, “and some air,” and he tips Illya’s chin up to look him in the eye. “Gorgeous,” he says. Napoleon’s eyes are so dark, all pupil, and Illya aches to look at him; he feels Napoleon’s hands at his throat, and thinks: finally. His eyes fall half-closed at Napoleon’s touch. “How does it feel?” Napoleon says, fingers working, and Illya realizes that Napoleon is loosening his tie, undoing the knot and holding the ends fast.

“Good,” Illya tries to say, but it comes out as a broken sound, half a sigh and half something caught deeper in his throat. Napoleon chuckles.

“Isn’t it so much easier when you listen to me the first time,” he says, and pulls the tie from Illya’s collar in one long caress of pressure and friction. Napoleon undoes Illya’s top button, and rests his thumb at the base of Illya’s throat — in the notch of his collarbone — for the space of a breath. “Shall we?” he says, finally, and lifts his hand from Illya’s skin, offering it instead.

“Where?” Illya says. He does not want to move. He wants to sit, and be touched, until he is thoroughly satiated and spoiled. He wants to be kept like a fine thing amidst curtains and columns. He wants to be watched, sidelong and enviously. He wants a great deal, and all of it bad for him.

“Not far,” Napoleon says. “I want to see you in chiaroscuro, and badly. I think you would put Caravaggio to shame.” He smiles, hand still outstretched. “Coming?”

Illya does not know how to say no, and does not want to learn. He wants to allow Napoleon anything that he wants, in every way possible, and without the possibility of refusal.

He gives Napoleon his hand, and allows himself to be led.

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Outside, the cold is almost of no consequence. Illya feels the wind on his overheated skin like a caress, raw silk with just an edge of roughness, as Napoleon pulls him across the plaza and into the city. The lights are different from this side of the glass — like footlights, Illya thinks, or a trail of bare bulbs — and he follows them deeper into the night, breath a ragged-edged cloud before him. He follows Napoleon down street after street, corner after corner whirling past, and does not try to remember the path that they have taken to the center, allowing himself to be lost.

When Napoleon finally slows down, he is flushed with the cold, and his eyes are glittering. “This looks promising,” he says, and then they are inside again, through the dizzying spin of a door, and Illya has a drink in his hand. He is having some difficulty staying upright on his barstool, and Napoleon presses himself flush to Illya’s back, bracketing him in and holding him up. Illya does not flinch away, even when Napoleon leans in closer to be heard over the low swell of background conversation. “Try it,” he says. “You’ll like it.”

Illya takes a sip. Napoleon is right: he does, although there is something to the flavor — summer sweetness, undercut by the chemical taste of vodka — that reminds him of soap film, the iridescence of a bubble. “There you go,” Napoleon says, approvingly, and raises his own glass. Whiskey, Illya thinks, neat and amber-dark, and remembers the flavor from long ago. He wants to see if it tastes different from Napoleon’s glass. He wants to see if it tastes different when Napoleon is watching him drink it.

“Just say the word,” Napoleon says, and Illya catches himself, as if he has missed a step on the stairs. Has he been talking out loud? Surely not. Surely he knows better. Napoleon tilts his drink towards Illya, though, and Illya thinks that perhaps he does not, after all.

“May I?” he says.

“Of course,” Napoleon says, and does not surrender the glass, but raises it to Illya’s lips instead, and tilts until the whiskey is licking at Illya’s mouth like flame. It stings, where his lip is bitten raw, and smells like smoke, creeping into every corner of Illya’s perception. He lets his lips part, and forces himself to hold the liquid on his tongue until he understands slightly better why Napoleon is so taken with it. The look, certainly, of a glass of gold, but the skill of enjoying it, too: it is a demonstrative drink, and Napoleon is by nature the same.

Illya swallows, and waits for Napoleon to take the glass away, or to say something, but he does neither. Napoleon holds Illya absolutely still without touching him once, and waits until Illya feels as if his throat is on fire, eyes watering, before Napoleon allows him to stop. Illya holds still for another half-second, just in case, before running the pad of his thumb across his mouth and licking away the excess.

“Very good,” Napoleon says, then, and raises the glass to his own lips, not bothering to turn it. He does not drink, but presses it to his mouth, considering Illya over the edge for a moment before he releases him once again, tilting his head back to take a swallow. Illya watches the hook of Napoleon’s jaw, and the broken angle of his thumb distorted through the glass, and washes the taste of both from his mouth with more vodka. The glass is slippery in his hand, ice nearly melted when he puts it back down, and Illya wonders how long it has been since Napoleon brought him here — since the night began, even — to see him in the velvet richness of the shadows, illuminated by spirits alone. It seems as if he has been here for no time at all, and as if the gala had been a lifetime ago. It seems as if Napoleon has been leading him here for a very long time.

Napoleon, when Illya looks for him, is gone again.

This time, Illya has no intention of being left in the cold, to be picked over like so much fresh meat. If Napoleon is going to lead him, then Illya is going to follow, jaw set tight and teeth sunk in as deep as Napoleon will let him.

He finishes his drink, and slips through the shadows as if they are all his. Illya does not know where Napoleon is, but pursues him with absolute certainty nevertheless.

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Illya finds himself outside, at the back of the bar, in what seems to have been designated the smokers’ alley. He finds Napoleon there as well, further from the door and consequently in deeper shadow. Napoleon’s jacket is open, and his hands have gone very pale in the cold, and the angles of his face are absolutely stark in the stolen light. Illya thinks that he should be painted, or perhaps sketched in charcoal or ink-wash, in some medium that will do justice to his inanimate grace. If not for the white of his breath, Illya might mistake Napoleon for an illusion, a trick of the night.

There is a cigarette caught between Napoleon's fingers, as if he has pulled it from the air, and as Illya watches, Napoleon tucks it between his lips. There is a woman standing beside Napoleon, Illya realizes, and she raises her hand and flicks fire into life between her fingers.

A lighter, of course; she is holding a lighter, and as Illya watches, Napoleon cups his hand around the flame and leans in as if for a kiss. The quality of the light sets his face aglow, as if illuminated by some internal source. Illya stares at the darkness of Napoleon's lashes, the hollowing of his cheeks and the way that he is entirely absorbed by the flame, and is suddenly aware of the cold. More than anything, he wants with sudden lucidity the momentary intimacy of a lighter flame, and a shared moment in the shelter that the alley provides from the ever-present wind. He wants to feel the way that Napoleon looks, letting smoke spill from his lips towards the frozen clarity of the sky, absolutely unconcerned by anything else.

Illya wants, very suddenly and very much, to not be there. He wants Napoleon to make up his mind, and to stop sliding from Illya's grasp. He wants Napoleon to stop leading him and then leaving him, to stop talking about light and then looking like that, as if formed wholesale of the winter night himself. He wants Napoleon to want him, Illya realizes suddenly, as much as he wants Napoleon, and as much as Illya wants to be desired. It is an endless inversion of craving, and one which will never be fulfilled. Illya knows that Napoleon is not the sort to want to keep anything, once he has it, and he knows that Napoleon will slip away again and again, no matter what: it is only a matter of time.

Illya should go. He should return to the gala, or the studio, or his room, where he belongs. He should stop staring at things that he cannot have.

"Illya," Napoleon says, so quietly pleased to see him.

Illya should turn, and walk away, and not look back. Napoleon is the reason that such stories exist. Napoleon is what he was told about as a child, when he was given warnings about what might befall a good person in a cold world. Illya should leave.

He cannot.

Illya allows Napoleon to lean against the wall next to him, and to smoke quietly, and to tell Illya about the first cigarette that he smoked, on the roof after his first day in the corps. Illya lets Napoleon give away the secret like a favor, something small and precious pressed into Illya's palm for luck, and listens until Napoleon falls silent again. Illya does not volunteer a mystery in exchange. Napoleon, he knows, would take no pleasure in a gift freely given and unearned. He watches Napoleon smoke the cigarette down to its filter, taking a vicarious pleasure in his distant enjoyment, and watches him flick the glowing end away, a movement so smooth that it must be practiced. A searing coin, flipped into the snow, and the bite of it still lingering in the air: Napoleon turns to Illya, and the smoke around them dissipates, leaving the air cold and clear and still. There is an inevitability to the moment that even Illya understands, an absolute of intuition.

"Let me take you back," Napoleon says, hands in his pockets. He says it with such certainty that Illya could almost mistake it for earnestness. "I've dragged you all over tonight; let me at least see you home." Napoleon takes Illya's hands in his. "You must be freezing."

Illya thinks of rehearsal, and Napoleon turning to meet him, and Illya moving to hold him weightless. This time, it is Illya who is falling; this time, it is Napoleon who is rising to meet him.

“Yes,” he says, absolutely helpless, in a corner of his own contrivance, and one which he has no desire to escape. “Yes, Napoleon,” Illya says, and when Napoleon smiles, it is brighter than all the lights of the gala: an open flame in the cold, a candle in the window of a sanctuary, a promise of absolution.

“Thank you,” Napoleon says, and does not let Illya go, and leads him back by the same path, out of the labyrinth and into the light.

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In Illya’s room, outer layers discarded, Napoleon is all shirtsleeves and sleek lines, a vision of classical fixation. Illya has no doubt that, even sitting on the edge of the bed, he is all limbs and awkwardness, made ungainly by the champagne and even more so by — laced drinks or not — Napoleon himself, his proximity and his presence, and that Napoleon is enjoying every second of his artlessness. His smile, so uncharacteristically lucent in the cold, is more familiar in the warmth of Illya’s room, at once a disappointment and a relief. Illya has neither Napoleon’s intuitive grasp of the theatrical nor his easy, clean grace. Napoleon looks his best in multiples, reflected and redoubled and letting the light love him, all stark shadow and clean lines, and knows it.

Illya is aware, though, of how he looks in the half-light, the residual candle-yellow filtering through the crisp cold night and the fogged window, warm enough to cast a glow throughout the room. Enough people have remarked on the kindnesses that firelight does him, the luminescence that he acquires between winter cold and warmth, that no matter how much Illya might try not to listen, he is peripherally aware. He feels like an open flame, between the heat in his face and his flickering awareness of sensation: Napoleon’s hand on the small of his back, as Illya slumps over next to him; the warmth of Napoleon’s shoulder through his shirt, or maybe just the shocking casualness of the contact; Napoleon’s laughter, low and surprised, and the way it resonates through Illya, setting him ringing like a flute glass.

“Well, hello,” Napoleon says, and Illya tilts his head, tries to meet his eyes; he does not want to, though, not when Napoleon’s hand is on his cheek, not when he wants so badly to lean into it, Napoleon’s fingertips brushing the skin behind his jaw. Unbidden, Illya remembers the stifling dark of the blindfold that afternoon in the empty studio, almost intimate when he thinks of it now, and Napoleon’s curled fingers under his chin: contact to be endured, then, rather than enjoyed. This time, though, instead of snapping at Napoleon’s fingers, Illya wants to tip his head back. He wants to bare his neck until Napoleon gives in to the provocation — one constant, at least, in his behavior — and traces the lines of Illya’s throat with that same certain pressure.

If Napoleon were to span Illya’s throat with the pads of his fingers, Illya thinks, then he might be able to feel the roughness of Illya’s breath. There is none of his usual control, no rhythm to



Illya's breathing. He inhales when he forgets Napoleon's closeness enough to do so, and exhales when he remembers, driving the air from his ribcage like an impact. Napoleon might be able to feel all of it: the half-gasp caught in Illya's throat, and what he will not ask for, but wants so desperately. "Hello," Illya says, under his breath, and it comes out far more fondly than he wants it to, and Napoleon laughs again, not surprised this time but delighted.

"Maybe we shouldn't have called it a night so soon," he says, and brushes the corner of Illya's mouth with his thumb. "What do you say?"

Illya hums, noncommittal and lazy. He does not want Napoleon to move his hand. He does want Napoleon to keep talking.

"We could go back out," Napoleon says, because he knows; understanding want is what he's good at, and offering it with open palms is what he does next. "Find some unholy corner — poorly lit, tasteless decor, drinks menu even worse — and see if we can make it till the morning." He traces the curve of Illya's lower lip, the very edge of its swell. Illya feels fever-hot, drifting between the secondhand light and the cant of Napoleon's voice, low and lyrical, like a story that he's telling himself. "You'd hate it," Napoleon goes on. "But you'd look unspeakable in the dark, like a promise. Too good to be true."

He pauses, thumb perfectly in the middle of Illya's chin, and taps meditatively, and goes still; Illya stops breathing, and waits. "Just the way you are now, but in a crowd, and the music in your blood. They wouldn't be able to look away, Illya," Napoleon says, and Illya is still holding his breath, but if Napoleon keeps talking, he does not need air. Illya can do this forever, if Napoleon just says his name like that again, and he exhales a gasp that he has been holding at the back of his throat for what feels like years, and Napoleon's thumb brushes up across his mouth, an incandescent shock of sensation.

It is too much. Napoleon is too close, and Illya feels as if he has no skin. He lets the pad of Napoleon's thumb drag at his lip, lets Napoleon tuck his thumb under and hold him, open-mouthed and hooked in place. "There you go," Napoleon murmurs, and curls his fingers under Illya's chin. "Good." Illya knows that Napoleon feels the roughness in his throat then, subvocal and involuntary, because Napoleon strokes up under his jaw, and Illya holds himself still. Every point of contact between them feels raw, freshly abraded and still stinging, and he wants to press his face into Napoleon's shoulder; he wants to hide how overwhelmed he is in the slope of Napoleon's neck.

"Here," Napoleon says, though, and turns Illya's face to his. Illya, eyes half-lidded, watches him swim in and out of focus, reflected lights leaving comet-trails in the blur of the room, and does not focus on Napoleon's face beyond his eyes — dark, dark, dark — and the upturned, pleased bow of his mouth. If he sees Napoleon's face, Illya will not be able to ignore that he is being observed, and by whom. Illya may have been told how he looks in candlelight, but it is not his secret to know; it is not for him to have. There are things which it is safer for Illya to keep from himself.

Instead, Illya closes his eyes, and lets Napoleon's thumb slip out of his mouth to hold him in place by his chin instead. When Napoleon leans in to brush a kiss to the corner of his mouth — another to the press of his thumbnail, just at the border of Illya's lip — and, finally, squarely, wholly and without prevarication, Illya feels it like reverence, like the swoop of a

bow, roaring echoing in his head. It is a cumulation, and a moment of clarity, and Illya thinks of candlelight and open flames and the way Napoleon's shoulders had moved, that night in the studio. Napoleon had been ensnarement and enthrallment all at once, incarnate, and Illya does not think in words, as such, or even particularly in movement, but the raw inferno of want, all-devouring. He surges forward and bites at Napoleon's mouth, consumes his cry of pained delight and feels as if he has been set alight, every broken line of him ignited.

Illya stands and pushes Napoleon back, and he goes, a lovely splay of limbs even before Illya pulls at his shirt. Inept, he tugs deep crumples into the white until Napoleon fumbles with his buttons and Illya leans down to bite along his sternum. By the time he has reached the swoop of Napoleon's ribs, the hollow rise and fall of his abdomen, Illya has the hang of it, leaving a trail of livid marks, nothing quite like the flush of new contusion and fresh swelling. He pauses over the thin skin on Napoleon's belly, and forgets not to look up; Napoleon has his head thrown back, a broken-necked bird, gasping, but when his breathing slows, he looks at Illya like someone who cannot believe the gift that they have been given. "Don't stop on my account," Napoleon says, and pushes himself to sit half-upright, even the awkward angle of his arm — shoulder, elbow, wrist, all broken, and is that not what Illya wanted anyway — still somehow perfect. "Or, no, let me."

When Napoleon reaches a hand out, Illya thinks, again, of biting, of taking his fingers off at the top knuckle, but he swings his head to track the movement instead. Though Illya is kneeling and all too aware of it, Napoleon is not teasing, this time, but treating him like something wild and dangerous. Between the rush of blood, or the roar of flame, consuming Illya, and the instinctive way his shoulders are drawn up, and the marks already rising over Napoleon's ribs, it feels good. Illya is not in the mood to be gentled. Napoleon sinks his hand into Illya's hair, and undoes his belt with his other hand, and makes no sudden movements, peeling off his facade of black and white down to the corporeal lies they tell best. If Illya wanted, he could snap Napoleon's wrist; he could tear Napoleon's throat out with his teeth. It is the snarling in his chest which he has been ignoring since their first rehearsal together, and the single-mindedness of purpose beaten into him by years at the barre, and something that Illya thinks cannot be taught. It is everything that he has been afraid of since he first saw Napoleon in motion, a better reflection than all the mirrors in the world.

Not better, perhaps, but incisive; where mirrors only tell Illya what he already knows — too tall, too lanky, too driven by negatives, and nothing to show for it — Napoleon cuts through illusion, and Illya feels as if he has been flayed, had his skin peeled back and likes what he has found. He lets Napoleon guide him, one-handed, and scratches the skin over Napoleon's hipbones, digs his thumbnails in and follows the line of muscle up even as he lets his mouth fall open and lets Napoleon press his hips forward, body an unrelenting arch. Illya closes his eyes, and thinks of how Napoleon had moved, as if his bones had been unstrung. He pushes into the ache of his shoulders and his jaw, a movement unfamiliar in purpose and practice, and thinks: *Again*.

Again, Illya pushes, throat as raw as if he has been eating glass, and feels the heave of it all the way down his ribs. He shudders, a sound that starts at the base of his spine and rolls upwards, and Napoleon's grip on his hair tightens. Napoleon's mouth is open, but Illya cannot hear anything over the pulse in his shoulders and the click of his vertebrae. There are fingernails in his back, under his shirt. There are welts rising across his shoulders. Someone

in the room sounds as if they are in pain, but it is too human a sound to be Napoleon, and it certainly cannot be Illya. He has no skin. He cannot be in pain if he has no skin. Illya cannot be in pain if he feels like his chest has been split open, ribs splayed like grasping fingers, and his lungs filled with smoke, suffusing him and leaving him as light as ash. His shoulders are bleeding; his shoulders are stripped to the bone; his shoulders have broken to make room for his spine. Napoleon's fingers are wrapped around his shoulder blades and hooked under his clavicle and Illya can no more free himself than he can be anything other than brutal, down to his marrow. Napoleon stops moving, a breathless moment of apex, and then he is arching, an elegance to it that Illya will never match, and tugging Illya up by his collarbone — by the muscles of his shoulders — by his hair, hands clean, and Illya goes snarling.

“Now that won't do,” Napoleon says, and his eyes are ground glass, and his smile is ravenous. He pushes Illya back onto tangled sheets and scrapes his nails along Illya's collarbone, opens his shirt to follow his breastbone down, and Illya can feel his ribs buckling along the line that Napoleon leaves. He could pin Napoleon by the wrists and kiss him bloody, if he wanted. He could leave gouges along his ribs down to the bone. The room is still glowing with residual gold, and Illya knows, suddenly, that it would still do him kindnesses that he does not deserve; he would still look beautiful — terribly so — in the light with his teeth stained red.

He looks down at Napoleon, and knows, instantly, that doing so is a mistake. The hook of Napoleon's jaw, the point of his chin, the push of his scapulae through his skin: it's all the same, mirror-empty and hollow and as clean as glass. Too late, Illya remembers: he never wanted to see Napoleon's face like this, even in reflection, but particularly not looking up at him over the ruin of his chest. The welts on his ribs are coming up red. His ribs flicker open and closed again. Napoleon smiles, and Illya notices, vaguely, that he should not have so many teeth, surely; it must be impossible, no—

—the room flickers, and winks out, and takes Illya with it.

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It not the sun which wakes Illya. The sky is still dark when he opens his eyes, and the blinds are drawn. It takes him a minute to push himself up onto one elbow, and another to understand why it is so difficult for him to do so. He feels as if his chest has been hollowed out, as if he is caving in on himself; usually pain is an earned luxury, or at least a reminder of work done well, but Illya wants to curl up in his empty bed, arms around his knees, until he aches less. Instead, he forces himself upright and into the hallway before his eyes focus, even the washed-out grey light too much for the way his vision seems to lag a moment behind his movements.

Illya ignores the half-mirror in the bathroom, and turns on the water, standing and shivering until the cubicle fills with steam; at the corner of his eye, something flickers, and he turns, and is confronted by his own reflection. From the shoulders up, he looks — tired, yes, but fundamentally the same, the set of his jaw stubborn and the line of his mouth immobile — unchanged, but from the throat down, it looks as if he's been split open, skin pulled apart at

his breastbone and clumsily smoothed back together. From his collarbone down to his hips, Illya looks as tattered as he feels, torn tissue lifting on his breath and subsiding with a shudder as he exhales. When he rubs a thumb along the waistband of his briefs, disbelieving, it comes away smudged a rusty brown, dried blood flaking away as he raises his hand to his eyes. For a moment, Illya wants to lick the stain away, and forces himself to drop his hand to his side instead.

The room is full of steam already, but Illya half-turns, twisting, to look at his back, and cannot believe for a moment that there is not more blood. His shoulders look as if he has been dragged across concrete by the throat, half-moon scabs raised and nearly black. There are welts parallel to his spine, broad and red, and thinner lines that look as if he's had thread pulled through his skin, imprecise and irregular stitches tugging and bunching into tangles. At the small of his back, the marks tail off, but as he turns back, Illya can feel the ache of marks lower down on his hips.

It hits Illya squarely in the chest, then, too visceral to be anything but memory: Napoleon's hand in his hair, and Napoleon's fingers digging into his shoulders, and Napoleon's smile, razor-sharp even in the dark; most shameful of all, Napoleon's thumb on his lips, and the way that Illya had leaned into him. That had been neither the light nor the festivities nor the champagne, no matter what else — no matter what Napoleon might have — no matter what. That had been all Illya, all self-indulgence, and Illya wishes that he could feel hollow again, just so that the weight of humiliation would lift from his chest, heavy on his diaphragm, pulling at his lungs, stale morning-after smoke and tar.

His chest still aches, and his skin pulls with every movement, scrapes reopening as he steps under the spray. Illya has no doubt that he will come out of the water just as damaged as he was when he went in, scabs softening and peeling, and puts it off as long as he can, letting the knots in his shoulders loosen and the tightness in his neck subside. He closes his eyes, and lets the water run over his face until he is gasping for breath, and when he runs out of excuses, he turns off the water and steps out. It's still early enough that Illya can take his time, skin red from steam now rather than abrasion, to rub the most stubborn of the dried blood from his hipbones and to pick the loosest of the scabs from his back. Underneath, his skin is split, shiny and pink and slippery to the touch, halfway between healing and scarring.

The water has cleared his head, at least, if not by much; Illya wonders whether there was anything in his drink after all, or whether he has just been working too hard. Immediately, he dismisses the possibility. If anything, he is not working hard enough. He needs to be better, more precise, more disciplined, if he wants any of this to mean anything. It is of no particular consequence, anyway, whether it was the champagne or something else, or simply the excuse with which Napoleon presented him. Illya took it and let himself want, for once, without restraint, and has nobody to blame for it but himself. He wonders if Napoleon is awake yet, and if he is standing in front of a mirror too, tracing his bruises like trophies rather than brands. He wonders if Napoleon knows how profoundly ruinous he is, and then discards the thought as self-evident. Of course Napoleon knows.

Illya barely spares a thought for the flickers of time that he can only piece together as negative space, like worn-out magnetic tape, skipping from one minute to the next. He has lost many moments in his life, between those he has chosen to discard and those which have

been taken from him; in the scheme of things, how much of a difference can a few more make? If anything, he thinks, fingertips light over a sluggish trickle of fresh blood, it is a mercy, most likely, that he does not remember.

The mirror is clearing of fog, when he looks up. Illya does not meet his reflection's eyes.

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Illya arrives at the studio early, and makes sure that the collar of his shirt is high enough to hide the highest of the marks on his chest, angry red on the thin skin just under his collarbone. Even where it is worn almost transparent, the fabric is too rough, pulling over the worst of his grazes, and consequently Illya feels feverish, oversensitive and bursting out of his skin. He remembers that now too, in half-finished sweeps of light, flickering back and forth on the inside of his eyelids: bone, and blood, and biting down, and how good it had felt to be laid so completely bare.

The more that Illya picks at his shirt, the worse he feels, and the more he wishes that he could scrub his skin away with steel wool, peeling away all evidence of his present and becoming made new. He stretches, and feels emptied out, and wonders if this is why Napoleon looks, sometimes, as if he could disappear into the air. Illya thinks that perhaps today Napoleon will not look so impossibly intangible, having consumed everything that Illya has to give, gaining substance as Illya has lost it. Perhaps there will be color to Napoleon's cheeks.

He wonders, too, if Napoleon will look at him with the same blank lack of expression that he had turned on the corps member that morning — a month ago, now — and that same absolute indifference. Illya thinks that it will undo him as surely as would Napoleon's impersonal satisfaction. After all, Illya is hardly the first; he is hardly remarkable in any way. Napoleon is easy, with regard to both his inclinations and the ways in which he acts upon them, and Illya is unexceptional at best. He has known this for a long time, and has reminded himself of it often enough that it has lost its sting, fading into the familiar ache of a wound long healed. This is no worse than any other reminder of Illya's plainness. There is nothing left that Napoleon can take from him, and therefore no way left in which he can be hurt.

The door opens, and Illya looks up before he can stop himself.

Nonsensically, Illya's first thought is that Napoleon looks more real than he ever has before. Napoleon's hair is still damp, curling slightly, and his shirt is slipping off his shoulder, one side of his collarbone completely bare, and there is a run in his leggings along the outside angle of his knee. Alive, Illya thinks; alive is what he means. Napoleon looks alive.

Before Illya can look away, Napoleon turns, and catches sight of him by the mirrors. Illya is already braced for disinterest, for Napoleon's disdain, and thinks that, no matter what, he has already survived so much more. He can live through this, or at least he can be certain that it will not kill him. Napoleon can do no worse to Illya than he already has.

The way Napoleon looks at him is not empty or blank, though, in the slightest. Instead, he looks at Illya like someone who knows a secret. One that Illya would rather not have given away, perhaps, without candlelight to render the night a dream, but Napoleon looks as if he has discovered a possibility that he had not even known to exist previously. Napoleon looks at Illya as if it is the first time that Napoleon is seeing him, and as if the world has, for him, shifted. He looks at Illya as if it might be all right, sometimes, for Illya to stop holding himself in check so intensely, and to just let someone see. Napoleon looks at Illya as if he has pulled him apart and put him back together into something that he might want to keep, and he looks at Illya as if he never wants to look away.

Illya feels something expand in his chest, lighter than air, as if he has just broken through the surface and taken his first breath: Illya feels as if, looking at Napoleon, he has just begun to see. The way that Napoleon smiles at him is a secret miracle. The way that it sets Illya alight — against his judgment, against his token resistance, against his aching ribs — feels like hope.

The studio door opens again, but Illya does not look away.

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Costume fittings are scheduled to be a week later, for which Illya is grateful; his skin is not completely healed, but is at least considerably less sanguine. The welts over his ribs are no longer as prominent, and the worst of the scratches have knit at the edges, scabs worn down to reveal smooth new skin. Standing in the costume shop and waiting in front of the mirror, Illya no longer mistakes himself for some sort of anatomy lesson, and even runs his thumb idly over the new skin at his breastbone. He has healed intermittently, according to the severity of the initial damage inflicted upon him, and wonders at the pink shininess visible beneath the uneven edges of dead tissue. Thoughtlessly, Illya picks at the rough outline of one such remnant, and watches himself peel it away as if he is an unconcerned onlooker, external to his body.

The damage is more extensive than Illya had assumed at first; he realizes this as he pulls, drawn further and further back into awareness of his body, and the way that he is bound to it. Illya keeps peeling nevertheless until blood wells up, a beaded and broken line, and he is forced to tear the skin away by force. It breaks messily, leaving a ragged crease that fills and clots as Illya breaks the last of the fragment away and looks up.

Over his shoulder in the mirror, Napoleon is visible, standing behind Illya and waiting, unmoving, for him to notice.

Illya does not know what it means that Napoleon has chosen not to try to startle him. Even as Illya sees himself light up — no other expression for it, as hard as he tries to think of one — in the mirror, Illya is not credulous enough to believe that it is a matter of affection, or any similar softness of sentiment. For all that Illya has nothing left to give, he is under no impressions about what Napoleon has to offer in return.

He smiles, though, when Napoleon is careful in his approach, deliberate in the way that he moves, and not performing elusiveness for once. Partly it is a result of Napoleon's caution, and partly it is a result of this strange new volatility beneath his ribs: Illya is unused to the possibility of choice, and the availability of options. He is unused to the idea that he could turn Napoleon down, and that Napoleon treats him now like something dangerous, and would be mindful of Illya's refusal.

Fundamentally, Illya thinks that he is unused to being an agent of exclusion, rather than an object to be acted upon in such a way, and finds it thrilling. If he wanted, Illya thinks, he could say no to Napoleon. A single syllable, regardless of repercussions: Illya can have this now. Illya can say no.

Illya lets Napoleon span his torso with his hands, thumbs placed between his tenth and eleventh ribs, and thinks about putting up a pretense of denial. In the end, he does not; instead, he breathes into Napoleon's hands, and looks past the rows of costumes and the boxes of pins and rolls of ribbon to the mirror at the end of the room. Napoleon's shoulders look narrower when he is restricting Illya's breathing like this, exerting the smallest pressure on his ribcage and relying on Illya to take his cue. Napoleon looks like less of a threat.

Lightheaded at this realization and short of breath at Napoleon's hands, Illya watches the incremental expansion and contraction of his sides and the way that Napoleon matches his rhythm to exert additional pressure when it will matter most. Illya is distracted by the concordance of movement, and so when Napoleon slides one hand up his side, the first thing that Illya notices is the rush of air into his lungs, a matter of reflex rather than conscious response. The second thing that he notices is the warmth of Napoleon's hand, spread so that his thumb presses at the lower extremity of Illya's sternum, and then Napoleon curls his hand around Illya's side in a smooth unbroken slide, thumbnail barely digging in as he goes. It is a neat partition of personhood, entirely impersonal if not for the way that Napoleon looks up when Illya catches his breath. Napoleon looks as if he wants to keep the sound, but more than that, he looks as if he wants to keep Illya.

Illya could lean down and kiss Napoleon, if he wanted. Illya could step back, and out of Napoleon's reach. Overcome by the possibility of exercising autonomy, Illya does neither, until footsteps approach in the hallway and the choice is made for him.

To his surprise, Illya's instinctive response is not what it would usually be: he is used to debilitating panic in the face of a missed opportunity, let alone one at which he may never be given a second chance. This is, Illya thinks, no longer the case. To Napoleon, Illya realizes giddily, he is no longer a certainty, and so he is more compelling than he has ever been before. Napoleon, now, is the one facing an uncertain outcome, Illya thinks, as Napoleon steps back, and Illya drags in a full breath for the first time in minutes.

Illya has Napoleon transfixed, he realizes, through the very hollow center of him. He has Napoleon in the palm of his hand. It feels like too precious a realization to trust, but one which is too certain to disbelieve. Illya has always been prone to such credence anyway: call it resignation, call it trust; it has rarely made any difference in the end. Whatever it is, Illya lets it bear his entire weight, now, and does not even consider the alternatives.

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At the end of the weekend, Illya returns to the costume mistress. She has cleared a corner of the shop for a folding chair, under which she has laid down newspaper. “Better you get used to it now,” she had advised him through a mouthful of pins, fixing the shoulder seam of his jacket none too gently. Illya had known better than to flinch away from her touch — quick, methodical points of contact, punctuated by the occasional pinprick — and had not argued. From the very first time that Waverly had described his part, even in the relatively broad strokes typical of the early days of rehearsal, Illya has been aware of the archetypal nature of his role, and the uniformity with which he must play it. His costume is unremarkable in context, just as Napoleon’s is; it is only in juxtaposition that the conceit becomes obvious. It makes sense that Illya must become equally regular.

The costume mistress places a hand on the side of Illya’s head when he sits down, and tilts it from side to side, and clucks. “Such a shame,” she says, and turns away.

Illya does not share her disapproval, but then such matters of appearance have never been of consequence to him. From the moment that he was enrolled as a student — and earlier than that, from the moment when he was given to the state, a repatriated lien for inherited debt — Illya has understood that his body is no longer his. It is rather an instrument by means of which he may earn worth, so that one day he may once again have a name worth repeating, and one which can no longer be used as a weapon against him. Even if his parents had not indentured him to redeem the same name that they left him to bear, Illya has pledged himself to dance the way that he has been told that he should pledge himself to the state, or to a person. Illya has given himself entirely to the possibility of earning a place in history, and to the construction of an edifice which will outlive him. His body is, by comparison, immaterial.

When she turns the clippers on, Illya closes his eyes.

The costume mistress is not unduly gentle, just as she is not excessively rough. She pushes Illya’s head down so that she may start at the nape of his neck, and crops his hair a section at a time. Her touch is competent but incurious, simply a matter of necessity when it comes to tilting Illya’s head to the side, or pulling him back to an upright position, and has an odd sedative effect as a result. Illya is glad that he does not need to keep his eyes open, body suffused with radiant warmth, and allows himself to drift.

“All done,” she says, finally, and it takes Illya a moment to understand. “You haven’t been sleeping enough, have you,” she adds, and he opens his eyes to find her glaring down at him. “All of you — working so hard to be perfect — and then what do you have left?” She clicks her tongue. “Mayflies, all of you,” she says, though it is not without fondness. She brushes his shoulders clean, and slaps at the back of his neck. “Go on, get used to that.”

Illya ducks his head at her, still half-insensible, and barely remembers to thank her before he leaves. On his way out, he rubs at the back of his head, confused by how much lighter he feels. Illya is still feeling at the curvature of his skull when Napoleon catches him doing so, just as Illya is about to take the stairs to a late rehearsal, the last of the day.



“Have you lost your strength, too?” Napoleon enquires, and falls into step with Illya, even as he pushes open the door to the stairwell. “No, don’t tell me — you’ve had a change of heart, and this represents — oh, I don’t know. You’re going to take up asceticism, more than you already have. I have to warn you: sackcloth doesn’t suit anybody. You’re far too fine for hessian.”

“For my part,” Illya says, more tolerant than he is naturally inclined to be, “I must appear trained. I must be disciplined.” He drops his hand to his side, not a little reluctantly. “Not a piece out of place.”

“No doubt,” Napoleon says, a self-amused smile tugging at his lips. “A well-regulated machine, you are.” He raises his hand as they reach the landing, and pauses a moment before he touches Illya’s head. “May I?”

“Be my guest,” Illya says, pausing at the top of the stairs, and Napoleon brushes his fingers through Illya’s close-cropped hair, frowning in consideration.

“If you’re going to take up self-denial,” Napoleon says, brows furrowed, “I don’t see why you have to do it in a way that means that I have to as well. I don’t do well with restraint.” He half-smiles. “Self-restraint, anyway.” Napoleon pauses, and seemingly realizes that Illya has not heard him. “Hello?”

“Very funny,” Illya says, but the words come out as if through amber, syrupy-slow and sweet. Napoleon’s touch is not incurious in the slightest, but is somehow equally potent, and Illya can feel himself slipping under, eyes heavy-lidded and lips slightly parted.

“Now that is interesting,” Napoleon says, and just like that, he is focused again, fascinated and entirely preoccupied by Illya. “More than a fair trade, I’d say. Now I wish that you had let me watch.” He scratches lightly at Illya’s scalp, down to the nape of his neck, and lets his hand rest there unmoving for a long moment of stillness. “We’ll be late,” Napoleon says, “if you don’t let me open this door.”

Illya does not care that they will be late. Illya does not want Napoleon to move his hand. Illya does not want to shake himself sufficiently free of his reverie to put one foot in front of the other, let alone to dance.

Reluctantly, though, he does, and steps away. “After you,” Napoleon says, opening the door for him.

Illya obeys, the warmth of Napoleon’s hand lingering at his nape.

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Waverly dismisses Napoleon first, as he always does, and keeps Illya late to give him more notes — on his technique, on his translation of Waverly’s vision into performance — although not as many as usual, this time. He has Illya run one particular sequence of steps,

choreographed to reflect internal conflict, twice more, and gives him the most minimal of direction. Once, Waverly suggests a substitution of Italian double fouettés rather than the usual singles, and once he stops Illya to request a slightly more formal approach. Beyond such minor adjustments, though, Waverly stands silent for the most part, occasionally tracking Illya's movements with a raised hand.

When Illya finishes the sequence the second time, he wavers for a moment, uncertain as to whether the vertigo that he is experiencing is a result of excellence or exhausted ineptitude. Waverly's face tells Illya all that he needs to know, though: Waverly is not smiling, but he is not frowning, either, and his expression is one of expectation exonerated. Brilliant in the original sense, Illya remembers him saying; twice as much so, and with the potential to be extraordinary.

"Not bad," Waverly says. "Not bad at all." He takes his glasses off, and presses at the corner of his eye with two fingers. "I think we can call it a day, then," he adds, and Illya bows, watching the door swing shut after him. Illya takes his time to leave, stretching while he still has the extra flexibility that comes with activity and warmth, loose and easy as he folds over at the waist. The pervasive ache in his legs and the compression of his back and his tight calves: all of it is immaterial, after a rehearsal like that, and the knowledge is almost as good as the prospect of rest. Illya forces himself upright before he falls asleep, losing momentum quickly now that he has stopped moving. When he finally manages to get to his feet and out of the studio, then, he barely notices Napoleon waiting in the hall.

It takes him a moment to understand, even then. Napoleon is still in leggings, knees pulled up to his chest and one legwarmer slipping down. He looks up at Illya as if he has done the same to everybody who has gone by, except that this time it really is him, and Napoleon puts out his hand, smiling. Illya pulls him to his feet and crosses his arms.

"Waverly looked happy," Napoleon says, adjusting the strap of his bag and stretching. "Or, well. As happy as he ever gets. Not entirely discouraged. That sort of thing."

"It was a good rehearsal," Illya says, as they reach the stairs, and Napoleon catches his wrist as Illya moves to push the door open.

"Can I show you something?" he says, and adds, when Illya looks at him: "It isn't far, I promise, and you'll like it. If I'm any judge, anyway."

Illya wavers.

"Just ten minutes," Napoleon says, and Illya gives in, an inevitability that they have both been aware of since Napoleon had first asked.

"All right," he says. "Ten minutes."

What Napoleon wants to show Illya is the front of the theater, already lit for the evening. More importantly, though, he wants to show Illya the ladder left by some builder, just tall enough to be braced against the great round overhang above the doors. Illya hesitates, dusk chilliness already sinking into his skin, and watches Napoleon as he climbs. "Well, come on,"

Napoleon says over his shoulder, already halfway up the ladder. "We've missed the sunset already."

Illya shivers, breath white before him, and follows.

When Illya settles himself at the top of the overhang, he realizes that it is not terribly far up, compared to mezzanine or balcony seating. The height is far more akin to that of the dress circle, but somehow it is still removed enough that Illya feels as if he has never seen the plaza before. From this angle, it is too close to be abstract in miniature, but far enough to be put in sudden perspective.

"Smoke?" Napoleon says, leaning against the windows next to him. "You look the part, now." He indicates Illya's cropped hair.

"I don't," Illya says, and Napoleon shrugs. Suddenly, impulsive from height and cold and achievement, Illya wants to have this, too. If Napoleon can, then so can he. "I haven't," he admits, and Napoleon tilts his head.

"Not the best place for a lesson," he says, but he looks considering rather than condescending. "I suppose we'll manage." He rummages in his bag. "First, paper," he says, and hands a slip to Illya. It flutters. "Sticky side, plain side," Napoleon says, and rearranges it in Illya's grasp. "Don't lose that. Filter," he adds, and takes one between his lips, holding another to Illya's, and Illya does the same.

Rendered silent, Napoleon demonstrates by example the placement of the tobacco, and then the addition of the filter. "No trick to it," he says, and rolls the paper neatly on his first try. "Just practice." He licks the paper. "Your turn."

Illya's fingertips are tingling with the cold, but he follows suit, paper immaterial like Eucharist on the tip of his tongue.

"Nicely done," Napoleon says. "You're a natural. Here," he says, and flicks a lighter flame into being, cupping one hand around it. Illya leans in, and inhales, as he remembers Napoleon had done, and breathes deep. "There you go," Napoleon says, and lights his own. "How's that?"

Nothing like Illya had imagined, somehow, and yet the only way it could possibly be, Illya thinks. It hits him with sudden weight, as if the smoke is curling into his lungs, and pulling him downwards, and he exhales a little too quickly, throat suddenly rough with it. Illya manages to hum his consideration. "It is real," he says, unsure of what he means, or why he says it, but Napoleon nods.

"That's why," he says, and they smoke in silence, looking out across the plaza, and the street, and the night, utterly closing in now and only punctuated by the occasional light.

When Napoleon finishes, he flicks the end away, and edges back over to the ladder. Illya tries to copy him, the ember faintly warm at his fingertips, but does not quite manage the same finesse.

“I’ll show you how to do that too, if you want,” Napoleon says, momentarily graceless as he climbs onto the ladder.

“Napoleon,” Illya says, and Napoleon looks up, as substantial as the smoke lingering on Illya’s fingers, in his mouth, caught in his throat.

Illya kisses him, then, two fingers pressed beneath Napoleon’s jaw just in front of his pulse. It is an inelegant position, half-crouched and shivering as he is, but Illya wants to kiss Napoleon, and so he does, Napoleon’s skin almost feverish beneath his cold fingertips.

“All right,” Napoleon says, when Illya pulls away. “Or we could save it for some other time.” He smiles. “That sounds good. That sounds better, in fact—”

Napoleon breaks off, laughing at the expression on Illya’s face, and Illya glares at him. “Do you want to talk,” he says, “or do you want to move?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Napoleon says, and loses no more time to words.

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As soon as the door to Illya’s room is closed, Napoleon backs him up against it, pinning Illya there with the weight of his body and pressing himself absolutely flush. Napoleon smiles against Illya’s mouth, and his hands are cold on Illya’s sides, and he tugs at Illya’s shirt. “Off,” he says, and leans away so that Illya has room. “All of it, come on, Illya, I want to see you,” Napoleon adds, and finds the light switch. Illya, blinking in the sudden glare, wants Napoleon to have it. Whatever it is that Napoleon wants, Illya will give it to him.

Despite Napoleon’s wandering hands, and the way that he seems intent on exploring every new exposed angle by touch, Illya somehow manages until Napoleon finally loses patience and decides to help. He runs his hands down over Illya’s hips, following with his eyes, and then folds to his knees in a single dizzying movement.

“May I?” Napoleon says, looking up, and Illya thinks that he understands, now, the conceit central to this particular ploy. Napoleon makes himself dangerous — frictionless, inscrutable, call it what one will — so that the thrill, the drug of it when he goes to his knees, is even more potent, and goes straight to the head. The idea of all that just waiting to be told what to do is absolutely overwhelming.

“Please,” Illya says, and when Napoleon licks his lips — agonizingly blatant, but he looks up at Illya through his lashes as he does, so no less effective for it — and takes him in hand, Illya has to shut his eyes and press one hand over his mouth. Napoleon takes the same enjoyment in this that he seems to find in all things that allow him to demonstrate virtuosity, and Illya realizes that he is shuddering, absolutely unused to any sensation but pain from his own body. Pleasure is a shock, and one which loses none of its immediacy over time. Napoleon holds Illya’s hips against the door, grip tight enough to bruise, and Illya sinks his teeth into the ball of his own thumb and has no choice but to take it.

At some point, even biting down becomes ineffective, and Illya becomes aware that he is gasping, each exhalation closer to a sob. Napoleon draws it out, too, and goes entirely still as Illya shakes. Eyes open, Illya watches transfixed as Napoleon pulls back, lips parted, and presses his thumb to the corner of his mouth.

“What do you want?” Napoleon says, and Illya shivers, racked with tension. “Tell me, Illya, come on.”

Illya wants Napoleon to keep him. Illya wants Napoleon to keep going, or to kill him; either way, he is half-frantic with desperation. He wants Napoleon to look at him this way for always, and he never wants Napoleon to look at him again. Napoleon’s hands are still on his hips, and Napoleon is still on his knees, and what Illya wants, more than anything he has ever wanted before — and more than anything he will ever want again, he thinks, with a certainty that has been stripped of all its terror — is Napoleon.

“You,” he rasps out, hand falling to his side. “You, please, Napoleon — I want — please,” he says, inarticulate in the language of desire, and reduced to begging instead. “You.”

“That’ll do,” Napoleon says, and lets Illya sink a hand into his hair, and does not stop when he pulls — too much, Illya thinks, wordless and overwhelmed — and does not stop when Illya goes joltingly still. Napoleon waits until Illya is trembling, more nervous reflex than voluntary movement, and swallows, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before he rises, kissing Illya breathless again. “What do you want now?” he asks, and Illya has no answer that is not already in his hands, pressed against him from shoulders to hips, smiling against his mouth.

“You, still,” Illya says, helpless, and the way that Napoleon looks at him — gaze hot and dark, and unspeakably dangerous, but what about Napoleon is not — makes his heart pound.

“All right,” Napoleon says, and steps back. “Come on.”

Illya follows him, and lets Napoleon place a hand between his shoulder blades and push him down on the bed. He lets Napoleon settle over him — warmth and weight — and mouth at the roundels of his spine, obvious at the base of Illya’s neck where he is pushed up on his elbows, head hanging. Illya lets Napoleon scrape his teeth over the point where his back becomes concave, and bite gently at the prominence of his lower vertebra. When Napoleon smooths his hand over his flank, Illya shivers, and when Napoleon digs his fingernails in, Illya freezes, gasping at the sensation.

When Napoleon digs his thumbs in — followed by just the faintest flicker of tongue, a whisper-light obscenity — Illya arches, reflexively, and scrabbles at the sheets, feeling as if all the breath has been knocked out of him. Napoleon holds Illya still, though, and licks at him until Illya feels as if he must be absolutely sloppy with it. Napoleon works Illya open with his mouth and the pad of his thumb, until Illya is too far gone to focus on anything but the raw sensation of it, needy and unstrung all over again.

“Don’t,” Illya manages to say, face pressed into the sheets, when Napoleon shifts to catch his breath against the small of Illya’s back. “Don’t stop.”

“No?” Napoleon says, and Illya feels the press of his fingers, at once a presumption and a tease. “Don’t?”

Illya gasps, and pushes back against the pressure, and can feel the curve of Napoleon’s smile. “I thought so,” Napoleon says.

Illya would be ashamed if there was anything left to him but want, and need, and the simple fact of his body and his pleasure. He does not want to consider what he looks like, so undone, and he does not want to consider what Napoleon in particular sees in the arch of his back and the push of his hips and the flush of heat in his cheeks. Instead, Illya begs — staccato and simple, *please please please* — and buries his face in the corner of his elbow, and cannot catch his breath.

He sighs with relief, then, when Napoleon finally, finally pulls away, returning to press a kiss to the nape of Illya’s neck and to tilt Illya’s hips up, hands wide and so warm. Napoleon presses into him incrementally slowly, and Illya is somehow unsurprised by the way that the sensation is continually overwhelming. It is no easier an adjustment when Napoleon is pressed flush to his back than when Napoleon shifts, and begins to move. Illya lets Napoleon lift him, and wrap one arm around his chest for leverage, fingers curled into the shelf of his collarbone, and lets Napoleon move him, not bothering to suppress the way that he sounds anymore.

“Good,” Napoleon says, rough and breathless; whether it is a question or a matter of praise, Illya does not know, and cares even less. Napoleon’s fingertips slip from Illya’s collarbone to the notch of his throat, and then up to press at Illya’s windpipe. Illya thinks that Napoleon must be able to feel the noises that he is making, involuntary and helpless, because he moves faster, and pushes harder with his fingertips, a point of sharp and unrelenting pressure.

“Good,” Napoleon says again, and Illya chokes back a sob; Napoleon gasps with laughter, having certainly felt the jump of Illya’s throat and the hitch in his breathing. “Again,” he says, and bites down at the nape of Illya’s neck, and again at the juncture of his shoulder, and Illya feels the word like a blow — like all the air being knocked from his lungs — and shakes to pieces.

Napoleon slows, and flattens his hand to Illya’s chest, and rocks Illya through it, soothing the sting of his teeth with the press of his lips instead.

When Illya is quiet and still, he begins to move again.

Illya does not have the energy or the desire to protest, or to do anything but lie there and take it, caught between Napoleon’s hand on his shoulder and the insistent press of Napoleon’s hips, moving faster now. By the time that Napoleon goes still, gasping out his release into Illya’s shoulder, Illya has stopped shivering, for the most part. “Illya,” Napoleon says, still breathless, and turns him over, drawing one hand down the side of Illya’s face to trace the curve of his mouth. Illya smiles.

“Hello,” he says.

“Hello yourself,” Napoleon says, and traces the line of his throat, lazy and proprietary and luxurious. Sweet, Illya thinks; there is a sweetness to Napoleon when he is like this, and it is

evident in his touch, not so much a brand as a caress.

Illya rolls over to let Napoleon cradle his head, and trail his fingers along the curve of Illya's skull, and at some point — as unfamiliar as such an expression of intimacy is, and as daunting — Illya supposes that he falls asleep.

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Lying in bed in the mornings, early light wine-ruddy and dreamlike, Napoleon gives Illya secrets, like precious stones kept under his tongue. He tells Illya about London in winter, close and clammy, and New York in autumn, the brisk wind and the browning leaves and the gradual encroachment of nighttime. He tells Illya about Gaudi and Klimt and Fitzgerald, and Illya does not have the heart to tell Napoleon that he knows, though perhaps not firsthand; besides, Napoleon is giving him a greater gift than he is aware. There is an awe to his descriptions that more than matches the richness of the originals, and that is worth more than the words themselves. Napoleon tells him about Santorini in the off-season — “No such thing,” he says, “and anybody who tells you otherwise is lying” — and makes promises that they are both willing to believe him capable of keeping. He tells Illya about the stage at La Scala, the truest red and gold that he has ever seen, and the view from the roof of the Palais Garnier, Apollo golden in the glow of the sunset and all of Paris spread out like the stars pinned down.

Napoleon dowers away his dreams and his nightmares in equal measure; there seems to be very little about him that fits into neither category, nothing done by halves. There is a rumor that he was to be partnered with Fonteyn by Ashton, and a ballet created for them alone. “Not my style,” Napoleon says. “Dumas, I mean, père ou fils.” He lets the sibilant linger, and adds, meditatively: “I much prefer a rising star of greater velocity.” His gaze tracks the line of Illya’s side, down, down, down, before he smiles, eyes downcast, smile delicate. Illya feels something dangerously like tenderness — like hope — flicker in his chest, and cannot bring himself to snuff it out. There is a rumor that someone killed themselves over Napoleon, once. He says this just as casually as if he were discussing the weather. “Tried,” Napoleon clarifies, certainly less concerned than he had been when it came to discussing Schiele. “Couldn’t quite finish the job.” He makes a moue, a little displeased pull of his mouth to the side. “Ask me something else,” he says.

The corps — Illya does not particularly ignore them, but paying attention to the tenor of their mood and the hum of their voices is like picking up a signal with poor reception; he must focus to make it out — say, with their multitudinous single voice, that Waverly made a pass at Napoleon, that day when he called him into his office and closed the door. They say that no one knows. They say that no one else was there. Illya, half out of curiosity and half out of having no other loose threads to pull at, asks obliquely and haltingly. “Please,” Napoleon says. “That man has ice water for blood. I must confess a certain curiosity, but really, can you imagine?” He turns over and props himself up on one shoulder and says, curiously, “I suppose you have, then.” Napoleon smiles, slow and delighted. “Did you like it? Did it make you jealous?” The image hits Illya right in the gut, what it would look like: Waverly

impeccably dressed, standing at his desk, perhaps, one hand in Napoleon's hair, and Napoleon's hands flat on the wood on either side of his hips. "Don't worry, Illyusha," Napoleon says, and swings a leg over Illya's hips, almost crooning. "I'm all yours."

They are just words. Napoleon has such a way with words. Napoleon could talk the world into changing, if he wanted. Illya knows this, but it makes no difference: he lets them snag between his ribs. "If I had, though," Napoleon says, an inch from Illya's mouth, voice pitched low and quiet, "well. Let's just say—" his nose brushes against Illya's; his hands skim over Illya's shoulders to span his ribcage. "—I'd drag it out," Napoleon says. "Really make him push, you know, really make him take—" and Illya cuts him off, surges to kiss him, stifles a second of Napoleon's laughter before Napoleon has him pinned by the shoulders again. "—Really make him work for it," Napoleon finishes, and Illya thinks that this — Napoleon's smile, Napoleon's hands on his shoulders, the rise and fall of Napoleon's chest, laughter and lightheadedness — is going to kill him. More surely than cigarettes, than dancing himself to ruin, than the inevitability of his failure: this is what will do it.

"Or did you wonder," Napoleon says, looking as if he has Illya cornered, eyes alight at this unexpected windfall, "why it wasn't you? Did you want it to be you, in his office, door closed, and everyone wondering? Everyone thinking about it?" He slides his hand down Illya's chest, fingernails catching, and Illya shivers, taut as piano wire. "Everyone knowing," Napoleon says, and digs his nails in abruptly, stopping just short, "and wanting to see it, wanting to see you, wanting, well." He pauses. "Wanting *you*." He waits, and Illya thinks that he will have welts, after this, more claw marks to show where Napoleon has staked his claim, and Napoleon does not look away, does not blink until Illya can no longer take it, and begins to shake. "They can't have you," Napoleon says, certain, but still vicious about it, a pettiness to his ferocity that resonates with Illya more strongly than kindness ever could. This, then, is what will kill Illya: neither Napoleon's smile nor his snarl, but the edge on which they hang, the fine balance and the beauty of it. This is what will undo him.

"Napoleon," Illya says, and Napoleon seems to notice his fingers digging into Illya's abdomen. He lets go, and brings his hand back up to press two fingers to Illya's lips, a mimic of a kiss.

"They can't," Napoleon says, and lets his hand slip to the bed; he falls to one elbow, lips just brushing the corner of Illya's mouth, and closes his eyes. Illya is grateful. He does not want to know what Napoleon is seeing, this close. He cannot look away. "All yours," Napoleon repeats, arching to press against Illya skin to skin. He is warm, and solid, and could almost be mistaken for real, and Illya thinks that this is how it begins, every time, in every story and every fable and every instance of desire, however untold. All that a fall requires is a single misstep.

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Illya lets Napoleon keep him far longer than he should that morning, and then every morning for a week afterwards, drowsing when he should be working. Finally he gathers himself enough to slip out, not going straight to the studio but instead to the rear courtyard, which



overlooks an unremarkable street. There, Illya pauses by the gate, driven by some inexplicable desire for fresh air and uncomplicated sunlight. Before sunrise, the morning is icy in a way that takes Illya a moment to comprehend. When he does, it comes as a shock, as if he has fallen through river ice and only just realized it. Illya wraps his hands around the bars and shivers. Working as hard — and rising as late — as he has been, Illya is still unused to the way that the wind feels on the bare nape of his neck, and the immediacy with which it chills him. He feels light and stripped down, reduced to the essentials. The empty street echoes him, absolutely silent; its trees are bare, black and spidery branches abbreviated by the first slant of sunlight over the horizon. In the cold, Illya feels as if he can breathe again, caught weightless between the old year and the new. The gradual waning of winter is a long slew of nothing days, neither dark nor light, and the coldest of the year. Illya finds that it suits him to exist in a space defined only by entropy.

It will have to end, of course. The sun must rise — Illya closes his eyes against the oblique blaze, already unbearably bright — and the year must turn onwards: another season, another show, another day. The only certainty is that of cessation. Illya knows better than to think that any of this will last.

For now, though, he can have it. For now, he can believe in miracles, and in secrets which are his alone, and in Napoleon's ability to make the impossible probable. After all, what they do relies on making art of a discipline which is arduous beyond all reason. More than that, they make it effortless. The idea of dance is simply that — at a certain time, in a certain place, with the lighting dimmed just so and a rising arpeggio to lend the moment loft — it suddenly becomes not only possible, but obvious, that one may take flight. It must become the easiest thing in the world to believe that one may step into the air and never need to alight.

Illya knows that he has not earned any of it: the easy weightlessness, the name graven in movement rather than marble, the way that Napoleon traces circles over his hipbones and the way that Napoleon looks limned by the lightest wash of dawn. Illya knows, and holds onto his certainty with all the desperate tenacity of someone whose center of gravity has just shifted. For all the absoluteness of his conviction, Napoleon makes Illya doubt himself; Napoleon always has, though never so dangerously. Napoleon makes Illya want to believe that he is wrong, and that something can come from nothing, and that Illya — for the sake of Napoleon's smile, and for the sake of waking up next to Napoleon, and for the sake of something greater than either of them — can be forgiven.

"Aren't you freezing?" Napoleon says, muffled, and Illya looks over his shoulder. Napoleon is wrapped in either a particularly flattering blanket or a coat which is far too big for him, pulled tightly around him; it turns out to be the latter when he uncrosses his arms, shivering.

"I like it," Illya says. "Everything is so much simpler like this."

"Colder, you mean," Napoleon says, and Illya unhooks his fingers from the gate, making room for Napoleon against his side. Even through heavy wool, Napoleon is warm, and Illya digs his fingers into the folds of fabric at Napoleon's shoulder, pulling him closer. "How long have you been out here?"

"Five minutes," Illya says, finally beginning to feel the cold, any initial resistance long since worn off. He shrugs. "I was fine before you got here."

“Please,” Napoleon says, and shivers his way somehow closer.

“All right,” Illya says. “I was freezing. Better?”

“Much,” Napoleon says, and tilts his face a half-degree up, breath a smudged plume, to kiss Illya, a point of clouded warmth in the crystalline air. Illya tugs Napoleon closer to drape his arm over Napoleon’s shoulder, and to hold him still by the throat, and the sunlight blooms crimson through his eyelids. Napoleon sighs, happy and greedy, into Illya’s mouth, and scratches at the back of his neck as if laying claim, and kisses Illya like a demonstration of ownership.

When they finally break apart, Napoleon lingers for a moment, lips kissed pink and slightly parted, with his eyes closed. Illya wonders how he could have ever thought of Napoleon as river ice: it is an impossibility, Illya thinks, looking at him now. It is simply unimaginable when Napoleon is so prettily flushed, and when the veins of his eyelids are so delicately blue and so evidently dynamic.

“I’ll see you in the studio,” Napoleon says, finally blinking, and scrubs at his eyes. “Don’t give yourself frostbite,” he adds. “I’d miss your hands.”

Blue lips, Illya thinks. Blue fingertips, like a half-real memory: he cannot pin down the recollection, and does not bother to pursue it. The curl of Napoleon’s breath reminds him, suddenly, of rising bubbles. Illya puts the thought from his mind almost as quickly as it occurs to him. “Don’t sleep through class,” he says, instead.

Napoleon gives him a half-wave in reply, already at the door. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he says, and then he is gone, leaving the courtyard an empty wash of sunlight.

Illya has not believed in anything in a very long time. He is prone to deference, but that bears as much resemblance to faith as theory does to practice. It is one thing to understand the mechanics of a step, and another entirely to know it, a matter of embodiment and intuition rather than observation. It is also, therefore, one thing to understand inevitability, and another to knowingly give one’s self over to it. Illya has been, for a very long time, resigned. In that light, the idea that he can be anything else is almost sacrilegious; Illya cannot consider it directly, in much the same way that he must force himself to keep his eyes open while looking into the sun.

It could, Illya supposes, simply be too sacrosanct for him to understand. It occurs to him that the possibility of belief, ironically, may be the most uncertain of all.

Such thoughts are precipitous, and of a magnitude almost beyond understanding. Illya blinks away the burnt-out sparks at the edges of his vision, and crosses the courtyard, back to work and the known territory of the studio.

If Illya does not let himself wholly believe, though, then neither does he deny himself the possibility.

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Napoleon does, after all, catch up with Illya after class, in the five minutes which they have been allotted for a break before moving to a different studio. In a week, they will be on the stage; the time constraints under which they are operating have become suddenly apparent, and Waverly is coping well by dint of simply increasing the pressure exerted on everybody else. They are working harder, and for longer hours, and there is an atmosphere of terror-stricken anticipation to all of them, from choreographer to corps. In the rush of the hallway, Napoleon somehow finds Illya, taking him by the elbow, and pulls him aside into the stairwell, out of the way of the flood of corps members and coryphées. "Listen," he says, once the door has closed behind them, and he leans against it. "Illya, come with me."

"Yes," Illya says, nonplussed. "Yes, what?"

"What?" Napoleon says, tilting his head in confusion, and stares at Illya as if they are suddenly speaking different languages. He shakes his head. "No, not here," he says, and straightens as much as he can. Somebody pushes against the door. "Busy!" Napoleon calls, and leans back again, feet braced. "Come with me when all of this is over," he says, and Illya blinks at him in confusion.

"Over?" Illya says, blankly.

"The show," Napoleon says, gesturing vaguely, as if the theater is not the entire world. "All of it. Defect," he says, as casually as if the word is just that, and not the sentence that it represents to Illya. "Waverly won't stop you. Come away, properly, with me," Napoleon says, as if it was the simplest thing possible, and not the world in the palm of his hand, offered to Illya as carelessly as one would give a sugar cube to a child. "Come see Milan," he says, "and Paris, and not just on tour: to stay, and to see properly. You would look so good in Paris." There is a wistfulness to Napoleon's voice, as if he can half-see it already. Illya should stop him; Illya, caught spellbound, cannot. "I want to see you in London in the fall," Napoleon says, impulsive and open, "and New York in the spring, and Santorini in any season at all. You're far too fine to leave here, Illya." Napoleon leans towards him, eyes alight. "Let me steal you away."

Illya should refuse. Illya should know better than to believe that this can go on forever, or that he can have any of it for longer than the space of a blink, or that any of this is more than Napoleon's pretty words: no more a lie than any of the spun stories that keep the sun rising in the east and the world turning on its axis.

"You can have it, Illya," Napoleon says. "Anything. For you, I would put the world on a silver platter. You, and me, and all the time in the world," he says, and Illya thinks, half-appalled at the idea, that he does not have to deny himself any of it. He can have this. None of this has to end, if he so chooses; Illya never has to come down, if he wants. If he lets himself, Illya can say yes.

Illya wants to, so badly that he is certain it must be writ large across his face, resonating through every line of his body. Napoleon smiles as if he already knows, or as if he had hoped, but had not been certain until just now.

“See?” Napoleon says, and tilts away from the door for just long enough to lay his hand on Illya’s cheek, catching him in a quick kiss. “It’s all yours,” Napoleon says, “if you want,” and then he is gone, door closing behind him. Illya is left standing in the empty stairwell, full of an optimism which he can only begin to understand, and overwhelmed, suddenly, by the possibility of a future.

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In rehearsal, Illya finds it impossible to focus. He can have this, he thinks; he can choose when he dances, and for whom, and where. If he lets Napoleon steal him — as simple as not saying no, as easy as giving in to the force of Napoleon’s charm and letting himself have what he wants so badly — Illya does not know what will happen next. For the first time in longer than he can remember, Illya will live in a world far vaster than he can imagine.

“Kuryakin, focus,” Waverly says. “You’re not at La Scala, remember. We don’t want to be too flippant about such weighty themes.”

“Sir,” Illya says, set alight by the secret thrill of it — La Scala! He can have La Scala — and finds it so simple, when he takes no shame from the rebuke, and sees it as no more than an instruction: he does better.

In the mirrors, he looks effortless in motion, and allows himself to slip ahead of the beat so that the apex of his jump is timed perfectly, a beautifully weightless pas de chat in the Russian style. Illya steals time, and gives it back in bravura combinations, intricate and impossibly substantial, and does the music more justice than it deserves, as if he is dancing through a dream. He never has to wake up, if he wants. Illya can have this forever — be this good, and this happy, and this hopeful — and he never has to give it back. It will never be taken from him.

“Now,” Waverly says, “up—”

—Illya steps into the air, and feels as if he never has to come down.

Napoleon watches him, a smile that only Illya can see on his lips. Illya thinks that now, if he wanted, he could simply disappear into the light, leaving nothing to show for it but silence. Now, he is weightless.

“Bravo,” Waverly says, and Illya realizes that he has come to a standstill, firmly grounded, and that he is gasping for breath, head held high and arms spread wide. “That’s more like it.”

Illya is not perfect, but he can see the possibility, glimmering just ahead of him like a single ray of light. He simply has to follow it to the source, and step into it, and let himself vanish.

He never has to give this away; it is his to keep. The dream of it — the light, and the music, and the ease of it all — never has to end.

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On the first morning that they are due to start on the stage, Illya wakes up.

At first, he is disoriented, and then he remembers: the weight on his ribs is Napoleon's arm, thrown over Illya as he sleeps, a reassurance and a restraint; the sun is only just beginning to rise, slanting between the slats of the blinds; he is dancing the part that he has always wanted, and that he has never been certain of earning; and he is going to defect, and he is going to let Napoleon steal him and keep him, like the most precious of crown jewels.

It is ridiculous. Illya realizes, as if he has been plunged headlong into ice water, exactly how absurd all of this is, as dreams go. Illya has not believed in anything with such certainty for a long time because he has not been capable of such earnestness since, as a child, it was taken from him, with everything else he held dear.

Illya is far too old for children's stories, let alone childlike faith. He is far too old to be tempted by cheap trinkets, or empty promises, no matter how pretty — the trinkets and the promises both — and he shifts, careful not to dislodge Napoleon from where he is curled against Illya's side. Illya has not survived for so long to be reduced to helplessness all over again by a charming smile and an open hand. By Napoleon, really: if it had not been Napoleon's smile, and Napoleon's hand, and Napoleon in Illya's bed, pressed warm against him, Illya thinks that he would have never allowed himself to go so far. Of course he cannot have this. Of course he is no longer a child. Of course the dream must end, and better sooner than later.

So he cannot have Paris, Illya thinks, at least not in the way that Napoleon wants it for him, to be staged around them like a changing set. So he cannot have Milan, or the Adriatic Sea, or Napoleon's New York apartment, small and overcrowded with mementos that are meaningless without Napoleon present to explain them. So he cannot have a miracle beyond understanding, something so vast that the entire world can see it: he can still have this, Illya thinks. He can still have Napoleon, for as long as they dance together, a small and secret wonder to keep beneath his breastbone for dark nights and empty days. Illya can be greedy and steal this for himself.

Napoleon, Illya thinks, is bad for him, in the same way that a man dying of starvation must not be allowed to gorge himself to the point of illness. Illya enjoys the simplicity of winter, and the way that it casts everything into perspective: this quality of wool to wear for a walk of this distance, this much time before the cold creeps in, this number of hours left of daylight before the dark returns. There is a richness to Napoleon that Illya cannot resist, but to which he is unsuited, exhilarating as the first breath of spring. For a finite number of weeks, Illya will live, then; for the sake of Napoleon's smile, and for the weight of Napoleon's head on his shoulder, and for the sake of perfection, Illya will be greedy, and then, presumably, he will somehow inevitably cease.

Illya has nothing to give away but himself. Next to Napoleon's vibrancy, and his vitality, he knows that he is a poor offering. All he has is everything, and that is far too little. Illya

knows, fundamentally, that this is not how love works, of course; he is not so credulous as to believe that it is anything but effort, and luck, and timing. For all the stories that he has heard where love is filtered through tragedy, or hindsight, or simply the crossing of ill-fated stars, Illya believes — a weakness, but one which he will never have to worry about again — that love should be simple, and worth working for, and worth a lifetime.

He and Napoleon are not people to whom the concept of love applies. They are dancers, and for them, that is the glass through which they see the world. Love, as seen through dance, is a lukewarm expression; they do not love dance, because love is simply not a sufficiently strong word. What they seek is something which will devour them, and leave them with less than nothing, and for which they will be unutterably grateful nevertheless. This is gravity: it is only fatal at the very last moment.

If Illya lies, then — if he is greedy, and selfish, and disinters all the worst parts of himself which he has buried over the years — he will be granted a transitory grace which he will one day be grateful to lose.

Illya can live with that.

Napoleon shifts, and Illya takes the opportunity to lift his arm gently and to slip from between the sheets. He dresses as quietly as he can, and leaves the blinds closed — a single small lie to begin with — and does not bother to leave a note. Napoleon will know where he is. Napoleon will find him.

As Illya turns away to leave, caught in the doorway, Napoleon sleepily murmurs something into the pillow that Illya cannot pretend that he has not heard.

Illya closes the door as quietly as he can, and pretends that he is not pierced through, walking wounded and aware that — this time — it is mortal.

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The stage, empty and blank and unmarked as of yet by tape, has the same exalted quality to it as a church: the fact of silence, and the illusion of eternity. Illuminated by the ghost light at center stage, and the spillage from the wings, the space could be mistaken for one twice as vast, and the empty seats actively full of shadows. Illya makes as little noise as possible, and moves carefully between curtains and heaters, scattered haphazardly and cold with inactivity. He cannot shake the feeling that he should have made some gesture of self-abnegation upon his approach, and that the space is crowded with ceremony; there are rules that he should know, and that he will break as a result of his unfamiliarity. The stage will turn against Illya: the proscenium will implode, and the wings contract, light and movement crushing him to nothing for his ingratitude and his scorn in the face of their hospitality.

One step, and the world has not yet fallen in; another, and Illya starts to breathe again, still tentative in his every movement, and certainly no less awed. If he wanted, he could dance, and prove his worth in that way. He has enough, now, that might be worth giving: the

vastness of the stage echoes through him, and resonates along his bones, and finds its match below his breastbone. There is a hunger to both of them, Illya and the stage, that once brought forth is impossible to quell, and with or without Napoleon present, Illya could earn his place here.

Without Napoleon, though, Illya thinks, it would be a waste. He could dance his feet into tatters, and grind his joints to disuse, and none of it would mean anything without Napoleon to drive him ever onwards and ever upwards. He could expend all of his brilliance — twice as bright for half as long; the words echo with the same hollow quality of his heartbeat — in one great burst. Without Napoleon present, frictionless and unchanging and intangible, Illya could burn himself to ash — to nothing — all to no avail.

Inevitably, of course, Napoleon will be gone. It is what Napoleon does, and what dancers do: they are living ephemera, built for transitivity rather than permanence. Illya is, no doubt, another one of Napoleon's amusements. For Illya, it might be the best week — month — season of his career; he might be dancing to a standard that he never has before, pushing himself harder and higher and better, but when it ends, Illya knows, certain to his core, that he will be left with nothing but the taste of ash in his mouth. For Napoleon, this is just another tour, another bagatelle, another broken heart. Illya's has long since ceased to beat, but he has no doubt that Napoleon will nevertheless take it when he leaves. Illya has learned: there is more than one way to break someone, and leave them hollow. The trick to it is in finding someone desperate beyond words and beyond knowing, and giving them what they want too badly to be able to understand, and too badly to turn down, and too badly to give back, after the fact, and letting it consume them from the inside out. It had not been the blindfold, and it is neither the choreography nor the competition that has brought out the best in Illya. It is Napoleon, and they are on opposite sides. It is very simple, in the end: he and Napoleon live in different worlds, and there is nothing to be done about it.

When he leaves, he feels the silence of the stage trailing around him, shroud-cloth and shadow, like a hollow sort of holiness: at once both benediction and condemnation, and entirely predestined, too great to struggle against, and too certain to be considered unjust.

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Transferring what Illya has learned in the studio to rehearsal on the stage is like placing the final piece of a puzzle; like checkmate; like falling perfectly into place. They will not be dancing through the work in its entirety for another few days, but Waverly starts them at the top nonetheless: the opening, followed by a divertissement inspired by exercices au milieu, and then the grand pas, once the corps has accumulated sufficient momentum, setting the stage for Napoleon's entrance.

It looks good, of course. More than good, it looks as if it is beyond reproach, which is really what matters; this will set a precedent, Illya knows, and one which will outlive them by dint of its circumstances alone. Waverly has always been aware of the stakes at hand, and so he has taken the opportunity to create a work of such significance that it will not be diminished if it is considered based solely on its own merits.

“Right,” Waverly calls, as the grand pas whirls to a halt, and the corps members immediately double over, stage suddenly crowded as they lose their grace and catch their breath. “Take five minutes, and we’ll run the first grand pas de deux; thank you, all.” He looks around for a moment before he catches sight of Illya, leaning against the proscenium arch, and crosses the stage. Illya pulls his knee up to his chest, making room for Waverly to stand, but does not rise himself. They both understand how this works; there is no point to the formality, not anymore. “My hope is that we’ll only have to run this once,” Waverly says, looking down at Illya, “or twice at the most, if you feel that you need it.”

“Sir,” Illya says, staring at a point just to the right of Waverly’s shoulder.

“Will you need it?” Waverly says.

“No, sir,” Illya says, meeting Waverly’s eyes, and Waverly nods, satisfied.

“Good,” he says, and smiles, no less opaque, but somehow more knowable now. Waverly carries himself in a way that indicates his understanding of the fact that, if he asks in just the right way, the world will rearrange itself to suit him. The trick, Illya thinks, watching Waverly walk away, is in knowing that, and in knowing better than to fight it. Illya lets his bent knees fall to the sides, and presses into the pull of the stretch, exhaling and folding over as far as he can. The trick, Illya thinks, is in knowing when to give up.

“Up,” Waverly calls from center stage, and Illya goes.

The rising action of their duet is endless, an escalation of tensions that Illya thinks will never end, though simultaneously he knows that it must. No matter how well he knows the choreography, the reality never ceases to beguile him. On, and on, and on: Napoleon circles Illya, and Illya provides the technique around which Napoleon may embellish; Illya catches Napoleon by the hand, ensnaring him for a single moment, before Napoleon whirls away; Napoleon is turning towards Illya, and towards him, and towards him, feet flickering in demi-pointe. Illya pulls Napoleon flush, and feels the shift of Napoleon’s body as he rises into arabesque, and then the finality of the movement as he plunges into poisson. For a moment, Napoleon hangs there, absolutely weightless, and then he looks back and catches Illya’s eye.

Illya loses, in a single moment, all of his previous certainty. It is not that he now thinks that he can keep Napoleon — he cannot, of course — or that he will be allowed to leave, or that his greed is uncomplicated. Illya simply realizes that, even after Napoleon is gone, he will have to continue. Illya does not have sufficient claim over himself to allow himself to cease, like the running down of a clockwork mechanism, or the dissipation of smoke. The worst that can — will, Illya thinks; the worst that will, now — happen to Illya is not that he must lie, and not that he must understand what he will lose, but the understanding that he must live through all of it, and keep going.

Napoleon will vanish into light. Illya must hold his breath, and listen for the sound of a footfall forever afterwards.

“Good,” Waverly says, not for the first time, and Illya sets Napoleon down, and relinquishes him with the thought that if he practices, at least, then perhaps it will not be so difficult to let him go when the time comes.



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At the end of the day, Napoleon lingers; Illya follows him out to the plaza and watches him rummage through his bag, finally producing a battered pack of cigarettes. Napoleon takes one and offers the other to Illya. “Last one,” he says. “From New York, for luck.”

Illya shakes his head. He does not want to waste time on smoking, although it is a pleasure — as always — to watch Napoleon take his time over the ritual of it. “It’s yours,” he says, and Napoleon shrugs.

“Suit yourself,” he says, and tilts his head back, blowing smoke up at the sky, efficient and neat. “In a rush?”

Napoleon knows that he is not, but Illya rises to the bait nevertheless, and so it is with a certain resignation that he says: “Never with you, Napoleon.”

“You’ll spoil me,” Napoleon says, and Illya realizes that he is being playful, and toying with Illya in a way that he would find captivating at any other time. There is an immediacy to the way that Illya wants Napoleon, now, and a sense that if he does not steal every last moment, his regret will be exponentially greater when it is all over. Napoleon narrows his eyes at Illya. “Sure you don’t want it?”

“Please,” Illya says, “can we go,” and the words tumble out of him as if he is trying to give all of them away at once, and has only succeeded in spilling them across the frozen cobbles. Napoleon is only certain because Illya is not, he knows. One day, Napoleon will know everything there is to know about Illya; one day, Illya will run out of secrets. If he keeps going like this, he might not last until the end of the show. Time is not on his side, anyway, and so Illya catches himself, immediately remorseful. “Sorry,” he says, under his breath, and looks down.

“No,” Napoleon says, and turns Illya’s face to his, hand on Illya’s cheek. “There’s no need for that, Illya, of course we can go.” He flicks the cigarette — only half-smoked — away, and Illya memorizes the movement as if by rote. “Illya,” Napoleon says, quietly, but the undercurrent in his voice is still there, and Illya thinks it will be easier to give in than to fight it. It is easier to give Napoleon what he wants, or expects; it is, after all, what Illya wants too. He wants an ember to cup in his palms against the cold. “Come on, then,” Napoleon says, and takes his hand, and leads him back inside, up and up the stairs until he closes the door of Illya’s room and pulls Illya close. “You’re trembling,” Napoleon says, as if wonderstruck, and Illya presses himself closer, hands spread on Napoleon’s back as if to somehow keep him. “Let me help,” Napoleon says, and leads Illya backwards a step at a time. “What can I do?” he asks, concern and coquettishness perfectly calibrated to slip between Illya’s ribs, and Illya thinks of the simple pain of burned palms.

“Anything,” Illya says, “you can do anything,” and Napoleon smiles.

“Let’s see,” he says, and pulls Illya down into a kiss, nails digging into the side of Illya’s neck, and then further still, pushing Illya to his knees. Napoleon sits on the edge of the bed, and considers Illya, who is suddenly conscious of his clothes — worn-out sweats, shirt torn at the shoulder — and says: “This can go.” He taps Illya’s shoulder, and rucks up Illya’s shirt at the waist, pulling it off and discarding it on the floor. “Better,” Napoleon says, and runs his hands over Illya’s shoulders, down his arms. “Behind your back,” he adds, and Illya complies, catching one wrist in the opposite hand, and aware of the way that the restriction pushes his chest forward and pulls his shoulders back. “Good,” Napoleon says, and looks as if he is considering the possibilities.

Illya waits, a flush already rising up his neck, already half-hard — obvious through the thin material of his pants — but Napoleon already knows, so what does it matter? Whatever Napoleon asks of him next, Illya will do.

“Close your eyes,” Napoleon says. “And don’t open them until I say.”

Illya meets Napoleon’s eyes for a half-second of hesitation, but it makes no difference. They both know that he will obey.

Illya closes his eyes, already breathing more quickly, and waits.

He does not have to do so for long before he is rewarded for his patience with a touch, trailing up the inside of his thigh and lingering just before the join of his hip. Illya hisses between his teeth, and jerks towards the contact, and Napoleon laughs and does not stop, pressure increasing until Illya is rigid with tension. “All right,” Napoleon says, and shifts, and Illya rocks up against him before he can stop himself, choking back a gasp. Something is off — something makes no sense — about the angle of Napoleon’s voice, and the increasing pressure, but Illya is too far gone to understand anything beyond the way that he is instinctively disquieted, and entirely desperate besides, barely holding himself in check as Napoleon teases, his touch far too light to be satisfying. Illya whines, deep in his throat, and Napoleon laughs, quiet and satisfied.

“There you are,” Napoleon says, and he scratches through Illya’s hair, and he is pulling Illya close — and his hands are in Illya’s hair — and if his hands, Illya thinks, leaning into Napoleon’s touch nonetheless — if Napoleon has not moved — “There,” Napoleon says, again, and presses a kiss to Illya’s forehead, and hums against his skin, and presses harder, and Illya pushes up against Napoleon’s foot, the arch and the slide of it, as sudden awareness blazes through him; he tries to hide his face, and the scorching flush in his cheeks, against the angle of Napoleon’s knee.

“Let me see,” Napoleon says, though, and twists his fingers into Illya’s hair for purchase, tipping Illya’s face up and baring his throat. “Look at me, Illya,” he says, and Illya’s eyes are stinging with the force of Napoleon’s grip and his own humiliation, but he does, and Napoleon sighs in pleasure. “If you could see yourself,” he says, satisfied, and Illya chokes, eyes falling closed again. He can imagine how he looks, unspeakably debauched and loving every moment of it. Illya has no doubt that, more than used, he looks absolutely obscene, Napoleon holding him in place as he gasps for it. “Let me,” Napoleon says, low and sweet, and strokes Illya’s nape and the angle of his jaw. “Let me, Illya, come on, let me see you,” Napoleon says, low and rough and certain, and Illya does, shaking as if he is coming to

absolute pieces, so hard that it hurts. Napoleon watches, avaricious and enthralled, and Illya does not look away.

“There you are,” Napoleon says again, “there,” and he lets Illya turn away, finally, and close his eyes, and press his face into the inside of Napoleon’s knee. Napoleon strokes Illya’s jaw, hyoid to hinge, and he runs his hands over Illya’s shoulders, gentling and firm. “There,” he says, and Illya turns his face up to Napoleon, no less desperate, and rests his hand on Napoleon’s knee. His shoulders ache, and his eyes are still stinging; he must look an absolute wreck.

“Please,” Illya says, still looking up, “may I,” and Napoleon leans back to look at him, one hand still at Illya’s throat.

“Of course,” he says, as if any other answer would be unthinkable. “Illya, of course,” Napoleon says, and he falls back to one elbow, and lets Illya tug at his waistband, and watches through half-closed eyes as Illya gives, gives, gives.

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It is not the sun which wakes Illya.

The blinds are open, but the sky is only just beginning to lighten. He looks at the ceiling with unfocused eyes, and lets the unquiet silence — the faint creaking of a pipe, the sound of a distant engine, the steady rhythm of Napoleon’s breathing — remain unbroken. Illya knows that if he waits for long enough, something will happen. He will tire of waiting, or Napoleon will wake up, or at the very least the sun will rise. No matter how still Illya lies, the world will keep turning, carrying him onward with it. He cannot escape the petty progression of tomorrows: when taken in their totality, a lifetime, and one which will be worn away a day at a time. One day, Illya will run out of time, and he will be left with nothing, not even his health, with which to shore up his remaining moments against the dying of the light.

Until then, Illya thinks, there is only one thing which he can do — which he knows how to do — to leave himself a little brightness for later. He will not defect, and become inconsequential; he will not play at personhood, and be left even less of one when he fails; he will not mistake the hold that Napoleon has around his throat — far beneath skin and muscle; a matter of marrow — for any more sustainable sentiment, simultaneously far less substantial.

Illya will dance, and he will do it so well that the world will never forget him as he is now — perfect, and possible, and with endless promise — and then he will do it again, and again, for as long as he is able, and perhaps one day when the light has begun to fade he will wake up and find himself free. Perhaps one day he will wake up in a world which has learned how to be, if not kind, at least slightly less cold.

Perhaps one day Illya will find it in himself to take Napoleon up on his promises: of New York, and Paris, and Milan, and summer on the Aegean, and the world in the palm of his

hand. Perhaps Illya is not the only one who has found himself caught as if he is hooked beneath the ribs, snagged in a way that means that — yes, certainly — he will never get free, but perhaps Napoleon never will, either. A certain quality of light, a certain style of movement, a certain look in the eyes: perhaps this is the secret, invisible to anybody else, of Napoleon's hold on Illya, or perhaps it is simply a fundamental similarity between them that neither can articulate, but that they both recognize as a matter of instinct. Perhaps Illya will see Napoleon across an airport, one day, in the liminal space of a border crossing, and will find it in himself to allow Napoleon this one last indulgence, and will let Napoleon steal him away.

By the time that the first meniscus of sunlight is visible over the horizon, barely any more a convexity than a point of gold, Illya is dressed. He closes the blinds, and looks around the room, memorizing it: a little luminosity to keep.

On Illya's way out, he palms the crumpled pack of cigarettes, now only one remaining, from the windowsill. Napoleon's last, from New York: it will have to last him for a very long time, in that case, Illya thinks. He lights it by the gate in the courtyard, and watches the overlapping shadows cast by the rising sun and the changing quality of the light.

The sun is above the horizon by the time that Illya has smoked the cigarette down to its filter, though it is not quite visible over the buildings on the other side of the street just yet. The morning is clear and bright, and Illya fills his lungs with the crisp cold air until the taste of smoke has, for the most part, faded. Napoleon must, by now, be stirring; Illya should not let him wake up alone, while he still can. Illya should put away these moments against the eventual shortening of the day, as inevitable a recurrence as the sunrise. Illya should lay them away so that he has them to hold close against the cold, when it returns.

It will be winter again someday.

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## CODA

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Opening night, and Illya, standing in the wings and waiting in the dark, watches, and thinks: can anybody own that? The way that Napoleon moves, like a forest fire, like a crashing wave;

nobody can have that, not even him. One day Napoleon will simply disappear into the light, Illya thinks, a hollow admission as he follows the spot, the dust glittering in the beam of it, and he will leave everyone too wonderstruck to grieve. Is it not better that way? Is it not better, Illya thinks, that Napoleon will never see him grow old, body crumbling and spirit already gone, and that for him, and for the world, Napoleon will live on like this forever?

It is a kindness that Illya does not deserve. He has another ten years left to him upon the stage, if he is lucky, and he will never have another season as good as this, and he will never have the way that Napoleon looks at him again, as if he is trying to catch a thought at the corner of his eye, as if Illya is a puzzle too beautiful to solve. One day, he thinks, perhaps, he will wake up, but until then, he can have this. Ten years are more than worth dowering away his life a second at a time, and feeling the cold creeping up with each one gone. Ten years, Illya thinks, will give him enough of the spotlight's radiance to last him a lifetime in the dark: ten years of brilliance, and ten years of agony, and ten years of —

— Napoleon is aloft; Napoleon is all that Illya can see, stage narrowing down to a single vanishing point; Napoleon is perfect, and his hand is outstretched, and his eyes are alight with the spotlight's incandescence. The music swells and the lights turn and the corps fades into the crowd, and Illya thinks that happy endings were never particularly his style, anyway. Napoleon is too dynamic for this to go any other way. They do not live in a world, or a time, that is conducive to such indulgences. They do not belong to themselves, but rather to the service of a greater beauty — the perfect line of body and broken bone — and here Napoleon is, and Illya lets his body lead him, memory and instinct and the compulsion of a story that has been told so many times that it lends its own weight to the movement.

Illya steps out of the wings, and the roar of the crowd, and the flood of light, burns through him, leaving him lighter than air. Napoleon is looking up at him, and Illya cannot look away; even in stillness, he can see nothing of the stage but a motion blur, and the traces of Napoleon's passing. Even on an empty stage, Illya thinks, this is all that he will ever be able to see again.

He takes his first step.

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