

## Paint. There lies salvation

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13488474) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13488474>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">The Man From U.N.C.L.E. (2015)</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Illya Kuryakin/Napoleon Solo</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Illya Kuryakin</a> , <a href="#">Napoleon Solo</a> , <a href="#">Gaby Teller</a> , <a href="#">Alexander Waverly</a> ( <a href="#">mentioned</a> )
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Fluff</a> , <a href="#">Domestic Fluff</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Modern Era</a> , <a href="#">AU where Napoleon has retired</a> , <a href="#">And is now an arts professor</a> , <a href="#">And all his students are curious about his mysterious husband</a> , <a href="#">Established Relationship</a> , <a href="#">Illya and Napoleon are married</a> , <a href="#">they have a dog</a> , <a href="#">All the tropes you were warned about</a> , <a href="#">Mild Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">London Riots</a> , <a href="#">London terror attack</a> , <a href="#">Both off-screen</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of <a href="#">Ceci n'est pas un espion</a>
Stats:	Published: 2018-01-26 Completed: 2018-03-19 Words: 30,651 Chapters: 11/11

# Paint. There lies salvation

by [ScribeofArda](#)

## Summary

*Art defines humanity, and humans never want to be alone, even if the only other person accompanying them is themselves staring back from their canvas.*

The Cortauld Institute, London, is full of the brightest art students in the country. Still, they will take any distraction from the impending doom of finals that they can get. The new Modernism professor, Solo, is more than easy on the eyes, but what makes it even better is the elusive husband that none of them ever see. The only proof is the ring on Solo's finger, and the few stories they manage to get him to tell. It can only get more interesting from there.

Napoleon just wants a quiet life to enjoy his retirement from UNCLE, teaching art history at university and dabbling in a few heists on the side when Gaby sends them his way. There's been a wedding ring on his finger for years now, a matching one on Illya's, and all he wants to do is live out his life with the man he loves. But things are never as simple as that, and neither of them have been left unharmed by the games they had to play.

*They never really leave the game. But there are worse things than to fade into obscurity, leaving only the art behind.*

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

So this initially began as a sequel to the Tour de France AU that still isn't done, and spiralled into 30k of a completely different story.

This happens more often than it should.

Anyway, this is my first go at writing a TMFU AU, so enjoy! It is told mostly from the PoV of one of the students, because I didn't intend for this to get so long, and once I'd started I couldn't change it without rewriting everything and basically writing a new story. I hope it doesn't annoy people- there are some very sweet moments that I couldn't have written without this outside PoV.

You do not need to know anything about art to read this story. Heck, I know very little about art, I'm studying chemistry at an all-sciences university, and I wrote this. If you do know a lot about art, then I apologise for the likely errors.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Who the hell is Professor Solo?”

Cassie glances down at her phone, flicking through the calendar until she reaches the lecture they're meant to have next. Sure enough, the name there is *Professor N. Solo*, teaching their next lecture course, *Modernism in Paris, 1874-1914*. “New professor?” she asks her friend. “I haven't heard anything about him.”

Her friend shrugs. “Give me a sec, I'll google him,” she says, and she's already opening up Google on her phone. Cassie reaches her out and steers her round a corner, and by the time they get to the lecture hall she has his bio up on her phone. “Yeah, he's new,” she says as they walk in and find some seats. “PhD from Cambridge, apparently.”

“What do you mean, apparently?” Cassie points out. “That's his bio. He's not going to lie on it.” She reaches over and takes the phone. “No picture, then. He's probably some old white man, with that name.”

The class settles down, people pulling out laptops and pads of paper and various brightly coloured highlighters. There's a low murmur throughout the room. It's halfway through the third year of the course, and none of the students in the room are intimidated by the Cortauld Institute anymore. They're mostly freaking out over the fact that this is their final year, and they have essays and exams and reading and absolutely no social lives.

The moment that Professor Solo walks into the room, everyone falls silent.

“Sorry I’m late, this place is a maze,” the professor is saying as he sets his satchel down on the table and digs out a laptop. “For those who haven’t looked at their timetables yet, which is probably not any of you, seeing as you made it here, I’m Napoleon Solo. Please call me Solo, not Napoleon. I’m teaching modernism in Paris, and I’ll be chucking some other stuff in there, because you’re all in your final year and life isn’t difficult enough already for you lot.”

He grins, and there are audible gasps from around the room. Cassie briefly glances around the room, and half the people look like they’re almost drooling as they stare at him. “Fuck,” her friend whispers to Cassie as Solo leans back against the table and flicks through his laptop, finding the right lecture slides. “He’s hot.”

On the desk in front of her, her phone lights up with a new message. It’s on the group chat for their class, and she has to stop herself laughing when she sees that someone has just written *OH SHIT*. Almost instantly, there are notifications popping up of people posting GIFs. She doesn’t even have to open the group chat to know they’ll all be various GIFs of exploding hearts and women collapsing from the sheer hotness of him. She stifles another laugh, and tries to pay attention as Professor Solo starts to talk. This class is going to be interesting.

0-o-0-o-0

What makes it worse, she thinks at gone midnight whilst she’s still trying to finish an assignment, is that he’s an excellent lecturer. Modernism is interesting anyway, and the vague subject she’s thinking of pursuing for her Masters, but Solo keeps everyone awake, even on a Monday morning. She’s pretty sure that people who don’t even take final year Modernism have sat in on some lectures, just to confirm the rumours spreading around the Institute.

There’s been dispute already about whether he’s single or not, which personally she finds a bit weird. Their lectures are small enough that it’s pretty interactive, and half the time they’re in a gallery itself, with Solo talking about the art whilst standing right in front of it, asking their opinions every few minutes. It’s surprisingly hard to draw him off topic, and she gets the sense that there’s a sharp intelligence behind those smiles and sarcastic remarks. Still, he’s older than most of them, probably around his forties, and she thinks it’s weird to talk about anyone like that, let alone their professor.

It isn’t until the second week of lectures with him when a blurry photo of him is posted to the group chat. *HE’S WEARING A RING*, is the next message, and the chat promptly explodes. Eventually, with some sneaky use of phones, there is clear photographic evidence that Solo is, in fact, wearing a wedding ring. Cassie wonders how, in a room of supposedly intelligent people, nobody thought to look for that before.

Of course, the gossip inevitably turns to who his spouse is. They’re in the middle of London, and pretty much all of them are in their early twenties, so there’s a significant portion of the class voting for husband on the poll that someone set up. Given time, Cassie knows this will develop into an actual bet, though they bet working hours, notes, essay structures and answers to past exam questions, or alcohol, all of which are more valuable than money to them.

Some students try and draw the answer out of him. “Doing anything interesting this weekend?” someone asks on a Friday as they’re all packing away after the last lecture. “Any plans?”

Solo huffs a brief laugh, and shakes his head. “I have your work to be marking,” he points out. “And some of my own research to be getting on with. Let me guess, you’re all going out clubbing?” His expression doesn’t seem to change, but there’s a vague sense of displeasure about the idea.

Someone else scoffs. “We’re final years,” he says. “We don’t have time to go out clubbing. We have your essays to write.”

Solo hums. “Yes, and I think you should all be getting on with that this weekend, don’t you?” he says. “Also, I don’t want all of you just focusing on Cézanne for that essay I set earlier this week. Branch out, find your own artists to support your points. If they’re obscure, that’s fine. If they’re not, that’s also fine, but I don’t want you leaning on the well-known artists just because it’s easier and there’s more writing on them. You all need to start thinking on your own.”

There’s a general groan around the lecture hall, and Solo smirks. “I never said I would be easy on you lot,” he points out. “Like you said, you’re final years. You need a push now and then.”

It’s only after they’ve left and Cassie is sat in her apartment, staring at her Modernism textbooks, that she realises just how easily Solo deflected their questions about his life. It didn’t even seem like he realised he was doing it.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t have enough time to dwell on her professor’s private life, seeing as he’s turning out to be particularly ruthless with his marking and commentary. She knows that it’s because they’re approaching writing their dissertations, knows that she has to push herself to be as good as she can be, but it doesn’t stop her cursing him as she struggles through yet another essay.

## Chapter End Notes

The title is a quote from Cezanne, a Parisian modernist.

In case it isn't clear, the Courtauld Institute is a leading university in art and art history, in the middle of London. They're very selective, only taking something like 80 people every year, but they're one of the best in their areas. I don't know how other universities in other countries work, but this is the closest approximation to how the Courtauld works in real life, based on research and my own experience of British university.

Chapters will be up somewhat regularly, seeing as I have finished exams now! And they will get longer, this fic turned out to be just over 30k somehow...



## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

So the structure of this story isn't what I'd normally write- there are a bunch of shorter little snippets, which were the original foundations of this story, what I'd always intended to write, and then a few chapters from now there'll be one long sequence that spreads out over a couple of chapters. That's where the story snowballed away from me and got completely out of control...

Again, you don't need to know anything about art or history of art to read this- I don't know anything, and I wrote this! Thanks for all the great responses so far.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Solo is leaning against the desk at the front of the lecture hall, long legs stretched out in front of him, and Cassie is sure that about half the room is drooling at the sight.

“Now, we can’t look at Paris in isolation,” Solo is saying as he fiddles with his laptop to pull up a presentation. “Anyone want to hazard a guess as to what greatly affected modernism in Europe in the early twentieth century?”

There’s a pause. “World War One,” someone calls out, and Solo nods.

“Precisely. Whilst we’ve been focusing more on late nineteenth century, we’re going to jump ahead somewhat, because I want to talk about the war and what impact it had on any artist alive at the time.” He finally gets his laptop working, and the first picture up is a faded black and white photo of a marred field, barbed wire twisting across it. There are dead soldiers lying in the foreground of the shot, and Cassie sees a couple of people grimace.

“I don’t think anyone can truly understand the horrors of being there,” Solo says, and his voice has suddenly gone quiet and serious. “Of what it was to wake up next to your friend one day and see them blown up by artillery the next. I could give a whole lecture course on this, and how art was affected by the war, but we don’t have time for that.”

The next picture up is of a young man in uniform. “Who is this?” he asks, and there’s quiet for a few long seconds. Cassie glances around, but nobody seems to be answering.

“Wilfred Owen,” she calls out. Solo searches for her in the room, and then nods at her.

“Precisely,” he says. “The poet Wilfred Owen was just one of many who was incredibly affected by the war. If you went to a British school, you studied him. It’s high school English teachers’ favourite topic.” There’s a ripple of laughter from those in the room who went to British schools, and who know the pain of studying war poetry for years upon years. Solo’s

lips quirk in a smile, and the group chat chimes again. She doesn't need to look at it to know it's someone talking about that damn smile.

"On an interesting side note," Solo says, pulling up a couple of Owen's poems on the screen, "a lot of his works were collected by the other famous war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, who was probably his lover, after his death a week before the Armistice. Owen looked up to Sassoon, as soon as they met in hospital during the war, and they wrote to each other constantly, up until Owen's death. According to close friends at the time, Sassoon was never the same after finding out he'd died."

There's a cough from the back of the room, and a murmured snort of *gay*. Cassie cringes at that, and shrinks into her chair slightly.

To her surprise, Solo pauses, and when he turns to face the room his lips are a thin line. The expression on his face makes her want to sit up and straighten her back, and she can't quite work out why the anger in his expression is so chilling.

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend like I didn't hear that," Solo says, his voice flat. The room has fallen silent. "I would like to know why a man losing someone he loved and never quite recovering from it deserves a snort of derision and a muttered word meant as an insult. Anyone care to explain?" He leans back against his desk, crossing his arms, and arches a brow. "No?"

"You are all intelligent, open-minded people," Solo says, and now he just sounds disappointed, which makes her feel even worse. "I expect better from you, whoever said that, and I expect better from anyone who has ever heard someone use *gay* as an insult and said nothing. This damn world is growing more divided by the second, and I will not have the students I teach feeding it in any way."

Solo pauses, and seems to weigh his next words carefully. "On a more personal note, I don't like my sexuality being used as an insult," he says, and there's a tangible ripple of shock that echoes through the room. The smile on Solo's face is cold and mirthless. "Yes, it's never personal until it is, is it? Tonight, I will have to go home to my husband and explain to him that one of the students I teach decided that our sexuality is a good enough insult to use in class. It won't be a fun conversation."

There's a palpable tinge to the class now, a mix of fear and apprehension and possibly regret. Solo nods to himself. "Next time you throw out a random comment like that," he says. "Think about it first. Think about someone sitting there who is questioning their sexuality, wondering if it's acceptable to be who they are, who hears you use the word they're trying to become comfortable with as an insult. Just think about that. And then don't open your damn mouth at all."

Cassie watches as he breathes out, and then turns back to the board. "Let's move on."

She can't quite concentrate for the rest of the lecture, even if the subject is interesting enough, and Solo puts enough details into the war to somehow make the grief and weariness palpable. There's a strange flicker of something deep in her stomach.



She hangs around as the lecture finishes, waving off a couple friends with promises to meet them in the library. Slowly the room empties, the last few students trickling out. Solo is by the desk, packing up his laptop and sorting through a folder of what looks like lecture notes for his next class. He glances up when she loiters near the desk.

“Cassie, right?” he asks. “You’re going to be in my workshop class from next month, I think.”

She nods, her mouth suddenly dry. She twists the strap of her bag in her hand, and Solo frowns. “Is everything okay?” he asks. “Do you need something?”

“I...I just wanted to say thank you,” she blurts out, trying to stop her heart from racing so fast it jumps out of her chest and wraps itself around her throat. “For saying that, earlier. It, uh, it meant a lot. Not many professors around here would do that.”

Solo’s lips twist. “Well, I’d hope that some would,” he says. “But anyways, I wouldn’t have done anything else. I grew up in public school in America in the eighties, and you can imagine how homophobic that could get at points. My husband and I were only legally allowed to marry a few years ago, and in his home country, it’s still illegal.” He shrugs. “I’m not going to let a comment like that go, however harmless some people might think it is.”

She nods. “Well, thanks again,” she says. “I’ve been that kid, sitting in class and wondering whether it’s okay, so...thanks.”

Solo smiles, and it’s a genuine smile that has her lips curling in response. “It was honestly quite fun to shut whoever the idiot was down,” he says, and his smile takes on a wicked curve. “If I find out who it is, well...officially, nothing will happen. Unofficially, I might mix up the workshop rotas a bit. Even if I haven’t been here long, I still know which professors you guys hate to have for workshops.” He huffs a laugh, and glances at his watch. “I’ve got to get going, but I’ll see you in class tomorrow. I have freshers to scare with architecture.”

He waves a hand over his shoulder as he strides out the room, and Cassie takes a breath before leaving. Her phone is buzzing again, and she pulls it out to see, predictably, the group chat going off again.

*He has a husband!!!!* is the first thing she sees, followed by various people gushing over how much hotter that makes him. Her lip curls in a grimace as she sees that, and she’s not sure what makes her type out her own message and send it before she really thinks about it.

*His sexuality isn’t something to fetish, guys*, she writes quickly. *Neither is mine. Fuck off.*

0-o-0-o-0

Slowly but surely, over a few months, they begin to learn a little more about Napoleon’s husband. Half the class seem to have some slight obsession over finding out as much as they can, perhaps as a distraction of the impending doom of finals. So far, they’ve worked out that he’s European, he works for the Civil Service in some role, and that he’s much more organised than Solo, but puts up with Solo’s special brand of disorganisation that only makes sense to Solo and nobody else.

Cassie has seen Solo's office during workshops, and can confirm that only Solo would ever be able to find something in there. It's a mess, research papers and notes in stacks on his desk, books in piles around the room. They're not even all relevant to the Institute, because she's certain she's seen some Terry Pratchett novels hidden amongst art books on neo-modernism and history books on everywhere from nineteenth century Paris to the tenth century Byzantine empire.

She's in his office for a workshop, four of them sitting around the table discussing Mondrian's *View from the Dunes with Beach and Piers, Domburg*, when a book open on Solo's desk catches her eye. Solo sees her looking at it, and he grins.

"I know, not your typical reading," he says, picking the book up and handing it over. She takes it, reading through the blurb on the back. The front cover is an image of some war-torn field that looks like it's from the Second World War, and the title is merely three words: *Lost in War*.

"I have a...professional interest in stolen art, I suppose you could say," Solo says as she hands the book back. "Specifically, art plundered in wars. It's a fascinating topic." He flicks through the book, a slight smile curling his lips as he does so. "My husband bought me this for Christmas three years ago. It's about art pieces that have been stolen and never found again. An inside joke, of sorts."

"Does he like art?" someone asks, jumping at the opportunity to find out more.

Solo scoffs. "He puts up with it for me," he replies. "But he's more of a...sciences person, I suppose." He huffs a laugh to himself at some other inside joke. "He knows I love it, and that's enough." He sets the book back down on his desk. "If you want to look into the subject, then there's a few copies of *Lost Lives*, *Lost Art* in the library here that are about the art the Nazis stole from Jewish collectors in the Second World War. Very interesting read."

There's a pause, and a seemingly silent conversation between the students around the desk. "So, does your husband work in the sciences then?" someone eventually asks. "Doesn't that make for arguments over who is doing the more important work? My sister is at Imperial reading physics and we're always arguing over who's degree is more relevant."

Solo laughs. "No, it's more of a hobby of his," he replies. "But we both know that his job is far more important than mine, so it all works out okay in the end." He leans against his desk, and picks up a print out of the painting they're meant to be discussing. "Not that I don't think teaching you lot is important," he adds absentmindedly as he studies the picture. "Anyway, back to where we left off. Anyone have anything insightful to say about the colour composition of this, or are you all silently dying inside because you have no idea what's going on?" At their mildly surprised expressions, he laughs. "I was a student too, once," he reminds them. "I too had no idea what was going on half the time. And I was in an American college- university, I mean- which are far worse than here, sometimes."

She frowns at that. "I thought you went to Cambridge?" she asks.

If she hadn't been looking right at him, she might have missed the brief flicker of surprise that crosses his face at that. After a second, though, it's gone, and Solo shrugs. "For my

doctorate, yes, but I went to Stanford for my undergraduate,” he says easily. “California is a weird place.” He clears his throat. “Anyway, back to doing some actual work. Please tell me someone has some ideas on the colour composition of this painting.”

For the rest of the day, she can’t shake that brief flicker of surprise that had crossed Solo’s face in the workshop, that slight undercurrent that something was ever so slightly off, even though he hadn’t hesitated before clarifying where he’d studied. She wonders about it for the rest of the day, but eventually the stress of finals and coursework and essays chases it from her mind, and she forgets it easily enough.

0-o-0-o-0

When everyone comes back after the Easter holidays, the entire Institute is buzzing with the news. She barely gets three feet in the doors before a friend is rushing to her side. “Did you hear?” he asks.

“About the painting stolen in Vienna?” she asks. “Yes. Of course I have. It’s literally all anyone is talking about here.”

“I still can’t believe they got away with it!” her friend exclaims as they walk through the halls of the Institute. “Right out of a private collection, and in the middle of the city as well! I wish I knew how they did it.”

“Think the painting will ever turn up?” she asks, and her friend shrugs.

“I have no idea,” he says. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

They have a workshop later that day with Solo, and it’s as they’re sitting around the table that someone suddenly pauses. “Hey, Solo, didn’t you say you were going on holiday in Vienna over Easter? Were you there when that painting was stolen?”

Solo laughs. “I was, actually. My husband worked over Christmas and New Year, so we both took Easter off, and as a favour to me his boss gave us tickets to the opera in Vienna. The museums and galleries there are some of the best in Europe as well.”

“Did you see anything?” someone blurts out. “About the painting, I mean?”

Solo arches a brow. “Vienna is a very large city,” he says. “With a lot of people. What do you think are the chances of an art professor there for five days on holiday running into the person who stole that painting?”

“But imagine if you had,” someone else says, a grin on their face. “Imagine the headlines. *Hero art professor prevents multi-million art robbery*. We’d certainly get more funding for the Institute then.”

Solo’s lips quirk in a smile. “Yes, well I’m not quite sure how I’d apprehend the burglar,” he says, sounding mildly amused by the whole thing. “I am an arts professor, after all. Sorry to disappoint.”

They turn back to the questions at hand for the workshop, but it takes her a few minutes to shake the quirk of his lips, how he looks amused at something they don't know about or understand. As they're leaving, she lingers slightly, packing away her bag. Solo drops into the chair at his desk, and then his phone buzzes.

He picks it up, and a slow smile spreads across his face. "Peril," he says, drawing the word out. "How's work?"

She finishes packing her bag, and Solo waves absentmindedly at her as she heads for the door. "No, don't be ridiculous," he says to whoever is on the other end of the phone as she shuts the door behind her. She just catches the end of his conversation. "This will cheer you up, though. Guess what I was just asked about by my students?"

She doesn't hear any more of the conversation, but she spends a good few minutes wondering about it, until the next lecture puts it from her mind. Three weeks later, and there's a quiet article in the newspaper about the man who owned the private collection being arrested for some vague crimes that aren't quite described, uncovered when investigators were looking into the stolen painting. She sees the newspaper sitting on Solo's desk, open to that article, but thinks nothing of it.

## Chapter End Notes

Solo telling off the entire class for someone using 'gay' as an insult is probably a bit of me living vicariously through my writing, because damn, I wish someone had done that when I was at school. Anyone in British high school will have studied war poetry, and will have studied Wilfred Owen. I haven't been in an English class for four years now, and I could still quote parts of Owen's poems from memory. And yep, Sassoon probably was his lover. History is more gay than they tell you, kids.

Yes, Illya bought Napoleon a book about stolen art for Christmas. What the students can't see is that he annotates the book with which heists he thinks Napoleon is responsible for (it gets more stupid as the book goes on). The book *Lost Lives, Lost Art* is a real book, by the way. And yeah, Napoleon is completely lying about going to Stanford University. It will all get explained later.

Finally, of course Napoleon stole that painting in Vienna, and it was Gaby who sent them there- Illya is still working for UNCLE, of course. Napoleon and Illya consider that sort of thing an actual vacation.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

So I have some good news- as of last night, the Tour de France AU has been completed! I have to do a final read through tonight, to check it all, but at the moment it stands at 82,074 words and probably won't change much from that after the read through! So no worries, I'm not going anywhere for a while (I'm already thinking about a sequel to this story as well, though not from an outside PoV- this was hard enough to write, I'm not doing another like it for a while).

This is another chapter of smaller moments- next chapter is where it starts stepping up a bit. This chapter does, however, contain descriptions of a mild panic attack, so please be careful if you need to.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The weeks pass, and finals draw near. Solo finishes his lecture course, and though she is in his workshops for a while longer, eventually they're all just permanently living in the library, trying their best to remember what the hell they've even learnt over the three years they've been here. She sees him occasionally around the Institute, but not often, and eventually she learns from a PhD student that he's going back and forth between here and Paris at the moment, on something for his own research.

It's two weeks before the deadline for their dissertations, and on top of that, she has suddenly realised that if she wants to apply for a Master's degree at the Institute, she needs to have a written recommendation from one of the professors. She pulls her laptop towards her in the library, and hastily types out an email to Solo. She could pick other professors, but he actually knows her fairly well by this point, and she thinks he'll write a good recommendation, seeing as it's Modernism she wants to do her Master's in.

It isn't until she's already sent the email that she sees the new one in her inbox, from Solo. *To all, it states. Due to a family emergency, I will not be around for the next week, and possibly beyond. You can contact me via email if it's urgent, but please no random questions that another professor could answer. You'll all do fine in the exam, you're decent students. Solo.*

She winces, and wishes she'd read that before sending her email, but there's nothing she can do now. She puts it aside, and focuses on neatening up a paragraph about the impact of LGBT culture on a specific sect of Modernism in Paris.

She almost forgets all about it, until her phone chimes with a new email that evening. She flicks it open by habit, and there's a slight stab of guilt when she sees it's from Solo. It's probably going to tell her to ask another professor for the recommendation and leave him alone, but she opens it anyway.

*Cassie, it says. I can write you a recommendation, I have some time at the moment, but I don't quite know what is best to say in it, as I don't know enough about what you want to do. It would be easier for you to call me anytime this evening, before 11pm, or tomorrow evening instead.*

His number, his mobile number, is below, and she swallows a lump of nerves in her throat before dialling and shoving the headphones in her ears. It rings for a while, long enough for her to just consider hanging up, but she grits her teeth and hangs on.

There's a click. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Professor Solo?" she asks. "It's Cassie. You said I could call--"

"About the recommendation, right," Solo says. His voice sounds weary, she can hear that even over the phone, and she can hear something in the background that makes her think that he's not on his own. "Give me a minute, I'll pull the forms and everything up on my laptop."

"If this is a bad time..." she says hesitantly. "I did see your email about the...the family emergency, but I'd already sent you the email about the recommendation? Anyway, I can just ask someone else, it's fine, you don't need to deal with this."

There's a tired huff of laughter over the phone. "Honestly," Solo says, "I could use the distraction right about now. Tell me what you're thinking about for your Master's. It doesn't have to be exact, but it'll give me an idea for what I can write about."

Cassie pauses, but then starts talking hesitantly about the things she's been thinking about over the past few months, ideas for avenues of research and potential threads that are barely formed but tumble from her lips anyway. Solo is mostly quiet, interjecting every so often with some comment about the process and the research, but she can hear him typing over the phone.

About fifteen minutes into the call, Solo is halfway through talking about the possible ways to narrow down a broad field of research when his voice abruptly cuts off. "Give me a minute," he says quickly, and then she can just hear the rustle of fabric over the phone. There's a soft beeping sound, and then she can just about hear Solo.

"Hey, easy now," he murmurs to someone else, and she feels like she should hang up and not listen in, but there's not much she can do except wait. "It's okay," Solo murmurs, and then abruptly he's not speaking in English anymore. If she had to guess, it sounds like Russian or an Eastern European language, in that same soft voice. There's more rustling, and then the barest murmur of an answer that she can't make out beyond knowing there's another voice.

"Sorry about that," Solo says, when he eventually makes it back to his phone.

"Not at all," she says automatically. "Is...is everything okay?"

Solo seems to hesitate, and then sighs. "My husband is in hospital," he says wearily. "Obviously, so am I, right now. He'll be okay, but he's not too great at the moment."

“Oh,” she says softly. “Oh god, I can...you don’t have to be writing my recommendation or anything, it’s not as important as that. I’ll just hang up- I’ll just find someone else to write it, it’s fine-”

“Cassie,” Solo interrupts gently. “It’s fine. Like I said, I could use the distraction right now.” There’s a slight rustling that she can hear over the phone, and then Solo’s muffled voice as he must turn away from the phone and to probably his husband in the hospital bed. Cassie waits, her heart thumping in her chest.

“So,” Solo says when he returns to the phone. “Like I was saying about narrowing down a field of research, it depends partially on what the professors you want to work with are studying, but beyond that, I would start by just reading. Read whatever you want to, and things will start to jump out eventually.”

He’s on the phone with her for another twenty minutes, and she can’t help but notice how his voice evens out, how it sounds like something has lifted off his shoulders, if only by a small amount. When he finally hangs up, promising the recommendation within a couple of days, he sounds like he’s actually smiling, and it makes her own lips quirk.

0-o-0-o-0

Finals take over her life, and it isn’t until she steps back into the Institute in September, finally a graduate student, that she realises just what this is that she’s undertaken. It’s exhilarating. There are freshers looking lost in the corridors, and professors still writing their lecture courses even as they go to teach. There’s terrible coffee from the café and overpriced London food and people already beginning to pick their favourite spots in the library, and she realises with a sudden pang how much she’d missed this over the holidays.

The professors are different, now that she’s a graduate student, more willing to banter and chat over coffee, and despite having officially been an adult for a good few years now, this is the first time she really feels like it. There’s a strange feeling that seeps through her, knowing that maybe, she has her life in some sort of order.

It takes three weeks before the feeling fades, and she starts to worry that she has no idea what she’s doing. She’s doing a Master’s degree, but she has no idea what on, really, and she doesn’t have too long to decide. Already the research is spiralling into dead ends and obscure references that are often in different languages, and it’s slowly beginning to terrify her.

Solo emails her a few weeks in, asking if she wants to sit down and go through some of her plans. He’s her supervisor, so it’s only to be expected that he was going to email her soon enough asking for a meeting, but there’s still a lump of fear in her throat. She doesn’t want him to see her so panicked.

Still, she turns up at her office. Solo smiles when she walks in and sits at the table. “Good summer?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Not bad,” she replies. “I mostly stayed at home. You?”

Solo huffs a laugh. “Somewhat uneventful, but I went travelling with my husband through Europe for a couple weeks, went around all the major galleries and then up into the Alps, so that was pretty good. Other than that, I mostly stayed here in London, though I’ve been in Paris for a couple days here and there, for my research.” He leans back in his chair, spinning a pen between his fingers. “Anyway. Your research. What are you thinking at the moment?”

She takes a breath, and starts trying to explain. But that worry picks up again, her heart starting to hammer in her chest, and her words begin to twist in on themselves. She can hear herself stammer, and then her breathing picks up and she can’t stop it, can’t do anything but think how fucking embarrassing this is as her body, convinced of danger, makes her breath quicker and quicker, makes her hands shake and tremble until she can’t quite feel her fingers, can’t quite get enough control to even flex them, let alone sit back and take deep breaths like she knows she’s meant to, like she knows she has to if she wants to stop this becoming a full panic attack, but it’s too late already, she knows it’s too late, her treacherous body won’t listen anymore and she knows soon she’s going to start crying and won’t that be the cherry on top of the fucking sundae, and that’s not even the worst of it, because she knows what comes after that and she knows how awful it’s going to be, but her *fucking* body won’t even listen-

She forgets there’s someone else even in the room until a warm hand clasps her arm, and she hears someone saying her name. The hand moves, and gently pushes between her shoulder blades until she’s leant forwards over her knees, and she can see the carpet under her feet.

“Breathe in...2...3...4,” a low voice says. “Breathe out...2...3...4...5...6...7...8. That’s it, just keep breathing, Cassie. Listen to my voice, okay? You can feel my hand on your back, feel the rhythm I’m tapping, just keep breathing along to that,” and now that he says that, she can feel him slowly tapping out a steady beat on her back. It’s easier to latch onto that than some nebulous voice she’s not quite sure is there, to struggle and control her breathing to match it. She sucks in a breath.

“Good, that’s good,” the voice says. He keeps counting out breaths, keeps going even after she’s wrestled her body back enough to follow it. It isn’t until she breathes out heavily, rubbing her hand over her face, that he finally stops. She looks up to see Solo crouching in front of her, a worried frown on his face.

“It’s okay,” he says, and immediately she can feel her face heating up, the rush of embarrassment making her groan and bury her face in her hands. Her breathing hitches. There’s soft rustling from nearby, and then Solo is in front of her, pressing a book into her hands.

“Describe the picture,” he says. She blinks, and stares at him. Solo’s lips quirk slightly. “Just trust me on this,” he says, and taps at the picture of a painting in the book. “Describe it.”

She glances down at it. “Umm, it’s a...it’s a landscape,” she says eventually, grasping at any words she can find. It’s harder than she thought. “It’s...there’s a garden in front of the house, a...a flower bed? They’re red and pink and white and...roses?” She breathes in slightly. “Oh. It’s a Renoir.”

Solo nods. “*The Rose Garden at Wargemont*,” he says softly. “Feeling better?”



She nods, hesitantly, and sits up. "Sorry."

"You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for," Solo says, and there's a fierce undercurrent to his voice that surprises her. "There is nothing wrong with what just happened. We're all human, Cassie."

She groans, and scrubs at her face again. Solo gets up, and grabs a box of tissues off his desk. "Do you have a bottle of water?" he asks, and when Cassie shakes her head, he reaches for his own on the desk and hands it over. "It'll help," he says when she hesitates. "Slow sips, though."

She nods, and spends a few minutes just sitting there quietly, sipping the water. Solo gets up and sits back in his chair, though he brings it out from behind his desk to sit opposite her. She resolutely doesn't stare at him, and he seems to look away from her as well, giving her as much privacy as he can. Eventually, though, he does turn to her.

"Are panic attacks something that you have often?" he asks softly, and there's no hint of pity in his voice. She just shrugs, and Solo nods. "Do you have any medication that you need to take?" is his next question, and for that, she can shake her head.

"It's not...they're not common," she manages to get out. "At all. I just..." She trails off, and shrugs again. Solo hums thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I understand," he says quietly, and when she looks up at him she's surprised to see that she can see it on his face. He must notice her look, and his lips quirk in a small smile. "I've had my fair share of...issues, I suppose," he says. "And, well..." He pauses for a long moment. "I suppose he won't mind me telling you this," he murmurs, more to himself. She frowns, and Solo smiles slightly. "My husband has PTSD," he says, and it's strange how easy the words are to put together in sequence, but how even so it's hits somewhere deep in her chest.

"So that's how you knew what to do," she realises, and Solo nods.

"I've had some practice at defusing situations like this," he says. "He's lucky, it's only slight PTSD, and it doesn't affect him too badly most of the time, but I know what to do to help." He shrugs, a small self-deprecating smile curling his lips. "It's the least I can do for him."

"He's lucky," she murmurs without really meaning to, and Solo arches a brow. "To have you, I mean."

There's an amused look on his face. "We're lucky to have each other," he corrects. "I wouldn't be here without him, and I mean that quite literally. But enough of that." He leans forwards. "What's worrying you? And what can I do to help?"

She takes a breath. "I just don't know what to do."

Solo arches a brow. "First off, I don't think that's quite true," he says. "You're here, after all." He reaches behind him and grabs a notebook and a pen off his desk. "Start with what you do know what to do," he suggests. "I'll write it down." She must look sceptical, because Solo

huffs a brief laugh. "Lists are useful, and a good thing to stop you panicking later," he points out. "Now, what do you know about what your Master's is going to be?"

She takes another breath, and starts talking. Solo is mostly quiet, just jotting down things in his notebook as she goes. It isn't until she runs out of ideas that he pauses, and reads back through what he's written down. "Good," he says. "We can work with this. There's definitely ideas here that could be interesting, especially if you do want to go down the route of LGBT influence on that period."

"I sort of feel like it's compulsory for me," she admits with a shaky grin. "Like, I'm a gay arts student, if I don't at least get LGBT somewhere into my research then I think the rainbow devil will come drag me down into gay hell."

Solo snorts, and actually takes a moment before he can control his expression. "I wonder what gay hell would be," he muses, a grin tugging at his lips. "An endless line of middle-aged suburban moms who give you that really specific look whenever they see you wearing a rainbow in Pride week. Like they're being so good by not openly judging you, but honey, you're going to hell in the end."

She huffs a laugh at that. "A million remakes of the same boring heterosexual love story on tv," she suggests. "All with the most intense queerbaiting for the two side characters who are way more interesting than the straight white leads." Solo laughs at that, grinning.

"We don't need gay hell for that, we have that right here," he points out. "Though they're getting better. You should watch Black Sails at some point, it's excellent. My husband made me start watching it, and then I accidentally overtook him when he was away on work. He made me sit and watch all the episodes again whilst he caught up with me, and I didn't even mind." He huffs a laugh, shaking his head. "We're impossible when it comes to watching series at the same time."

"Oh, my girlfriend and I can't ever agree on what to even start," she says. "But I'll tell her Black Sails comes highly recommended. Who knows, maybe we'll actually finish an entire show for once."

Solo huffs a laugh. "The first season is good, and then the plot twist in the second season makes it great, and it just goes uphill from there." He shakes his head, a grin on his lips. "We're getting ridiculously off topic, though." He rips the list out of his notebook. "Take this, pin it up somewhere visible, and every time you start to worry about what you're going to do, read it. Make some changes, if you want to. Add something, or take something off the list. It's not permanent, you can always put something back on. And if you really start panicking, then call me."

She nods, and pockets the list. "Thanks," she says. "Really. Thanks."

Solo just nods. "Anytime, Cassie," he replies. "And I mean it."

She pauses as she's heading for the door. Solo is moving his chair back behind his desk, tidying up a couple of stray papers in a way that probably isn't tidying to anyone but Solo. "Hey, can I ask you something?" she says suddenly.

Solo glances up. “Sure,” he says. “What is it?”

She looks around his office again. “This is going to come off as horribly invasive and personal, but... how come you don’t have any pictures of him? Your husband, I mean. You obviously...well, he’s your husband, and you have to know that everyone is curious about him, so...”

Solo huffs a quiet laugh. “I had no idea my love life was so interesting to my students,” he remarks. “I have heard a few, shall we say, hushed conversations when people thought I wasn’t paying attention as I was packing away, but I didn’t know you were all that invested.”

She blushes. “You’d think we have nothing more interesting to talk about in lectures,” she manages to say. “But after four years some people still can’t be bothered to pay attention.”

Solo snorts in amusement. “Yes, I know,” he points out. “It’s surprisingly easy to make out the people on their phone in a lecture hall, let alone in a workshop when everyone is literally no more than ten feet from you. I had some freshers in for a workshop on the module I’m trying to teach them at the moment, and I swear it’s like I wasn’t even in the room at some points.”

“They were that bad?” she asks. “I swear we weren’t that bad as freshers.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Solo points out. “Seeing as I wasn’t here. But according to other professors, this year of freshers seem like they are particularly inattentive. Or they’re just shy. None of us can really work it out.”

“Hey, it only took our year two and a half years to actually think of you as human beings, rather than people who decide our entire future with your marking,” she says. “They’ll warm up to you. Eventually. Maybe.”

Solo laughs. “Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he says. He glances at his watch.

“Speaking of the freshers, I should go and scare them with modernism. It’s so fun to see all those babyish faces staring at me in horror as I launch into a discussion of Cézanne’s works without any warning.”

“You know,” she says as he grabs his bag and stuffs his laptop into it. “Sometimes I think you like to torment us.” Solo just arches a brow, and there’s a grin on his face as he holds the door open for her.

“You’re a Master’s student now,” he reminds her as he shuts and locks his door. “We like you guys, at least.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, well that’s reassuring,” she deadpans, and Solo just grins at her over his shoulder as he heads off.

I have no idea if that's how applying for a Masters works, but we'll just go with it. No bets as to why Illya ended up in hospital, he definitely got shot or something when running around being a super spy.

There's some unashamed promotion for Black Sails in this chapter as well- it's on Amazon Prime, and honestly it is one of the best tv shows I've ever watched, it's brilliant. The way I describe it to people is 'Pirates of the Caribbean crossed with Game of Thrones, but very gay'. Please scream at me about it in the comments if you have watched it.

Napoleon doesn't have any pictures of Illya in his office because at this moment, Illya is still a spy, so there has to be some level of anonymity somewhere.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

I spent three hours today staring at a set of data from a lab experiment and trying to make it fit what I thought my products of the experiment were, only to realise three hours in there was more data on the next page. Of course, as soon as I had that I realised I'd make a mistake in working out the reaction scheme and the structure of my products, and everything was obvious. So that means I just wasted three hours messing around with NMR spectra today :/

Anyway, I was annoyed, so I'm publishing another chapter to make myself feel better (also got Dominos pizza, that helped). Warning for discussion of terror attacks, but they happen off screen. I'll say more about that in the end notes, to avoid spoilers.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Slowly, the research begins to pan out into something useful. Cassie spends most of her time in the library or the various galleries across London, until the degree is slowly taking over her entire life. Solo is as good a supervisor as he is a lecturer, and she does go away and slowly begin to work her way through Black Sails. The plot twist halfway through the second season makes it all worth it.

She's sitting in a workshop with Solo and five other students, trying to rationalise an obscure text that was, according to Solo, poorly translated from the original Italian. He's dug up the original text and is translating portions of it that he thinks are relevant, because of course he is fluent in Italian as well. They're laughing over a dick joke when her phone buzzes in her pocket.

She thinks nothing of it, but it buzzes again, and at the same time someone else's phone that they'd put on the table lights up. She's at the wrong angle to read it, but someone else picks it up.

"Oh my God," he says, cutting through Solo as he is translating. "Oh my fucking God." He glances up at the rest of them. "There's been a terror attack. Here, in London."

The room falls silent, and then everyone scrambles for their phones. Solo immediately heads for his desk and his laptop, and within a few minutes they're all staring at the BBC news page.

"Jesus," someone murmurs. "They're saying someone drove onto the pavement on Westminster Bridge, knocking people down, and then getting out with a...fuck, a gun. Jesus."

“There might be more than one person,” someone else says. “Check social media. People must be talking about it.”

“That will be a lot of speculation and very few facts,” Solo warns, though he doesn’t look up from his laptop. “Be careful. We’re perfectly safe here, there’s no reason to panic.”

“Oh god, I need to check my mum is okay,” someone says, and then there’s another second rush for phones as everyone suddenly starts texting and calling whoever they think of first. She scrolls through her contacts before realising she doesn’t have anyone in her family who would be in London right now anyway. She goes on Facebook instead, declaring herself safe when she sees at least five messages from friends. The rest of the group are all staring at their phones, some texting, some just staring, hoping for more news. Solo is still frowning, fingers skittering over his keyboard as he types.

There’s the sudden shrill sound of a phone ringing, and everyone pauses. Solo snatches up his mobile. “Peril,” he says as soon as he brings it to his ear, and then abruptly pauses.

“Gaby, why the hell are you calling me from his phone?” he asks. There’s a pause, and then the tone of his voice when he next says something makes everyone stop and look at him.

“Don’t you dare,” he says, and there’s a cold fury to his voice that sounds alien to them, completely opposite to the mild-mannered professor they know. “Gaby, don’t you fucking dare.” Whoever this Gaby is must interrupt him, because Solo pauses with words half on his lips already. “Gaby,” he says again. “Get him back. Get him back in. He can’t go out, you can’t send him out.”

“I don’t care if it’s his job!” Solo snaps suddenly. “I don’t care. Gaby, he has less than two months left, less than two months before he’s worked off the sentence and he can walk away. God, send me out instead, let me go, but don’t-”

He’s cut off again. “Don’t tell me you can’t do that,” he says eventually, when he can get a word in edgewise. “Vienna, Gaby, I did Vienna for you. You owe me, now.”

He listens for a long few moments, and then sighs, dropping his head. “Fine,” he says softly. “Fine. But Gaby, you do owe me. I’m calling in that favour. Whatever happens, whatever you do, you do your best to make sure he gets home to me tonight.” He sighs again, running one hand over his face. “Okay. Tell him...ah, you know what to tell him. Call me as soon as it’s over.”

He hangs up and just stares at his phone for a long, silent moment. Eventually someone coughs, and Solo almost jumps.

“Right,” he says, seeming to remember that there were other people in the room. “Sorry.”

“Is everything okay?” Cassie asks. Solo looks up at her, and for once, he looks tired.

“Not really, but it will be,” he says. He glances around his office. “Has everyone got hold of their relatives in London? Are they all okay and accounted for?” There are nods around the table, and Solo looks relieved. He glances down at his laptop. “Looks like we’ve been put on

lockdown,” he remarks. “Nobody is to leave until the attack is dealt with. And I have to go babysit a lecture class of freshers. You can come with, if you don’t know where else to go.”

He gathers up his laptop, a sudden sense of urgency to his movements, and they follow him because they don’t know what else to do. The lecture room that they end up in is full of nervous freshers, everyone refreshing their phones every five seconds and all but clambering over the desks to fill people in on the new speculation. There’s an undercurrent of fear that is palpable in the air of the room.

Solo strides in, sets his bag down on the desk and then slams his hand against the blackboard. “Listen up!” he shouts, and the room falls silent. Cassie and the rest of the workshop group lean against the wall next to the door, and watch as Solo stares out at the freshers.

He looks different to what they’re used to. He doesn’t look like an arts professor anymore. He looks intimidating, almost dangerous in a strange way. She can’t quite understand it, what has changed, and her mind drifts back to his conversation to whoever Gaby was earlier.

“I’m not going to coddle you,” Solo says to the assembled freshers. “If you want some meaningless platitudes about how we will never be divided, how we are afraid but it only makes us stronger, keep calm and carry on and all that jazz, then there are other professors in other lecture halls right now. You can go and sit with them instead, if it makes you feel better.”

There’s a ripple of murmurs through the hall, but it dies down when Solo arches a brow. “Instead, I am going to be useful,” he says. “Everyone is to put away their phones, or at least turn off any social media or news site you all have up at the moment. All you’re doing is feeding into your fear and paranoia. Staring at a phone screen will not make anything happen any differently. I will have my Masters students checking the news for you, and they will inform everyone of any developments as soon as they happen.” He nods at them, and they all instantly go for their phones, spreading out through the room to take up the empty chairs.

“Has everyone made contact with their family, with anyone in London right now?” Solo asks, and there are stifled gasps around the room. Cassie watches as some people go for their phones, some start talking, and it takes Solo hitting the blackboard again for them to quiet.

“Anyone who still needs to contact people, come down the front,” he says. “Everyone else, I am going to put on a movie or something to distract you. We are safe here. The attack was on Westminster Bridge and around the Houses of Parliament, and I know that is very close to here, but we are safe. They won’t come here.”

“How can you know?” someone cries out, and then the silence breaks. There are muffled screams from some people and anxious chattering from everyone else. Solo sighs, and then abruptly slams his hand on the board twice, louder than before. The echo reverberates through the room.

“I do not have the patience for this,” he says, his voice cold. “My husband is out there right now, so believe me when I tell you that *we are safe here*. You can be worried. You can be scared. But you cannot turn this into a moment for you to wallow in your fear, or turn this into drama. There’s nothing more I want to do than go out there and make sure my own

husband is okay, but I can't. I know I can't. Trust in the people trained to do their jobs who are out there, and stay here. We are safe."

With that, he pulls out his laptop and sets up a movie to run quietly on the screen. The room falls quiet, the edge of fear dimmed and muffled. People are gathered down the front of the room on their phones, those who still have people they need to contact, but most of the students just sit and watch the screen, their faces blank.

Cassie refreshes the news every few minutes, and as the reports slowly trickle in she occasionally gets up to tell the freshers what's going on. Soon enough a small crowd gather around her, not really saying anything, just wanting the contact of someone older, someone they think knows what is going on.

There's a muffled sob from the front of the room, and she looks up to see one of the freshers sitting on the ground, hand over her mouth. She's getting up before she even thinks about it, heading towards her, but Solo gets there first.

He crouches down beside her, and she does her best to get through the rest of the freshers crowding round to get a better look. "What is wrong?" Solo asks gently. "What is it?"

The fresher sobs again, and holds up her phone. "Can you not get hold of someone?" Solo asks, and the girl just nods through her sobs. Solo frowns. "Okay, I want you to first take some deep breaths for me. Cassie, get my laptop and bring it over here."

She jumps up and grabs it, hurrying back to where Solo is now sitting on the floor next to the girl. "Sit down with her," Solo murmurs as he takes it. "This might take a few minutes."

She just nods, and sits down with the fresher, putting an arm around her. "Who is it you can't get hold of?" she asks her.

"Mum," the fresher says, heaving in a breath. "She's...she was going to St. Thomas' for a check-up. That's...that's just across the bridge. She was...oh god, she won't answer her phone." She dissolves into tears again, and Cassie shushes her gently, rubbing her hand up and down her arm.

Solo looks up from his laptop. "What's your mum's mobile number?" he asks, and Cassie frowns at him. "Look, I can see where her mum is with the mobile number," he says. "I can track the GPS from my laptop, see where it is, if it's moving or not, all of that. It's something, at least." He glances up at her. "It's not technically legal, but it's the best I can do."

"I'm not stopping you," Cassie just says, and she plucks the fresher's phone out of her hand. Luckily the screen hasn't locked yet, and she's able to find the mum's number. She reads it out to Solo, and he doesn't even look up from his screen as he continues to type furiously. The fresher hiccups, and leans into Cassie.

"I've got it," Solo announces only four minutes later. "Her phone is at St. Thomas' hospital. They're well outside the reported attack radius on the other side of the river, and it's probably one of the safest places she could be." He spins the laptop so the fresher can see the little blue



dot on the map. “She’s on the fifth floor. The ER is on the second, so she’s not one of the injured, okay? She’s fine.”

The fresher sobs some more, and Solo looks up. “Is anyone else struggling to get in touch with anyone?” he asks. “To be clear, I’m not talking about your cousin who lives in the north of London or a friend who might have come up for the day. I’m talking about people who genuinely might have been on that bridge or nearby, family who really might be in danger. Anyone need my help?”

A couple people come forwards, clutching phones with worried expressions. Cassie takes the phone numbers of grandmothers and cousins and friends, and hands them over to Solo when he asks for them. For the entire time he just sits there, back against the wall, typing away at his laptop. Even when she gives him the last number and he finds their phone, reassuring them that they’re nowhere near the attack, he keeps typing.

After a couple of minutes, he fishes out a set of headphones from a pocket and plugs them in. Cassie glances at the screen, but all she can see are lines of code. The freshers around them slowly disperse, heading back to seats, and the other Masters students continue to call out updates when they arrive.

“What are you looking at?” she asks him eventually. Solo glances up at her, and a small grin quirks his lips.

“Plausible deniability,” is all he says, and Cassie stares at him. It suddenly feels like she barely knows him.

“That phone call earlier,” she says abruptly. “And what you said to these freshers...is that true?”

“Is what true?” Solo asks, but the grin has disappeared from his face.

“Is your husband out there?” Cassie asks, not knowing how else to say it. “Is he...is he police, or something?”

“Or something,” Solo says. He turns his attention back to his laptop for a few moments, his expression grim. “Yes, he’s out there trying to help. That phone call earlier was his boss. She’s an old friend as well, which is why she even called me in the first place to at least give me the courtesy of letting me know.”

“Will he...”

“Be okay?” Solo asks, not looking up from the laptop. “Yes. Without a doubt. But I can’t think any other way right now.” Cassie grimaces, feeling like she’d overstepped, but then this entire day has been all over the place.

It takes another tense, frustrating hour before the news appears that the suspects have been caught, that there are eight dead and more wounded. Solo looks tense as he continues to type at his laptop, one headphone still in his ear as he listens to something.

His phone starts to ring, up on the desk, and Solo glances up. "Answer that for me, Cassie," he says, and Cassie clambers to her feet. She grabs at his phone and answers it.

"Hello?"

There's a cool female voice on the other end. "Who is this and why isn't Solo answering?" she asks. Cassie can hear other voices in the background, someone shouting what sounds like orders, and the shrill beeping of computers and alarms.

"Uh, it's one of his students," Cassie says. "Is this...are you Gaby?"

"Well, one-of-his-students," the woman says, and there's a tinge of amusement to her voice. "You're right. This is Gaby. How do you know who I am?"

Cassie glances at Solo, who is still typing. "He wasn't very quiet on the phone to you earlier," she says. To her surprise, Gaby laughs.

"Well, it wasn't what he'd wanted to hear," she says. "But hand me over to him, please. I have news."

Cassie turns to Solo, holding out the phone. "It's Gaby," she says. "She has news?"

Solo all but snatches the phone out of her hand. "Well?" he asks Gaby. Cassie can't hear what she tells him, but it's obviously good news by the way his shoulders suddenly relax and a smile curls the corners of his lips. "Good," he says. "And the others?"

He listens for a few moments, and nods. "Even better," he says. "Keep me posted, will you? I've had multiple students freaking out over this, and I can't even reassure them with what I really know."

Gaby obviously says something, because Solo falls silent for a good few moments. "Yes, well what did you expect?" he asks eventually. "Try and keep me out of the loop, especially when Peril is right in the middle of it, and you should be glad that was all I did. You can tell your tech nerds to stop worrying over it, but maybe they should upgrade their security. It did only take me six minutes to get onto the chatter."

Gaby says something else, and Solo almost laughs. "I'll try not to scare them that much again," he says. "I'll admit I wasn't quite rational there. Don't tell Peril, though. He'll only hold it over my head." He smiles, a genuine smile. "Tell him I'll see him at home, then. And tell him..." He trails off. "Oh, he already knows. But I'll tell him again when I get home anyway." He laughs at something Gaby says. "Go on, darling, stop bothering with me and go save the world again."

"Everything good?" Cassie asks once he's hung up. Solo nods, pulling out the headphones and shutting down his laptop.

"Everything is okay," he answers. "Now if this place would just let us leave so I could go home to my husband, it would be even better."

Eventually someone comes into the lecture hall saying that the Institute isn't on lockdown anymore, and that the Temple station is still open for people to get home. Cassie sighs in relief, and gathers her bag from where she'd left it, forgotten, in a corner of the room.

"Do you need a lift?" Solo asks as he packs away. "They've cancelled everything for the rest of the day, of course, so all of us are heading home. I can drop you off wherever you live if you need me to."

"It's alright, I live only a couple minutes from the tube, and it's on a direct line from Temple," Cassie says. "Thanks, though. And thanks for everything today, even if it wasn't strictly..."

"Legal?" Solo asks. He laughs. "Don't worry, it's not really illegal either. It's sort of a grey area."

Cassie just looks at him. "Who the hell are you?" she asks.

"Just your History of Art professor, Cassie," Solo says, a weary smile on his face. "Just a professor, at the moment. That's all there is." He glances at her. "You trust me, right?"

Cassie looks at him, and remembers him tapping out a rhythm as she struggled to breathe through the panic, talking to her on the phone about her degree whilst sitting in hospital with his husband, writing down a list to help her focus and not panic back at home. She thinks of him hacking the GPS of someone's phone to make sure they're okay, to comfort a terrified student in the midst of a terror attack, and she can't do anything but nod. "Yeah," she says. "Course I do."

## Chapter End Notes

So I have a lot of thoughts on the terror attacks that have happened in London recently, and I won't try to put everything down here, because nobody wants to read that, but I will say something.

With the current political climate in my country (read: Brexit), sometimes I'm not very proud to be British. We have a very long and very chequered history where we did some really awful things, and that's sometimes not so easy to come to terms with. But I remember watching the news of those terror attacks last summer, Manchester and London. I remember the attacks themselves, but what I think I remember most was the days after. At the charity concert to raise money for the Manchester arena victims, a police officer danced with a group of young girls. A man didn't put down his pint when running from an attack in London. When some American news said we were 'reeling' from yet another attack, I felt an odd sense of pride as pretty much every Brit turned around and told them to fuck off, that we weren't 'reeling' from anything, we were doing just fine and getting on with the damn job.

That's the Britain I can be proud of, the one where in a time of crisis, Keep Calm and

Carry On rises up from where it lies dormant in our blood. And that's true of every Brit, whether your family has been here for centuries or has only just arrived from another country. We're bloody defiant when we need to be. John Oliver puts it better than I ever could, [here](#).

Anyway, hope you liked this chapter. What Solo mentions about Illya's 'sentence' will be explained, I promise. Also, nod to St Thomas' hospital in there because that's where I was born, overlooking Big Ben across the river!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the great responses to the last chapter! I actually have a mostly free weekend at the moment (not sure how, have this weird feeling I should be doing loads more work but I've actually finished all the work I can) so here's another chapter!

This one is a bit shorter, because the next few chapters will all be closely linked and I needed to split it this way. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It takes things weeks to go back to normal after the terror attack, but eventually they do. London is nothing if not resilient. She walks down streets every day on the way to the Institute where there's a mishmash of old and new houses, mapping out where the Blitz had reduced places to ruin, and they'd rebuilt over the top. London has been through wars and bombings and the people are as unbothered as ever. A few idiots in a van with a couple stolen guns weren't going to do anything to them.

Solo seems to slip back into that mild-mannered arts professor she's known for most of the time, but now she's paying attention, some things slip through now and again. The way he talks about the influence war has on art like he understands, like he knows what it means to slog through the trenches or is familiar with the guilt that people come back bearing. Occasionally she comes across him in the library, late at night. Solo starts when she comes round the corner, and she swears his hand reaches for something not there, before he controls himself.

He confides in her, late one night when she finds him again in the library, translating some of the old texts they have there, that he's here because his husband is away on work, and the house always feels empty when he's gone. She thinks for a long moment.

"Why don't you get a dog?" she asks.

Solo's lips quirk. "A dog?" he asks. "I live in central London. Dogs aren't usually possible around here. Anyway, between mine and my husband's work, neither of us would be around enough to look after it."

"You could get something small," she points out. "That doesn't need much walking. I had a terrier when I was a kid, and I grew up in a fourth-floor flat. They're easy enough to look after."

Solo shakes his head. "I highly doubt Illya will let us get a terrier," he says, huffing a laugh. "Knowing him, he'll want an Alsatian or something ridiculous for living in London. And if I bring it up, he definitely won't let it go. Illya loves dogs."

“All the more reason to get one,” she insists. “For Christmas, maybe, or for whenever his birthday is. You don’t even have to get a puppy, you could go to a shelter and adopt a dog. There’s loads around here, and they’re always understaffed and have too many dogs.”

Solo looks like he’s considering it. “Maybe,” he muses. “In a couple of months, when we have more time on our hands. I don’t know, we’d have to find the right dog.”

“Eh, that only takes a bit of research on the dog breeds,” she says. “There are some big dog breeds that are suitable for apartments or that don’t need as much walking. I don’t think you’d get away with an Alsatian in London, though.”

“Yes, somehow I don’t think an Alsatian could work,” Solo says. “And I don’t think either of us would really want one around, when it comes down to it. Maybe a lurcher, if we can train it to not chase the swans in Regent’s Park.” He huffs a laugh. “The Sun would have a field day with that.”

“Oh, they’re far more concerned with crucifying every immigrant in this country who doesn’t conform to their racist standards,” she says. “You’re white, they’d go easy on you.”

Solo laughs. “Yes, I suppose they would,” he replies. “Though I am an arts professor, and they reserve a certain hatred for us liberal elites.” He arches a brow. “But I’m American, so I’m used to the press being far worse than they are.”

“I don’t know, they’re pretty awful,” Cassie says. Solo just shakes his head, a wry smile on his lips.

“We have Fox,” he just says, and Cassie has seen plenty of clips online, so she concedes to that. It’s only after she’s wandered on, found another corner of the library in which to settle down and do some work, that she realises it’s the first time she’s ever heard Solo call his husband by his name in front of her.

0-o-0-o-0

The year passes. Time slips past her as she sits in the library working, wanders through the galleries of London, stays up late in her room with a sudden wave of inspiration, frantically googling the appropriate texts. Solo kicks her off to Paris in February to do more research there, and she spends four days not actually seeing any of the galleries or museums there, but spending all her time in cold archives. At least the professors there seem nice, and willing to help her out with the more difficult translations, but she suspects that’s more because of Solo paving the way than her own natural charm.

She gets into the archives on the fourth day to find Solo there, leaning against a table and chatting away to one of the professors there in what sounds like perfect French. “Solo,” she says, setting down the book and trying to get through that jolt of surprise at seeing him.

“Come to check up on me?”

“Oh yes, I came over to drag you away from all the gay bars in Paris,” Solo says, a wicked grin on his lips. “Found what you were looking for?”

“There’s so much here, I’ll have to come back later when my research is more refined,” Cassie says, reaching for the book she’d been looking through yesterday. “But yes, I’ve made headway. Why the hell are you here?”

“Been asked to examine something,” Solo says, flicking through a book on the table. “Check it’s authentic and everything before it’s submitted to the museum. I’ll probably be here a week or so, depending on how it goes. You’re heading back tomorrow, right?”

“My train is at seven tomorrow morning,” she replies, and Solo winces. “Yeah, I know, but it was the cheapest train and they don’t exactly give me much funding for this. What’s the piece you’re authenticating?”

“Can’t tell you that until it’s been authenticated,” Solo says with a grin. “Or I’ll have to kill you. I take this profession very seriously.” The professor he’d been talking to laughs, and swats at him half-heartedly. Solo grins at her. “Speaking of, I should get going. But I’ll take you out around Paris tonight, find somewhere nice to eat. My treat, seeing as you’ve got such terrible funding for this trip.” She tries to wave him off, but Solo won’t take no for an answer in that infuriating way he has.

True to his word, he appears from some room in the museum early in the evening, drags her away from the work, and finds a nice hole-in-the-wall restaurant that does the best steak she’s ever had. It’s strange, sitting in a restaurant in Paris with the supervisor of her degree, but at the same time she feels, for perhaps the first time, like an actual adult.

Solo’s phone buzzes in his pocket halfway through dinner. “Sorry, it’s Illya,” he says as he fishes it out. “Could be important.”

“Yeah, of course,” Cassie says, and Solo answers.

“Hey, Peril,” he says. “Everything okay?” Cassie watches as the frown on his face smooths out and he smiles. “Yeah, of course, Peril. I’ll call her in the morning, make sure she knows.” He pauses for a minute, listening. “Of course, Paris is as tempting as always. I’ve only just started on the work, so I don’t know yet.” He huffs a laugh at whatever Illya says. “Look, I’ve got to go, Peril,” he says, glancing at her. “I’ve taken Cassie out to dinner, and it’s the height of rudeness to answer a phone at a Parisian restaurant. The looks I’m getting from the maître-de are verging on murderous.” He laughs at what Illya says in response. “Yeah, okay. Love you too. I’ll call later.”

He hangs up, and pockets the phone. “Sorry about that, but with his job, I don’t like leaving phone calls unanswered.”

“You’ve never actually said what he does,” she points out. “After the attack in London, it’s not police, but something similar, right?”

Solo smiles a half-smile, taking a sip of his wine. “Something similar,” he echoes.

“Technically he’s retired now, but...well, it’s a slow process, and he’s still doing some work now and then. Retiring is proving...difficult, in a way.” He smiles slightly. “He’s used to working, not having time off.”

“Like I’ve said before, you need a dog,” Cassie points out. “That’ll give him something to do.”

Solo laughs. “You know, I’ve actually thought about it somewhat,” he says. “Might bring it up for my birthday next month. It would make the house much livelier.” He pauses for a moment, swirling the wine in his glass. “We’ve earned it, by this point,” he murmurs, and there’s something that flits briefly across his face, too quick for her to understand.

“Anyway,” Solo says, after a few seconds of staring at nothing. He seems to shake himself, and returns to the present. “How has the research been coming? Why do you want to come back later?”

She starts talking about the research and what she’s thinking of using in her dissertation, and it spirals from there, discussing Modernism over steak and a bottle of red wine that Solo requests without even looking at the wine list. It’s surreal, like she’s stepped inside one of the paintings that she’s studied for so long. It’s just started to rain, and the soft yellow of the street lamps blur through the droplet-stained windows. A car passes by, and the light turns into a muted kaleidoscope of reds and yellows, scattering across the restaurant wall until the car moves on.

She feels comfortably out of place in the way that Paris makes so many people feel, in the way that she sits and listens to the soft murmur around her of a language she can’t really understand, the way the city shines out of the corner of her eye. She watches someone hurry past on the street, coat collar turned up against the rain. The city is just within her reach, is close enough to touch if she tries.

“You’ve got that look on your face,” Solo says, and he sounds amused as she jolts and turns back to him. “What is it?”

She shrugs. “I just...I never thought I’d ever be here,” she says.

Solo just looks mildly amused, still. “What, here as in this restaurant, or Paris, or are we talking more metaphysical?” he asks. She huffs a laugh, and shakes her head.

“I don’t know, when I was a kid I just never would have imagined this for myself,” she says. “I just...it’s strange how I’ve ended up here, in Paris doing research for my Masters in History of Art, and looking back there was no real conscious decision to get here. I never sat down one day and thought ‘hey, I’m going to be in Paris one day going through the archives for my Master’s research’, or anything. I just...ended up here.”

Solo smiles, and it’s almost fond. “Yes, well, we never make conscious decisions like that,” he says. “It’s impossible to know where you’ll end up. If it’s any help, you seem to be on the right tracks so far.”

She blushes, and ducks her head. “Did you know?” she asks. “That you’d end up here, as an arts professor?”

To her surprise, Solo laughs. “God, no,” he says. “Absolutely not. I thought...” He laughs again. “Well, let’s just say I thought my life would go in a far different direction, and that



direction has swung around wildly over the years. I'm content enough with this, though, after everything. I've seen plenty of the world, more than enough for me. And Illya and I found each other, which I don't think would have happened if we'd gone in different directions to what we did when younger."

"You weren't always a professor, then?" Cassie asks.

"No, I've had a more unusual path to academics," Solo says, and there's an amused quirk to his lips. "A few different things between here and there. Everyone finds their own way to doing what they love, however much that sounds like it should belong on a Hallmark card."

"Hallmark card?" she asks. "What's that when it's at home?"

Solo huffs a laugh. "Obnoxious American greetings cards," he explains. "Much as I love some parts of my home country, there are some parts which really are awful. Obnoxious greeting cards fall under that heading, though they're fairly low on the list compared to everything else going on there right now." He takes a sip of his wine, swirling it around his glass and staring at it. "They never see it, and so they never learn," he murmurs to himself. "And it repeats itself once again. Sometimes I think we're in the shadows for too long."

"What was that?" Cassie asks.

Solo hums. "Oh, nothing," he says. "Ignore me." He clears his throat. "Right, do you want dessert? My treat, of course, though I'm not springing for dessert wine as well."

She just nods, and for the rest of the meal Solo is all smiles, telling her the various gossip that he's found out about the department, and she tells him the things that only the students hear or work out. He calls Illya as they step outside, and the immediate, real warmth in his voice is evident, even as she tries not to listen to his conversation. For a brief moment, she almost feels jealous of what he has, the ease with which he tells Illya that he loves him, a teasing note to his voice as he does so. But it's only for a moment, and then she can't help but smile as he talks to Illya. She's known Solo long enough by now to know that life has had a fair go at him, even if she doesn't know how. But she's almost surprised to find herself so happy for him. Maybe it's the Parisian atmosphere.

Eventually she heads back to her hotel, walking along the bank of the Seine for a few minutes before she sees a free cab, and she can't help but fall in love with Paris all over again, in a different light.

## Chapter End Notes

For people who have never been to London (or to pretty much any European city, for that matter) you really can walk down a street and work out where the bombs fell during the war based on the ages of the buildings. The Blitz is the bombing of the UK during WW2 (1940-1941). Most of the important cities were bombed, especially any of the ports, and London was heavily bombed. The bombing never seriously stopped war

production in the UK, and was eventually given up by the Nazis as they focused on the Soviet Union. Us Brits were incredibly staunch about the whole thing- according to Wikipedia, people referred to the bombing like the weather, and there was no widespread 'shell shock'. Even the amount of pub visits went up during the Blitz. So yay for the UK, I guess.

The reason neither Napoleon or Illya would probably want an Alsatian dog (German Shepherd) is because they're used a lot as guard dogs, and they both have probably been chased by these dogs a few times. A lurcher is a sighthound (usually greyhound/whippet) crossed with another dog, usually a collie or terrier. They're very common in the British countryside with old-school farmers, especially around where I live, and are used for hunting rabbits. They also make good pets.

In this universe/story, Napoleon also does authentication work for the Institute, because it turns out being able to forge art also makes you very good at spotting the copies. Illya finds this hilarious, of course.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

So I just saw Black Panther and it is absolutely brilliant, I loved it- if you can, go see it. I promise it is worth it for the badass women alone.

The next few chapters are all going to be about the same overall scene, which means chapters might end somewhat abruptly, because I wrote the next three chapters or so in one entire scene, but I can't publish it all at once (however much you'd like me to) because I like to keep you all in suspense.

I can't say until the end notes what this chapter is based on because spoilers, but I will talk about it after the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

No matter how hot London gets, the library at the Institute is always cold. Even in the middle of June, she has to pull on her jumper only minutes after sitting down at an out-of-the-way desk to get some writing done. It's a Friday, and on top of that the undergraduate exams had finished the week before, so the library is almost empty. Only the graduate students and professors are still around over the summer, and most had their own offices to haunt, instead of the library.

She's smuggled food into the library, so doesn't bother getting up and interacting with other people to get dinner, just pulls out a slightly squashed sandwich and tries not to get any crumbs stuck in her laptop. It's getting late, but it's one of those days where she knows that if she stops typing, if she lets herself take a break and go home, then she won't pick it back up for the rest of the day. She's sure she'll read it back tomorrow and realise half of what she's written was utter bullshit, but it's better than having nothing written at all.

She doesn't notice it getting late until the lights automatically switch on overhead, and even then she keeps working, typing away on her laptop and listening to Hamilton on repeat. There are barely any people moving around in the library at this time, though it's open the entire night, and she goes for the entire evening only seeing one or two people as they pass by.

There's the sound of footsteps on the wooden floor, and then someone clears their throat. "Cassie," someone says, and she looks up to see Solo approaching, a frown on his face.

"Oh hey," she says, and then pauses at the look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Have you looked at the news?" Solo asks instead of answering, and Cassie turns to her laptop, turning her wifi back on and pulling up the BBC news page.

“Oh, shit.”

“It’s been brewing for the past few days, but it’s all spilled over tonight,” Solo says, leaning over her shoulder to read the story. “The riots are spreading, and spreading quickly.” He frowns again, and glances at his phone.

Cassie feels a strange sort of dread pool in her gut as she flits through the news and then onto social media. There are fires burning already in Tottenham. “Shit,” she says again. “I should... I should get home, make sure my housemates are okay, I’ll have to call my mum before she gets too worried, and oh God, I’ll-”

Solo cuts her off. “Breathe,” he says, gripping her shoulder. “Grab your stuff. I’ll give you a lift home. It’ll be much safer than the Tube, and I really don’t like the way this is going.”

“What does that mean?” she asks, but she’s already packing away her bag, pulling out her phone to text everyone she needs to text, and then following Solo out of the Institute and into his car. The city feels charged, like a thunderstorm is brewing even as the skies remain stubbornly clear. She shivers, even though it’s June.

Solo glances at her as he gets into his car. “I know,” he says. “It’s like you can feel the tension rising in the city.” He slings his bag into the back seats and starts the car, but doesn’t yet go anywhere. “Put where you live in the satnav,” he says, pulling out his phone. “I need to call Illya.”

Cassie puts in her address and then Solo is pulling out of the garage onto the streets, the phone on speaker. “Peril,” he says tersely when the phone connects. “You home?”

“*Da*,” comes a voice over the phone, and Cassie arches a brow upon hearing Illya’s voice for the first time. “*Where are you? This is getting worse.*”

“I’m in the car,” Solo says, glancing at the satnav display. “Cassie is with me, I’m giving her a lift home. The Tube isn’t safe.”

“*No, it’s not*,” Illya says, and the way he says that makes Cassie shiver. “*I don’t know if I’m being paranoid, but-*”

“No, I think you’re right,” Solo says, expertly guiding the car through the ever-present traffic in London. It’s thinning out, though, and Cassie wonders if that’s because they’re moving closer to where the rioting is. “I’ve always trusted your instinct with these things. Have you called Gaby?”

“*She’s busy*,” Illya says tersely. Solo sucks in a breath, and Cassie glances over at him to see him suddenly frowning.

“How busy?” he asks. “Madrid level of busy, or Istanbul?”

“*Baghdad*,” Illya just says, and Solo’s knuckles turn white where he’s gripping the steering wheel.

“Shit,” he spits out, and Cassie stares at him. He doesn’t look away from the road. “Peril, get into the police chatter and find out where these damn riots are spreading. There’s a back channel onto the UNCLE line if you go the way-”

*“That Gaby conveniently left open for when you worried about me on job?”* Illya interrupts. *“Yes, I know how to get onto it. I can get access to CCTV as well, track riots and you. Where are you trying to go?”*

Cassie reels off her address when Solo prompts her, but she’s not sure she’s actually aware of doing it. She’s still trying to fit the pieces together in her head, fit the arts professor that she knows with someone who talks about hacking secure police lines or CCTV. She stares at the road ahead as Illya provides a running commentary on the riots in a cool, precise voice, directing Solo on the best roads to take.

He suddenly cuts off for a moment. *“Cowboy,”* Illya says next. *“Sudden spread of people down towards you, about eight hundred metres. Your two o’clock. Take the next left.”*

Cassie suddenly notices how quiet the streets have gotten. When she points this out, Solo just nods. “I’ve noticed,” he says. “I-” He suddenly slams on the brakes. “Fuck!”

Cassie winces as the seatbelt cuts into her neck, but the sting is quickly forgotten when she looks up and sees people running down the road towards them. It doesn’t look like they’ve seen them yet, looks more like the random pattern of violence that she’s been seeing in news clips all evening, but it’s only a matter of time before they notice a nice car sitting in the middle of the street. “Shit!” she shouts. “Jesus, this is bad.”

*“Cowboy,”* Illya says over the phone. *“I can’t get you past safely. If it were just you-”*

“Yes, I know,” Solo bites out. “But we can’t risk it, not with Cassie in the car.” He slams the car into reverse and twists in his seat as he flings the car back down the street. “Get me a new route, Illya. Preferably one where I won’t damage the paint job. Gaby will kill me.”

*“This is hardly as bad as Monte Carlo,”* Illya just says as Solo spins the car around in a tight circle, puts it in gear and guns down the road in the other direction. *“You have more people closing in on your right. Heading towards intersection in front of you. Some are in cars.”*

“Christ, Peril, could have warned me earlier,” Solo says. He puts his foot down and speeds up. Cassie reaches up and grabs the handle above the window.

“What the hell is going on?” she shouts. “Will someone fucking tell me if I’m being kidnapped by my fucking professor?”

To her surprise, even as Solo is speeding down the road and the shouts of nearby rioters are getting louder, both Solo and Illya let out a short bark of laughter. “Sorry,” Solo says as he slips the car around a corner, narrowly missing parked cars on the other side. Cassie can see an orange flicker in the sky, and stares at it as they seem to get closer. She can still hear people shouting.

“It’s going to be too dangerous to get you back to your place,” Solo explains as he swerves around another corner and speeds past a police car heading the other direction. “My home is going to be safe. Are you alright coming back to ours with me? I can get you somewhere else if you want me to, but it might be difficult. This is spreading out of control.”

*“I’m getting reports through UNCLE,” Illya suddenly interrupts. “We were right. This was triggered as cover for something else.”*

Solo curses. “Fuck,” he says again. “Are they calling you in?”

*“Not yet,” Illya replies. “They shouldn’t unless it’s really threatening. I am getting several police reports through about speeding black car around the area. I’ve put word out that you’re official. They’ll leave you alone.”*

“What would I do without you, Peril?” Solo asks, a sudden grin flashing across his face, so brief that Cassie almost misses it. “Don’t answer that.” He glances over at Cassie. “What do you want to do?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but Solo suddenly hits the brakes and the car skids to a stop in the road. She is flung forwards, the seatbelt cutting into her neck, and she can’t help but cry out in shock.

*“Cowboy?” Illya demands over the phone.*

“Rioters on the road,” Solo says tersely. He glances behind them, and Cassie twists to see more people a few hundred metres behind them. “Both ends. Give me an exit, Peril.”

Cassie can hear the sound of typing over the phone. *“I see it,” Illya says. “Side road on your left, fifty metres. Still in dangerous area, but I can get you out.”*

Solo puts the car into gear. “Hang on,” he says to Cassie. “I promise you I am going to get you out of this perfectly safe. I promise.” He puts his foot down, and the car lurches forwards with a roar.

Cassie can barely watch as they wind through the London streets at a heart-stopping speed, Solo expertly weaving in and out of the narrow roads and any obstacles they find. More than once a terse few words from Illya has him slamming on the brakes and reversing back up a road, or taking a last-minute corner that makes her stomach lurch. Illya keeps providing directions and Solo takes them without question every time, following his every word as they race through London. She can see the flicker of fires still, but the orange glows are slowly getting dimmer, and further away.

Finally, after what seems like hours, they pull out onto a main street and Solo slows down. “I think we’re okay,” he says, breathing out and loosening his grip on the steering wheel. He glances at her. “What do you want to do?”

She stares at him. “I...I don’t know,” she manages to get out. There’s a flicker of a smile on Solo’s lips, but he doesn’t look away from the road.

“Either I can take you to a friend’s house, take you to a hotel, or take you back to my house, where you can crash for the night,” he says. “In the morning, I can drop you anywhere you like.” He glances at her again. “It’s up to you, Cassie. Though if you come back to ours, you will get answers to the questions you’re probably trying not to ask right now. And it will be safer.”

She breathes out, a long breath, and then draws another one in. “After all this,” she says slowly. “I think it’s safest to stay with you.”

*“I’ll try and get Gaby on phone,”* Illya says, and she jumps at suddenly hearing his voice. *“Check in with her. Do you need me, Cowboy?”*

“No, you try and get hold of Gaby,” Solo says, steadily heading across London. “Make sure she’s saving the world as usual. Tell Waverly I say hi, as well.”

Illya laughs. *“I will, and he’ll hate it as usual,”* he replies. *“Okay, Cowboy. I’ll see you soon.”*

“Yeah, Peril, we’ll be there in ten,” Solo says. “Love you.”

*“Love you too,”* Illya says, and Cassie can swear she can hear him rolling his eyes. *“Be safe.”*

“Always am, Peril,” Solo says with a grin, and Illya just snorts, and then hangs up. Solo breathes out, and drums his fingers on the steering wheel. He glances over at her. “You okay?”

She realises she’s still clinging onto the handle above the window, and slowly lets go. “It’s... it’s a lot to take in,” she murmurs. Solo winces.

“I’m sure it is,” he says softly. “And I promise we’ll answer all the questions that we can, but that should probably wait until we get back to my house. You trust me, right? I’m not going to let anything happen to you, I promise.”

She nods, but can’t quite find the words to say anything as Solo drives through London, just stares out of the window at the city skidding by. She blinks, and they’ve moved more than a mile across the city, driving down streets of elegant townhouses that, in London, must cost millions. Solo pulls over and parks on a street outside a row of terraced townhouses. “Come on,” he says, grabbing his bag out of the back of the car.

She shivers as soon as she steps out of the car, barely notices when Solo presses her bag into her hand. “Come on,” he says again, his voice soft. He steers her gently down the street and then up the steps to a pale blue door, but she just stands there, not quite sure she’s actually seeing anything as Solo unlocks the door.

She stumbles over the doorstep into the house, and straight into a solid body. A hand catches her elbow and sets her on her feet, and she looks up to see a tall figure towering over her. “Are you okay?” he asks, and somewhere dim with her mind, she recognises Illya’s voice from the phone. She can’t do anything but just nod. Now she’s out of the car it feels like all the adrenaline has just dropped from her. She starts trembling, and can’t stop.

“She’s in shock,” Solo says as he steps inside behind her. “Put the kettle on, make some tea for her.” He guides her through into the living room, and sits her down on the sofa just before her legs give out from underneath her.

“Here,” Solo says, pulling a blanket from the sofa and wrapping it around her shoulders. He sits opposite her in an armchair. “You’re a bit in shock, okay? Illya is making you some tea, that’ll help. Just sit here and try to relax.”

She nods, and pulls the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders. She can hear someone, who must be Illya, in the kitchen, the clatter of utensils and the whistle of the kettle. After what must be a few minutes he comes into the living room, two mugs of tea in hand. “Here,” he says, handing her one. “Careful, it’s hot.”

“Thanks,” she murmurs, wrapping her hand around the mug. Illya passes the other to Solo, and then sits down in the other armchair opposite the sofa. She can’t help but stare at him. It’s been so long since Solo first mentioned his husband, and somehow now, sitting across from him, he’s strangely close to what she had imagined him to be. Illya stares back at her for a long moment, and then turns to Solo.

“I didn’t get hold of Gaby,” he says. “She’s busy still. I’ll try again in a few minutes.” They talk softly between each other. She sips at her tea, and gradually the world comes back into focus. There’s a muffled thump from somewhere in the house and she jumps, tea slopping over the edge of the mug and onto her hand. She hisses, wiping it off on her jeans.

“Sorry, I forgot to mention Laika,” Solo says as he uses the cuff of his shirt to wipe droplets of tea off a coffee table that looks more expensive than her entire wardrobe. Now she’s more alert, looking around the house, she realises that the entire house looks expensive in the way that on the surface, nothing really looks expensive. Everything looks cared for, but lived in; the sofa she’s sitting on is slightly ragged, there are books piled on the coffee table and more in shelves around the room, everything from art history to war history to paperback fiction novels. There’s a painting she feels she should recognise above the fireplace, and more on the walls around the room.

“Laika?” she asks after a long moment.

“The dog,” Solo clarifies. “Finally got one a couple months back. Will you be okay if I let her in here? She’ll only start whining if we leave her locked up in the other room.”

“Yeah, sure,” she says, and Illya gets up. Moments later there’s the sound of skittering claws on the hallway floor, and then a bundle of energy and fluff charges into the living room. Slowly it coalesces into a dog, a big thing with scraggly dark grey fur, and she snuffles eagerly at Cassie.

Illya comes back into the room and utters a few sharp words in another language, and Laika comes to sit at his feet. “Sorry, she’s enthusiastic about new people,” he says, leaning forwards and ruffling her ears. His accent is rough in his throat, Russian if she’d have to guess.



“What breed is she?” she asks. “She looks like if you took an Irish wolfhound and just shrunk it.”

Solo huffs a laugh at that. “She’s a mongrel,” he answers. “Picked her up in Moscow when Illya was there on business.” She arches a brow at that, but it’s probably one of the least surprising things she’s heard tonight, so she lets it go.

“Right,” Solo says after a couple minutes. “You have questions, and I promised answers. Ask away, and we’ll do our best to answer anything not covered by the statute of limitations.”

“Wrong country, Cowboy,” Illya cuts in. “They have something else here.” He takes Solo’s mug out of his hands, and takes a sip before handing it back, and looking at her. There’s something in his expression that makes her almost nervous, at least until Solo whacks him on the knee and mutters something in another language at him.

“Right,” she says, and then she just stares at the two of them for a long moment. “I don’t know where to start,” she confesses. “It’s...it’s a lot.” Solo nods, but doesn’t say anything, and she draws in a deep breath. “How did you know to do all that?” she settles on asking. “Hacking into CCTV or police chatter or whatever else you were talking about over the phone. Tracking the GPS of other people’s phones when there was that terror attack. Being able to drive like that. What the...how the hell can you do that?”

Solo breathes out, and looks over at Illya first. He nods, and something passes between the two of them before he turns back to her. “Okay, this might sound implausible to start off with,” he says. “But you’ll have to trust me here.”

She is immediately sceptical, but nods. Solo seems to brace himself. “Illya and I, we worked for an intelligence agency.”

## Chapter End Notes

So the riots in this chapter are based on the London riots in 2011. I remember these because I was actually on holiday in Madrid at the time, and my parents made us turn on the tv in the hotel room to scenes of rioting and burning shops in London, which started over the shooting of a black teenager, Mark Duggan, by police.

Laika, the dog, is named for the first dog in space, which the Russians did. And I promise, everything is going to get explained soon enough.

Oh, and by the way- all of those American lawmakers who are in the pockets of the gun lobbyists and NRA?? (not that you'll be reading this ever, but I need to say this anyway) Get your fucking shit together. Your guns are not worth more than children's lives.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Look at this, you're getting a long chapter today! I did try and cut it down, but there was just no plausible way I could manage it, so I've left it as is- I suppose none of you actually mind that this chapter is longer.

A lot of things are going to be explained in this chapter. I loved writing this part.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*She is immediately sceptical, but nods. Solo seems to brace himself. "Illya and I, we worked for an intelligence agency."*

"More than one," Illya adds. "Three, in total."

"So...you're spies," she says slowly. "This is fucking ridiculous." She waves a hand at Solo. "You're my arts professor. You're not a spy."

"Technically, we're both retired," Solo says, a small grin curling his lips. "But yes, we were both spies."

"Okay..." she says slowly, trying to let that settle in her head. "So, hypothetically, if this is true...who did you work for?"

"Have you ever heard of UNCLE?" Solo asks, and she nods. She's heard of them in the news before, only occasionally, but enough to know that they are an international intelligence agency. Solo nods. "I worked there for seven years, Peril here for nine. Before that, well...I was CIA, and Peril-

"I was SVR," Illya says. "Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, what KGB turned into. We met when working for each agency on same job, got...collected, into UNCLE, and stayed."

"What was the job?" she asks. She doesn't mean to, but the words just fall from her lips regardless of what she meant to do. Solo and Illya look at each other, an amused look passing between them, and Illya tangles his fingers with Solo's.

"Do you remember that crisis in Rome about nine years ago?" Solo asks. "International crime syndicates, weapons of mass destruction, all that jazz. Read like a bad crime novel, honestly." Illya snorts at that, but she doesn't miss how his fingers twitch at what Solo says, how his grip tightens ever so slightly.

She frowns. Nine years ago, she would have been in high school, around Year 8. Most teenagers are obtuse and rather self-absorbed at that age, but she's sure she would remember something like that. "No?" she says eventually.

Solo grins, a lopsided smirk. "Exactly," he says. Illya just rolls his eyes at him, but the look he gives him is still fond. Solo's grin just widens. "That was our first job together. Went terrible, honestly, but somehow we still ended up in UNCLE."

She nods slowly. "So how the hell did you end up as an arts professor?" she asks. "How do you go from...that, to an arts professor?"

Solo huffs a soft laugh, and opens his mouth to answer, but before he can a shrill ringtone cuts through the air. Illya fishes in his pocket for his phone. "It's Gaby," he says, and answers.

"Chop shop girl," he says into the phone. "How's it going?"

He listens for a while, and abruptly the slight quirk of his lips that could be a smile, in the right light, disappears. "No," he says, and his voice is suddenly cold. "Gaby, no. You can't ask that of me."

Solo's head jerks up. "Peril?" he asks softly, and Illya glances at him.

"I'm out," he says into the phone. "Napoleon is out. I know you are busy, but Gaby, this isn't even half as bad as Istanbul. You have many other people who are as good as us. You don't need me. You definitely don't need him. You know I promised him."

Solo's expression softens slightly, and he murmurs something up at Illya in that other language. Illya nods at him, still listening to whatever Gaby is saying. "We have civilian with us," he says eventually, when it seems that he gets a word in edgewise. "Cassie. You know her, yes? She is here." Gaby says something, and he pauses. "No, Gaby," he says softly. "We got out for good reasons. You know why we got out. Don't make us go back for the wrong reasons."

Solo's expression softens again, and he reaches out a hand. Illya tangles his fingers with his, and Solo presses a kiss to the back of his hand. Illya smiles down at him "Da," he says into the phone. "I'll do that from here. That's all, chop shop girl. No more." He nods. "Go save the world. Tell Waverly we say hi."

Solo snorts in amusement at that. "What does she want?" he asks as Illya sits back down and steals his tea again.

"Tracking some data from here," Illya mutters over the rim of the mug. "Get my laptop, *da*? It's on counter." Solo heaves a theatrical sigh, but gets up and pads past her out of sight. A few moments later he returns, handing over the laptop in return for the tea. Illya immediately opens it up and starts typing.

"He won't look up from that screen for at least ten minutes," Solo says, a fond look on his face as he watches Illya. "Seriously, nothing short of a disaster will get him to move. Or if I

tip the vodka down the sink.”

“Touch my vodka and I sell your Renoir on black market, Cowboy,” Illya says gruffly, eyes not leaving his screen.

All of her thoughts shudder and grind to a halt, and she gapes at him. “You have a *Renoir*?” she asks. “A fucking *Renoir*? How the fuck do you afford that?”

Solo almost looks sheepish. “And here begins the long and complicated story as to how I ended up in the CIA,” he says. Illya scoffs, but doesn’t say anything, and Solo grins. “Okay, so it’s not that complicated. Remember how I said that my route to academia was unusual? The whole thing is a very long story that I don’t particularly want to rehash, but let’s just say I had certain talents regarding art that got picked up by the CIA. For a long time, I was their expert in such topics.”

Illya scoffs again, and shakes his head. “Don’t give them inch of credit, Cowboy,” he mutters, and Solo shoots him a look.

“I was trying to simplify a long and bloody stretch of my life down to something less horrible,” he snaps at Illya, but there doesn’t seem to really be any heat behind his words. He turns back to her. “Anyway. I’ve always had an interest in art, and dabbled constantly whilst in the CIA, even if they hated me doing so.”

“Hate isn’t a strong enough word for it,” Illya mutters, and Solo shushes him.

“You weren’t even there,” he points out, resting his hand on Illya’s leg. He smooths his thumb over Illya’s thigh. “Stop complaining and do whatever our overlord has asked of you.”

Cassie just stares at him. “So, are you even...is your degree even real?”

Illya laughs at that, and Solo digs his thumb in just above his knee. “Stop it, you,” he chides. “You’re not helpful.” He sighs. “I don’t know why I married him.”

“My extensive explosives knowledge and my armoury,” Illya mutters, shooting Solo a look. “And because Gaby was ready to knock us both out and do the ceremony herself if we didn’t get our act together.” For a moment, there’s a silent conversation between the two of them, and Cassie feels incredibly like the outsider, sitting in their home, watching the two of them have an entire conversation without words.

“So, your degree isn’t real?” she asks, and the moment breaks and falls away.

“It is,” Solo says with a laugh. “UNCLE allowed me to do my PhD in my spare time, little by little. It was done under more unusual circumstances than most, but it is real.”

“Monte Carlo,” Illya says, seemingly as a reminder, and Solo laughs again.

“Yes, I know, Monte Carlo was hell and you don’t need to remind me every single day,” he says. She arches a brow. “I was writing part of my dissertation whilst on assignment in Monte Carlo,” he explains. “Let’s just say nothing went to plan in any way, shape or form. At the

end of it, Illya gave me grief for trying to save my laptop with my half-written dissertation on it in the middle of a firefight.”

“To be fair, I think any graduate student would risk that for their dissertation,” Cassie says, and she sets down her mug of tea on the coffee table. Solo instantly puts a coaster under it, and Illya rolls his eyes. “So, you are actually a professor.”

“I am actually a professor,” Solo confirms with a grin. “And that’s all I am, now.”

“Not quite,” Illya mutters, and Solo digs his thumb in above his knee again.

“Hush, you,” he says fondly. “Stop trying to terrorise the poor arts student. Do your work, and I won’t get Gaby complaining at me tomorrow.”

“Wait,” she says, holding up a hand. “This is all getting way out of hand. First things first. You have a Renoir. How?”

“An old and very rich friend gave it to me as a gift for something I did for him whilst in the CIA,” Solo says. He says it so easily, without hesitation, but still something makes her pause. Maybe it’s the slightest of smirks curling the corners of Illya’s lips, the way that Solo didn’t even pause before answering. She knows that an arts professor could never afford a house like this, let alone everything in it, and she’s only seen the living room. She wonders how much intelligence agencies pay.

Still, she’s British, which means she doesn’t ask about money. She stares at the science fiction book on the coffee table that clashes so much with what she knows of Solo that it must belong to Illya. “This is...it’s a lot,” she gets out. “I mean...”

“Of course,” Solo says. “And Cassie, you don’t have to stay here.”

“Streets are getting worse,” Illya mutters, and Solo gives him a look.

“If you’re not comfortable staying here, then I can take you anywhere you want to go,” Solo says, pushing at Illya’s laptop to make him look back to his work. “At any point, if you want to leave you only have to ask. If it gets to two in the morning and you suddenly decide that you absolutely have to get home, or get somewhere else, then you come and wake us up, and I will do my best to get you there. Can you drive?”

“Yeah, I passed my test three years ago,” she says, and Solo nods.

“I’m going to leave the car keys downstairs,” he says. “You can leave at any time. For my peace of mind, I would somewhat prefer you to stay here, because we are very safe here, but you can leave whenever you want. I promise you that.”

She nods. “Okay,” she says. “Uh, at the moment I’d like to stay, if that’s okay. I don’t think London is safe right now.”

“It really isn’t,” Illya says. “I wouldn’t like to drive across it right now, and it’s getting closer to us.” He glances up at her. “Don’t worry, this place is probably safest house outside of Buckingham Palace right now.”

“Are you serious?” she asks. “Like, really?”

Illya looks away from his laptop long enough to give her a wolfish grin. “I am retired special agent,” he says. “I have lots of time on my hands. It’s fun to play.”

“By play,” Solo adds wryly, “he means constantly disrupting the house and making Laika freak out by testing new security measures at two in the morning. It’s very annoying, but I indulge him because he’s unemployed and bored.”

She nods, and runs her hand through her hair. “How come you only...retired recently?” she asks. “Solo, you’ve been at the Cortauld for years now.”

Something in Solo’s expression shuts off. “Have you eaten?” he asks abruptly. When she says she’s only had a sandwich since lunch, he gets to his feet. “I’ll make something easy,” he says as he heads past her towards what must be the kitchen. “Pasta, maybe. It’ll do you some good to get something to eat.”

He disappears, and there’s a sudden stab of guilt as she looks at Illya. “Did I overstep?” she asks. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

Illya sighs, and sets his laptop down. His gaze drifts over her head for a long moment, presumably watching Solo in the kitchen. “No, it’s okay,” he says softly. “It’s difficult subject for him sometimes. And you had no way to know.”

He leans forwards and types a few lines of something on his laptop, and then leans back in the armchair. “Napoleon and I, we came into this life in very different ways,” he says eventually. “And he...he was not meant for it. He was brilliant at it, because that is who he is, but he was meant to roam art galleries across Europe, and charm entire cities into falling in love with him.”

“Flatterer,” Solo calls out from the kitchen, and Cassie jumps. A smile flickers across Illya’s face.

“What we did was not glamorous,” he says quietly. “Often it was dirty, and difficult, and in shadows. But we were tied to it once we were in. We couldn’t get out. Napoleon especially.” He sighs, and glances down at his laptop briefly. “The CIA had him on... a sentence. He had to serve number of years with them before being allowed to leave. When we went to UNCLE, that stayed.”

“After a while...” Illya sighs again, and for a moment his gaze drops and becomes distant. “I knew he wanted out,” he explains. “I could tell. But he had two years left on his sentence with CIA. With our job, it is dangerous to...to want to leave, but not be able to. It gets you hurt.” He shrugs. “I couldn’t have that. I went to our boss, and I traded his years for mine. He left, and I took final two years of his sentence.”

“We got married seven months, almost to the day, after that.”

She jumps at Solo’s voice, and twists to see him standing in the entrance to the kitchen. He’s wearing an apron. She blinks, and the pattern on it resolves into tiny cowboys on horses,

jumping over cacti. It's the most ridiculous thing she ever could have imagined him wearing, and she stares at it for a long, long moment whilst her mind frantically scrambles to rearrange itself to fit with everything she's just learnt.

He's not looking at her. There's a fond smile on his face and he's staring over her head. When she twists back to Illya, he's looking back at his laptop, but he's smirking, and twisting the band of his wedding ring around his finger with his thumb. "Get back to cooking, Cowboy," he says. "Someone has to convince neighbours we're real people and not sent from hell to destroy world with our homosexual ways."

"If only we could, Peril," Solo says wistfully, but he turns back to the kitchen. Illya snorts, and shakes his head.

"Were you any good?"

Illya looks up at her, an amused tilt to her lips. She blushes, but the question had slipped from her lips without it meaning to, and it's too late to take it back now. "At what you did," she clarifies. "Were you any good?"

Illya looks amused. "We were the best," he says simply.

She arches a brow. "That sounds implausible."

Illya just shakes his head. "There are fewer of us than you think," he says. "We were best in our agencies. When we teamed up in UNCLE we were, whilst there, the best." He shrugs. "It was what we did, what we had been trained for. I had been in army since sixteen, been trained for this since teenager. And we were both competitive, ambitious enough to be good but not enough to want to be men giving out orders at top. It made us the best."

He stares at his laptop for a minute, typing something. There's a frown on his face as he stares at the screen. "Is it getting worse?" she asks.

Illya just hums. "They're getting smarter about it," he murmurs. "Police are stretched." He looks up at her. "Don't worry, army is standing by but won't be deployed. This is not America. Police here actually work."

"I resent that!" Solo calls from the kitchen, and Illya rolls his eyes.

"Don't answer, you'll just encourage him," he tells Cassie. "He is hopeless American at heart. Still thinks capitalism is good idea." Solo calls something from the kitchen, but it's in another language, what sounds like Russian. Illya replies in the same language, grinning over her head at Solo. His gaze drops back down to his laptop eventually, the grin still tugging at his lips. It's only a few moments before he pauses, and looks up at her.

"He means it, you know," Illya says softly.

"What, all of this, the spies and agencies and everything?" she asks. "Somehow, I don't think he could really be making this all up. Like, what would be the point?"

Illya smiles briefly, and ruffles Laika's head where she sits at his feet. She rolls over, and he scratches at her belly for a minute. "No, I meant about car," he says. "If you don't feel safe here you can take it and drive away. We'd prefer it if you didn't, of course, but only because we wouldn't know if you were safe, and it would be pain to find car after." He huffs a laugh. "If you want to leave at two in morning, he will get up and drive you anywhere. I will as well."

"Thanks," she says slowly. "But I'm not going to steal your car."

Illya shrugs. "Would give Napoleon excuse to buy Jaguar he's always wanted," he says. "I won't let him get one. Completely pointless for London."

"Just you wait," Solo calls out from the kitchen. "We're going to retire properly to the country eventually, and then I'll buy a Range Rover and be really pretentious. I might even wear tweed."

"I will *burn* your Renoir," Illya hisses. "You hate my flat caps, you steal them constantly, and you want to wear *tweed*? I will..." He suddenly grins slowly. "I will tell Gaby about Taiwan," he says. "I will tell her *everything*."

She can't see Solo's face, but his voice sounds horrified enough. "You wouldn't," he says. "Not Taiwan."

"Promise me you'll never buy tweed and I won't," Illya bargains, and she can't help but laugh at this. She has no idea what is going on, really, no idea what her life has suddenly become. She doesn't know what happened in Taiwan or how her arts professor has a Renoir or how she suddenly knows two people who were once the best in the world at their jobs, and that their jobs were what she thought only existed in movies. She starts laughing and suddenly she doesn't know how to stop, doesn't know how to catch her breath. She can feel tears forming in her eyes and then running down her cheeks, and she can see them dripping down onto the carpet but she still can't stop them, can't do anything but gasp for breath as everything slams into her at once.

"It's okay," a low voice murmurs, and there's a solid weight between her shoulder blades, pushing her forwards until she's leaning over her knees. There's a sudden déjà vu where she can remember sitting in Solo's office last year, teetering on the brink of a full-blown panic attack, and it makes her laugh again so she can't breathe, she can feel her traitorous lungs heaving in her chest and there's nothing she can do about it.

"It's okay," the low voice says. "It's okay, you're safe here. This is going to pass and you'll be okay in a few minutes. That's all it's going to take, and then you'll be okay again. You're safe here. I promise that you're safe here. Just breathe in." She tries, a shuddering breath somehow making her way into her lungs, and she can feel a hand smooth down her back. "There we go," he says. "And another."

She gets another breath, and it comes just a little easier than the last, and then the next is a little easier, until she's breathing deeply, staring at the carpet of Solo's living room. She clears her throat, and wipes at her face. "Sorry," she mutters.



She hears someone sigh, and looks up to see Illya crouched in front of her, his laptop haphazardly shoved to one side, almost falling off the coffee table. “You don’t have to be sorry,” he says softly, and his accent is thicker than it was earlier. “But you’ll say sorry anyway. I understand.”

She wipes at her eyes again. “Yeah,” she mutters. There’s a whine and then a wet nose pushes into her hands as Laika nearly bowls Illya over as she sits in front of her. She ruffles her fur, and her breath hitches. “God, this is so embarrassing.”

Illya grimaces. “I know,” he says. “It really is awful sometimes. But you have good reason. Tonight, it was not easy for you.” He hesitates. “I have combat fatigue. PTSD, they call it here. I know how it feels.”

She just nods, and Illya hands her a couple of tissues. “Napoleon is nearly done with cooking, if you’re up to eating,” he says. “Pasta, I think. Promise he is good cook.”

“I’m an excellent cook and you know it, Peril,” Solo calls out from the kitchen. She can hear his footsteps as he comes closer, and without her meaning to, her breath hitches. Illya glances up, an unreadable expression on his face, and the footsteps stop.

Time slips past her, and soon she can breathe easily. She stuffs the tissues into her pocket and rubs her hand over her face. “What do you want to do, Cassie?” Illya asks. “Do you want to just go upstairs and sleep, or do you want some food?”

“Uh, food first,” she manages to say, and she gets to her feet without stumbling. Illya gathers up his laptop and the forgotten mugs of tea, and follows her through. The kitchen is large, open-plan, and looks like the living room, just sleek enough to probably be hideously expensive without looking like it is. Solo is at the stove, plating up what looks like spaghetti. He’s still in that apron, and she stares at it again, tracing the pattern of cowboys across it.

“Here,” Solo says, handing her a plate and gesturing at the kitchen table. There’s cutlery and glasses already set out, and she takes a seat as Illya grabs napkins out of a drawer. “You’re not allergic to anything, are you?”

“Hay fever, but that’s it,” she replies. She takes a bite of the pasta, and then pauses. “This is really good.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Solo says wryly. He sits opposite her. “It’s one of my more innocuous hobbies, I suppose. Good way to relax after a long day of dealing with freshers.” Illya snorts at that, and she manages a smile. It’s a strange feeling, sitting at the table with them, riots on the streets outside.

They show her to a guest bedroom upstairs afterwards, dig out some clothes that Gaby keeps at theirs for her to sleep in. “Anything at all, you wake us up,” Solo says. “Our room is down the hall on the left. You can have Laika in your room as well, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, actually,” she mutters. “I’d...yeah, I’d like that. She’ll be okay with it?”

“She’ll love it,” Illya says dryly. “She isn’t allowed upstairs normally.” He whistles, and there’s the skittering of claws as Laika comes running. She stops at the bottom of the stairs, ears cocked, and Illya sighs heavily before whistling again.

She doesn’t think she’s ever seen a dog look that happy as it bounds up the stairs and sits in front of Illya, tail wagging so hard half of her body is vibrating. Illya gives Solo a long-suffering look, and then points her into the guest bedroom. “Don’t let her on bed if you want to sleep at all,” he says as Laika bounds past her and into the room. “She’s awful.”

They go back downstairs, Illya muttering something about Gaby and tracking the code. She stands in the doorway for a long moment, and then slowly pulls the door to, until there’s just a sliver of light coming through the crack. She doesn’t think she’ll ever manage to get to sleep with everything that has happened, but despite it all, she’s out as soon as she’s under a duvet that feels like it’s worth more than her entire bed, and her head hits the inordinately expensive pillow.

## Chapter End Notes

I debated which intelligence agency to put Illya into, as the KGB split up into multiple agencies upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but the SVR is I think the closest equivalence in the modern day. Illya would have been GRU when he was in the spetsnaz, I think, but I don’t understand the intricacies of Russian intelligence services.

Renoir is a famous French artist from the Impressionist movement, in the early 1900s. And I think we all know how Napoleon really got that painting...

A Range Rover is the ultimate pretentious car for rich city people who move out to the countryside in England. I’m from the countryside, lived there most my life, and I can always tell who is also from the countryside and who are 'townies' based on their cars—namely how dirty they are, if they are white (nobody from the countryside has a white car, it’s a terrible idea) and how willing they are to drive their car into the hedge to get past you on a narrow lane.

Honestly this was one of my favourite chapters to write, finally getting to write the interactions between Napoleon and Illya. This was one of the reasons I did stick with this outside pov, it enables me to write so many of the quiet moments between them, like in this chapter. I think one of my favourite lines I’ve ever written is what Illya says about Napoleon: 'he was meant to roam art galleries across Europe and charm entire cities into falling in love with him'.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

Oh look, we're snowed in.

Not actually, but that's pretty much how every southerner is reacting to the British weather right now. It's always funny and slightly sad just how unprepared we are for weather like this, though to be fair, it is getting down to -15C in some places, apparently, and that is definitely not usual for the south of the UK!

Anyway, I'm hoping the snow will postpone a job interview for a year in industry that I don't want to go to, so fingers crossed. Have another chapter. This one is slightly shorter because of how the chapters fall out, but the night isn't over yet. This one in particular gets quite introspective and almost angsty. You'll see what I mean.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She wakes up in a dark room, in a bed that doesn't feel right, and there's a moment of bright panic until she realises where she is, what happened yesterday. When she rolls over to check the time, it's barely two in the morning, and she groans.

There's a whine, and she jumps when she realises Laika is standing by the bed. The moment she reaches out there's a wet nose being pressed into her hand, and Laika whines again. "What is it?" she asks, getting out of bed and switching on the light. Laika runs to the door and whines again.

"Dogs," she mutters as she finds her shoes. As soon as she opens the door Laika is out and running down the stairs, claws skittering on the hallway floor. There's a soft murmur of surprise, and she realises someone is downstairs.

Illya is sitting in the living room, laptop in front of him. He's petting Laika as she comes through the doorway, rubbing at her fur. "Can't sleep?" he asks, looking up at her.

She shrugs. "Laika woke me up. Thought there might be...I don't know, something with the riots going on."

Illya shakes his head, taking a sip from what looks like a mug of coffee on the table. "They're close, but not near enough for worry," he says. "It's not dying down yet, though. Will get worse as long as it's dark." He shrugs. "Not too bad. British are too reserved to really riot properly."

"Oh, and I suppose you'd know what a real riot is?" she asks, settling in one of the armchairs and curling up her feet under her. "What, do the Russians do it much better?"

Illya just looks mildly amused. “Too cold to riot in Moscow,” he says. “Too much snow. But I was in Egypt during Arab Spring. Yemen during beginning of civil war. Those were riots. Those were...those were life or death. This is few people stirring up unrest, and lot more people following because they can.”

“It started over good causes,” she feels compelled to say. “And just got out of hand, it looks like.”

Illya hums. “Was pushed out of hand,” he mutters. “Was pushed across city. Things like this, they’re easy to engineer. A few angry people in right places, and everyone else follows.” He sighs, running a hand across his face, and stares at his laptop. “They’re good at it, whoever is pulling strings. Problem for them is, I’m better.”

“What are you actually doing?” she asks. “What is on that laptop?”

Illya smiles slightly, but he looks tired. “Better if I don’t tell you,” he says. “Sorry. Napoleon was right about...plausible deniability, he called it.” He sighs when she doesn’t look away. “In very broad terms, I’m trying to find who is behind some of this.” He types a few more lines of something, and then sets his laptop back down on the coffee table. “Have to let program run,” he explains. “Lot of this work is much more boring than the movies say.”

She nods. “I would have no idea,” she says. Illya hums, and sips at his coffee. “Have you slept at all?” she asks. “No offence, but you look tired.”

Illya just shakes his head. “Can’t sleep with all this going on, and will just keep Napoleon up if I try. Decided to stay down here and do what work I can. I can sleep in tomorrow.”

“Can I ask you something?” she asks. Illya shrugs, and then nods. She pauses. “Will you answer it?”

At that, Illya huffs a laugh. “Now you’re thinking,” he says. “I might. Depends what you ask.”

She doesn’t know why the question is on her lips, doesn’t know why she’s suddenly able to ask it now, but she figures that this day has been strange enough, and she might as well ask whilst she can. “Why didn’t you go in when Gaby called?” she asks. “That’s what she was asking, wasn’t it, that you go in and help on the ground or whatever. Why didn’t you?”

Illya looks at her for a long moment, and she thinks he isn’t going to answer until he actually speaks. “It becomes all there is,” he says eventually. “What we did. It becomes everything. Neither of us can forget it. It’s easier for Napoleon, in a way, because he had life before it, but I grew up with it. I was never going anywhere else.”

He rubs his hand over his face. “Stepping away was hard,” he admits. “If not for Napoleon, if not for him already being out and being here, I don’t know I would have been brave enough to walk away. And then job would have killed me, in the end.” She can’t help but feel horror at that, but it’s abstract in the way that the thought of dying is abstract, in the way that she can see this man sitting in front of her, tired and in rumpled clothes, coffee in hand as he stifles a

yawn. It's enough that she can put aside the thought of what might have been, enough for her to just nod, eventually.

"I made promise to Napoleon," Illya explains. "That I wouldn't go back unless I really was needed, unless it became so dire we were only thing that could help. So today, when Gaby called...other people could do job she wanted me to do. So I said no."

He stares at his laptop for a moment, and then leans back into the sofa. "It is not easy thing, to love another spy. It was hard for both of us. Finding each other, keeping each other, getting through everything to come out other side. We're finally here, so I won't give Napoleon reason to worry like that again." He smiles slightly. "He would watch me walk away into danger every time, if he knew I wanted to do it. He would hate it, but he would let me go. So I don't."

"How do you know that?" she asks.

Illya just smiles, a quick upturn of his lips at the corners of his mouth. "Because I would do same for him," he replies simply. He downs the dregs of his coffee. "He's been there through everything, through my combat fatigue and doubts over retiring and...everything. I owe him more than I can ever pay."

"Yeah, well I suppose that's how relationships work," she murmurs. "You owe each other, constantly, all the time, for everything. I bet he thinks he owes you more than he could ever repay as well."

Illya snorts at that. "I'm sure he does," he mutters. He sighs, and grabs the mug off the coffee table. "I'll put some more on," he says as he gets to his feet. "Want anything?"

"Yeah, some tea would be nice, actually," she says. "It's no bother though, I can make some."

Illya waves her down as she tries to get to her feet. "You are guest," he says. "Napoleon will be very cross with me if I let you make your own tea." He bustles around in the kitchen for a few minutes, and she messes with Laika's fur, rubbing at her belly when she rolls over. Laika lets her tongue loll out of her mouth, and wriggles on her back.

"She's hopeless," Illya says as he comes back into the living room, handing her a cup of tea. "I don't know why Napoleon persuaded me to get her." He sits back on the sofa, pulling his laptop towards him and taking a gulp of coffee that's obviously too hot, given how he nearly spits it back into the mug.

"I thought you liked dogs," she says. "And she's pretty cool, by the way. Very obedient, anyway."

Illya snorts. "When she wants to be," he mutters. He studies his laptop again, typing a few lines of something, and she sips at her tea.

"It took me a long time," he says abruptly. She looks away from the various photos on the mantelpiece and shelves around the room, snapshots of their lives. There's one on the

mantelpiece that is obviously their wedding day, both of them in tuxes on the steps of some hall.

“What did?” she asks.

Illya doesn’t look up from his laptop, but he stops typing. “To work out that world keeps going without me there,” he murmurs. “That I wasn’t needed to save it. That’s why I didn’t go, when Gaby asked. If I start thinking that again, then I won’t be able to stay away.” He sighs, taking a gulp of coffee. “Like I said, it becomes everything. You become everything. You start thinking nobody else can do what you do. When you start thinking that, that’s when you should retire. There will always be somebody to take your place.”

“That’s morbid,” she mutters, and a smile tugs at Illya’s lips.

“It’s reassuring,” he counters. “To know I can walk away and people won’t die because of it. To know I can have this, this life, and not feel guilty.” He shrugs, and the smile turns self-deprecating. “That’s idea, anyway. Bit harder to...what is phrase? Put in use?”

“Put into practice,” she says. Illya nods, but doesn’t say anything, and starts typing again. She looks around the room. “Can I turn on the tv?”

“The...thing, tv stick, whatever, is above it,” Illya says, waving a hand in the vague direction of the tv. “Nothing loud, please. Napoleon wakes easily.”

She gets up to fetch the remote and flicks through the channels. At two in the morning there’s little on, but she finds some Attenborough repeat and puts on the subtitles. She’s seen it before, but it’s something to distract her. When she’d flicked through a news channel it had been filled with images of the riots, people flooding down streets, shop windows smashed in, a building on fire. She’d switched over quickly. It’s easier watching some random documentary about penguins than thinking about what’s going on outside. She catches Illya watching over his laptop occasionally, even as he’s typing.

The documentary is about halfway through when something starts beeping from Illya’s laptop. She half glances over her shoulder towards him, and then twists in her chair when she sees the look on his face. “What is it?”

Illya is typing furiously already, and doesn’t look up. “Get Napoleon,” he spits. “Get him up.”

There’s something in his voice that makes her not even hesitate. She jumps to her feet and runs up the stairs, feet pounding along with her heart as she runs down the hall. “Solo,” she calls out as she reaches the door. There’s a brief moment of hesitation before she shoves it open. “Solo!”

She barely takes in the room before Solo is sitting up in bed, awake in a split second. He pushes back the covers and jumps to his feet. “What is it?” he asks, but he’s already pulling on a jumper and pushing past her into the hallway.

“Illya said to get you,” she says, running after him as he heads downstairs. “Sounds urgent.”

Solo is already heading into the living room, and she follows on his heels. Illya all but throws his laptop at Solo. "Look," he says, and Solo stares at the laptop as he sits on the edge of the coffee table. "I was hacking firewall to get trace, and this..." He switches languages, English evidently not enough to get everything across properly, and there's a look of cold fury that slowly appears across Solo's face as he listens and reads through the code.

"Gaby?" he asks, and Illya shakes his head.

"Haven't tried yet," he replies. He takes the laptop back and swears under his breath. He starts typing, the code flowing across the screen faster than she can read it. "Only just saw it. Get her on phone now. They need to fix gap before it gets worse. I'm doing what I can now, but..."

Solo nods, and grabs Illya's phone off the coffee table. "Gaby," he says as soon as he's connected. "Peril found a gap. Get one of your tech nerds on it, and do it now. He's trying to counter them right now, but it's not safe for us." He listens, and then presses the phone to his chest. "Peril, get the information to Gaby's tech nerds. They've got a ten-person team ready to deal with it."

Illya just nods, still typing furiously. "Check news," he gets out. "Where riots are. Are already close. If they track me, then they can..."

"Get them heading this way," Solo finishes. "Or come this way themselves." He frowns. "Get that sent off to Gaby's people as soon as, and we'll deal with what comes next." Illya nods again, and just keeps typing.

Gaby shouts something through the phone that is loud enough for even Cassie to hear, standing in the doorway, and Solo puts the phone back to his ear. "I don't know," he snaps down the phone. "I'm not exactly fluent in code like Peril is. He'll get it done. And then I think we're going to have our own problems, darling. You'll have to save the country on your own."

He nods, looking over Illya's shoulder. "I think he's nearly done," Solo says into the phone. Illya grunts, and then mutters something in Russian. "One more minute," Solo clarifies. Illya's face is blank, the only thing a slight tick in his jaw. Solo's hand hovers over Illya's shoulder, not quite touching, as if he desperately wants to offer something but doesn't know what, or how.

Finally, Illya slumps back on the sofa. "Done," he mutters. Solo hums, telling Gaby and then hanging up the phone, and drops his hand to Illya's shoulder. He rubs his thumb along Illya's collarbone.

"It's out of your hands," he says softly. "Nothing to do now."

Illya gets up abruptly, shaking Solo off. "More to come," he mutters as he heads across the room. "Check riots again. How much time?"

Solo is already grabbing Illya's laptop. "Met police are reporting spreads to...shit, only about five streets from here," he says. Illya nods as he crouches down by one of the bookshelves.

She watches, still frozen in the doorway, as he pulls something up and reaches under one of the books. When he straightens up, there's a gun in his hand.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ!" she yelps. "That's a.... you keep a *gun* in your bookshelf?"

Illya just looks at her as he tucks the gun somewhere out of sight on his person. "What do you think we did as spies?" he asks. "And it's not just one gun in bookshelf."

Solo sighs in exasperation. "Not helping, Peril," he grinds out. "Cassie. Come sit in the kitchen. I promise Illya knows what he is doing." He guides her into the kitchen, but she doesn't miss the glare he levels over his shoulder at Illya, nor the way Illya ignores it and keeps unearthing weapons from around the living room.

## Chapter End Notes

Oh, Illya.

I did really like writing these parts, rationalising to myself as much as to you guys what happened to make Illya and Napoleon retire, why they are where they are right now. Oh, and if I haven't mentioned it before, I am currently working on a sequel to this story! It's early days yet, but I do finally have a plot bashed out. It just needs to be written now...

Things are going to continue in the next chapter- there's more to come!



# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

Ughhhh so I had that interview today and I think it went well enough, but I had pretty much a five hour round trip for an hour interview and I am so tired... Anyway, here's another chapter- this one gets angsty and mushy and I loved writing the final parts of it between Illya and Napoleon. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Look,” Solo says with a sigh as he ushers her to a chair at the table. “If this is seriously freaking you out, if you really want to leave, then I’ll do my best to get you somewhere safe. If you want.”

She stares at him. “Why do you keep insisting that I know I can leave at any time?” she asks, purposefully ignoring the clicks of machinery from the living room.

“Because I don’t want to appear as if I’m kidnapping you?” Solo replies wryly. When she just looks at him, the smirk tugging at his lips disappears. “I don’t like thinking that you’re here because I’ve just dragged you along,” he says. “Holding someone against their will, no matter how good our intentions, is not something Peril and I ever intend to do. And we’ll leave that there.”

Even at gone two in the morning, after the day they’ve had, she’s smart enough to know that is something she shouldn’t ask about further. She just nods, feeling distantly like she’s been doing a lot of that recently. Solo grabs Illya’s laptop and listens in to the Met police chatter, occasionally calling out updates to Illya. She only looks at the living room once, enough to see significantly more weapons than were there before. After that, she just stares at the kitchen table.

It must only be a few minutes before Solo frowns, and takes the laptop into the living room. Against her better judgement she follows, to see Illya fiddling with what looks like a shoulder holster. “Might be worth going out there, Peril,” Solo says, putting the laptop down and spinning it so Illya can see whatever is on the screen. “Got enough flash-bangs?”

Illya shakes his head, screwing what looks horribly like a silencer onto a handgun. “I know you are joking, Cowboy, but I would like them right now,” he mutters, slotting the gun into a holster. “I’ll sweep street, scare off anyone. Will deal with them if they decide to come themselves. Watch from cameras, *da*?”

Solo nods. He steps up to Illya, stroking a hand across his jaw. “Give them hell, Peril,” he murmurs.

There's a fond smile on Illya's face, and he presses a quick kiss to Solo's lips. "Always do," he replies. Solo steps back, and Illya nods. In another moment he's gone, the door shutting behind him.

Solo sighs, and rubs a hand over his face. "Right," he says. "I would say this calls for some scotch, but I feel like that sets a terrible example. Besides, it really should wait until this is all over."

"I mean, I'd love some scotch," she says. "Anything with alcohol in it, really. But yeah, maybe it isn't the best idea right now." She follows him into the kitchen, where he pulls open a cupboard, and then precedes to remove the false back to reveal a monitor.

"Street cameras," he explains as he sets it up. "Peril set them up when we moved in. Don't bother staring at them, though. Chances are you won't see him unless he wants you to." He sighs, and puts on the kettle. "Tea?"

"I thought Americans were meant to hate tea," Cassie says, but she nods anyway, and gets up to get the milk out of the fridge. Solo huffs a laugh, but it's strained. She sees him glancing up at the video feeds, sees him turn to the laptop every few seconds, but she doesn't say anything.

"I'm more a citizen of the world than American at this point," he says. "As Gaby likes to put it when I'm annoying her. I've probably spent more time in different countries in total than I have in the States. Left there as soon as I could." He shakes his head. "But that's a story for another time."

He checks the cameras again, and then the laptop. She can't see anything on the camera feeds, but then she has no idea what she's looking for. Whatever is on the laptop is just gibberish to her.

"Anyway," Solo says, pouring out two mugs and poking at the tea bags with a spoon, "my old boss, Waverly, was always drinking tea. He'd be up giving us briefings at half three in the morning, that godawful time when nothing feels real, like somebody was tired and screwed up the Matrix, and he'd be fresh as a daisy. Every single damn time. And then once he offered us some, after a particularly difficult job. Turns out the stuff is quite good. Peril gave me grief about it for weeks."

"Well, if you want to fit in here, you have to learn to like this stuff," she says, adding a teaspoon of sugar, and then another, to her mug. It was gone two in the morning, she was entitled to more sugar in her tea. "It's a more innocuous way of keeping up a caffeine addiction than coffee."

Solo sits down opposite her, pulling the laptop towards him. She doesn't miss how he sits so he can see the camera feeds from the cupboard, nor that he puts himself between her and the front door. She wonders if there are any weapons in this room as well, and glances around, trying to work out where they might be.

Solo's lips quirk in a smile. "You won't guess where they are," he says. "Peril gets very inventive when it comes to stashing things. Took me over a week to work out where he was

hiding the engagement rings.”

He keeps talking, letting her draw one small anecdote after another from him. Slowly, over the minutes spent sat at that kitchen table, mugs of tea in hand, it’s enough that she relaxes a little, slumping in her chair and resting her head in her hands.

“This is fucking weird,” she murmurs, and Solo looks away from the laptop and up at her. There’s a small frown on his face, but it smooths out quickly enough that in her tiredness, she ignores it.

“Which part?” he asks wryly. “Or just the whole experience.”

She shrugs. “I don’t even know anymore,” she replies. “Like, the whole thing has surpassed itself. Riots in London, for God’s sake.”

“Oh, this old city has weathered much more than a few idiots and a lot more people stampeding after them like sheep,” Solo says. “It’ll be over by the morning, I’ll bet. A couple of weeks to sort out the aftermath, and then everyone will move on.” He smiles slightly. “The British are nothing if not excellent at taking the blows, getting back up and making a cuppa.”

Five minutes later, Solo trails off halfway through some story about freshers at the Institute. She looks up to see him studying the camera feed, a frown on his face.

“What is it?” she asks, but he just holds up one hand, and keeps watching. She tries to see over his shoulder, but only glimpses shadows moving within other shadows. She wishes there was some sort of audio.

Solo gets to his feet, and reaches behind the camera feed. He pulls out a handgun, but keeps it lowered. “Just in case,” he murmurs to her. “Stay here.”

She watches him, her heart racing, trying to leap up and claw at her throat as he moves into the living room, padding quietly along the wall to reach the large windows at the front. The curtains are drawn, and he doesn’t pull them back or open a gap. He just stands there, gun pointed at the floor, head down as if he’s listening.

She tries to hear past the roaring in her own ears, but in the kitchen, she can’t hear anything from outside. Her hands are clammy, slipping around her mug, and she can see it slipping from her grasp and shattering on the tile floor. She puts it down before she breaks anything.

Solo doesn’t say anything, and she watches as he paces around the two rooms of the house, moving from the kitchen to check the cameras and laptop, out to the living room to pause beside the windows. She notices that he never moves out of her line of sight, where she’s sat clutching her mug of cooling tea in the kitchen. And through it all, she doesn’t hear anything from outside.

There’s nothing on the street cameras that she can see in the darkness, nothing beyond vague movements within shadows that make no sense to her. Solo’s frown only deepens as the minutes stretch on, his movements becoming more and more restless as he prowls the house. She watches the clock on the kitchen wall tick on, the minute hand slowly creeping its way

around the face. Nobody has turned off the tv, and the low noise of yet more Attenborough filters through the house. She thinks he's talking about seals, but she can't see the tv from where she's sitting.

There's the sudden noise of the latch at the door, and then a creak as it's pushed open. Solo pauses, gun pointed at the floor. "Gave them hell, Peril?" he calls out.

"Of course I did," comes the reply, and Illya steps through the door. "All clear, Cowboy."

She can't help the sigh of relief that rushes past her lips, and it seems that neither can Solo, given how he briefly shuts his eyes and tilts his head back. "Good," he murmurs. "Thank God for that."

Illya steps into the living room. There's a gun in his hand, pointed at the floor.

"Oh god," she hears herself say faintly. "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ." She takes a breath, and shoves at the incoherent mass in her mind, forcing it into a ball, and then putting rubber bands around it all. It starts to leak out through the gaps, so she gets duct tape and wraps the whole thing up, and chucks it in a corner of her mind. It tries to roll back, and she shoves at it with both hands until it falls into the corner, hard enough that she thinks she might have left a dent somewhere.

She can't help but snort at her own imagery. Even for an arts student, that was horrifically full of metaphors.

Solo reaches for Illya's hand and squeezes it briefly, before letting go. Illya barely looks at him as he snatches up his phone from the table and dials. "Chop shop girl," he says into the phone as soon as it connects, his voice eerily blank. "Need pick up for angry fascist in dumpster at end of street. Send your people."

He pauses for a moment, listening. Solo moves past him into the kitchen, quietly checking the cameras and the laptop. "Just keep quiet for a moment," he murmurs to her. "Peril takes a couple minutes to come down from these things."

In the living room, Illya nods at whatever Gaby says as he checks out the windows. "Unconscious now, but will be angry later. Will have information useful to you." He pauses again. "No, I didn't have time to interrogate. Was more concerned with riots and not being stabbed. Get your own people on it."

Solo moves quietly into the living room. "Hey Peril," he says softly. "Hand the phone over for a second, go sort out your weapons. Don't need to scare Cassie any more than we already have, okay?"

Illya stares at him, and then just hands the phone over. He stalks back to the edge of the windows, and then through into the kitchen and the cameras there. She tries to make herself even smaller in her chair at the table.

"He'll be okay," Solo is saying into the phone. His eyes track Illya as he prowls around the house, disarming as he goes until there aren't any weapons left to see. "But some people

around the area, if you could spare them, would be appreciated. Legitimate risk here, now.” He watches Illya as he haunts the windows for a few moments. “Listen Gaby, I’d better go. You’ve got it all handled. We’ll see you here sometime soon, okay?” He hangs up, and she doesn’t miss how he breathes out, takes a moment just standing there in the middle of the living room with his eyes squeezed shut.

“Right,” he says after a second. “Peril, what’s the prognosis?”

Illya stops his prowling. “One of them came this way, I disabled him,” he says. His voice is eerily blank again, monotonous in a way that makes her shiver. “Rioters were close. They were persuaded to go elsewhere. Police are beginning to control spread more effectively.”

Solo nods. “Well, that’s all good,” he says. “Nothing we can do now but monitor it.” He heads into the kitchen and reaches for the fridge. “This calls for hot chocolate, I think.” His hand skates across Illya’s back as he passes him, and Illya almost shivers.

The three of them end up sitting around the kitchen table, sipping at hot chocolate. She isn’t sure if it’s because she’s tired, awake at gone three in the morning now, or if it’s because there’s a ball of something that she doesn’t understand, taped up and forced away into a corner of her mind, but it’s probably the best hot chocolate she’s ever had. The laptop sits still in between all of them.

It takes her a few minutes to come through the haze that has seemed to cover her own eyes to notice the flecks of what look suspiciously like blood on Illya’s hands, the way his knuckles are almost white where he’s clutching his mug. Solo just nods when she gives him a questioning look, and glances over at Illya.

“Hey, Peril,” he says quietly. “Maybe put the mug down before you break it. Again.”

She jumps when Illya slams the mug down, hot chocolate slopping over the rim and onto the table. The chair shrieks against the tiles as Illya shoves it back. He stalks out of the kitchen without a word, heading for the other door that looks like it leads through the rest of the house to the back garden. Solo just sighs.

“No, don’t bother cleaning it up,” he says as she reaches for a paper towel. “He’ll come back in a couple minutes and do it.” There’s a slight smile on his face, but it looks weary. “We have this sort of shit worked out.” He gets up, pulling out a bottle of what looks like very expensive scotch, and adds a decent slosh to his mug. “Want some?”

She holds out her mug in answer. “Is he okay?”

Solo just smiles wearily, topping up her mug. “It’s jarring, going from a tactical situation to a home so quickly,” he explains. “No time to decompress somewhere that isn’t valuable. Illya will spend a few minutes in the garden, hopefully doing those bloody breathing things he hates but actually work quite well, and then he’ll come back in.” He shrugs. “He didn’t break the mug, so it’s going well so far.”

“This is insane,” she mutters into her mug. “Absolutely fucking insane.”

“You know, I sort of see it,” Solo says mildly. At her questioning look, he elaborates. “I’ve spent a couple of years playacting the civilian now,” he explains. “After doing our job for so long, this sort of thing becomes horribly routine, but these past few years have helped me get a bit of a different perspective.” He huffs a brief laugh. “So yes, I am beginning to see how this might look batshit crazy from your point of view.”

“Oh, well that’s reassuring,” she mutters. She takes a gulp of hot chocolate, and stares at nothing for a good few minutes. She wonders if the scotch is kicking in, or if she’s just that tired.

The back door opens and Illya stalks back into the kitchen. The first thing he does is grab a cloth and wipe up the hot chocolate cooling on the table, and then he sits back at the table, burying his head in his hands.

“Give us a moment, Cassie,” Solo says softly as he gets up from his chair. She takes her hot chocolate and heads for the living room, curling up on one of the armchairs and staring at Attenborough on the tv. She can still see them in the kitchen, see Solo get up and pull Illya close to him.

“They were kids,” Illya murmurs, and Solo shushes him, running his hand through Illya’s hair. “They’re just kids.”

“I know,” Solo murmurs, and Illya wraps his arms around his waist, pressing his face into Solo’s chest. Solo presses a kiss to the top of his head. “I know, love. But it’s finished now, yes? We don’t have to do anything else.”

“They were kids,” Illya murmurs again. “They didn’t know what they were doing.”

“Careful, we’re going to dissolve into morality and ethics arguments again,” Solo says, his voice mild. He presses another kiss to Illya’s head. “You know I always win those. I do have a classical education.”

“You are thief and liar,” Illya mutters into Solo’s chest. Solo huffs a laugh, carding his hands through Illya’s hair.

“That’s why you love me,” he just says. He pulls back, enough to look down at Illya. “Come on, I’ll make you some more hot chocolate and we’ll sit and watch Attenborough talk about baby penguins.”

They end up, all three of them, sitting in front of the tv and watching Attenborough repeats. Illya is quiet, barely saying a word as he sips at his hot chocolate. She thinks she saw Solo pour some vodka in it, but she can’t be sure.

Eventually the program ends, the time on the tv reading ten to four in the morning. She looks across at Solo, who just raises a finger to his lips. She hadn’t noticed, too caught up in the plight of elephants, but Illya has fallen asleep, resting heavily against Solo. Solo’s lips quirk in a smile, and he gently cards his fingers through Illya’s hair.

“Go up to bed if you want,” he whispers. At the noise, Illya shifts, murmuring something into Solo’s shoulder. Solo leans against the arm of the sofa and lets Illya fall more heavily into him, smoothing his hand down Illya’s back until he stills again. “Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if we’re not up in the morning.”

She nods, and gets to her feet. She leaves her empty mug in the probably incredibly expensive kitchen and then heads upstairs, crawling back into the bed. Like before, she doesn’t expect to be able to even close her eyes, but she’s asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

## Chapter End Notes

I'd had the idea of that scene with Napoleon and Illya at the end in my head for weeks before finally getting to write it down. This whole scenario with the riots was never meant to be this long (it spun out of control pretty quickly, like everything to do with my fics and my writing), but this was always going to be how this part of the story ended, as soon as I'd thought of the idea.

After this chapter, there will only be two more! But I'm not going anywhere- I'm writing a sequel to this that absolutely nobody asked for, but I started writing anyway (it turns out a sucker for the established relationship trope when it comes to Illya and Napoleon, which really shouldn't have surprised me). Whilst I'm writing that (and a shorter oneshot/few chapters long story that got stuck in my head) I have the 82k Tour de France AU to be published! So you're not getting rid of me that easily...

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

So this is the second to last chapter of this story! Finally Gaby turns up properly- I've been trying to write her better more recently, expand her character in my stories. She'll turn up in the Tour de France AU, of course, and she features much more in the sequel to this story (which is partly because of the plot of that story, so you can all guess at what horrible things I'm going to be doing in that sequel...)

It's been nonstop rain here for the past few days (yay England) but I can hear it at night and the sound is the best thing for making me go to sleep, so it's not all bad.

Enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She wakes to a dark room, and it takes her a good few moments of staring confusedly at her phone to realise that it is actually morning, but the drawn curtains are so thick they are all but blackout curtains. She lies in the bed for a few minutes, scrolling through the news on her phone. According to the BBC, and she's not likely to trust many other sites, the rioting died down with the sunrise. There's been widespread looting across the affected areas, and a few shops have burnt down, but she thinks Solo is right. The city has withstood far worse before. It'll come back from this no worse for wear.

She gets out of bed when her stomach starts to rumble, hoping to hell that somebody is awake and she won't have to do that awkward thing of either waiting until someone appears or rummaging around a strange kitchen looking for something to eat. But even as she heads for the door, there's the sound of the front door opening, and Solo's voice drifts up the stairs from the hallway.

"By all means, Gaby, let yourself in."

A cool female voice answers him, some accent that she can't quite place, and she immediately recognises it from the phone call months and months ago during the attack. "Darling, if you think purposefully not giving me a key for this place will keep me away, then you should know better," Gaby replies. "You taught me how to get in without one, after all. Now, I need your coffee. The filth at HQ is disgusting."

Solo sounds victorious when he replies. "I told you things like that would all go downhill as soon as Peril and I left," he says, and she can hear the grin in his voice. "I suppose everything is taken care of?"

Their voices start to fade as they move further into the house, and she takes a few more steps downstairs without really meaning to. "To the extent that we can deal with, yes," Gaby says.



“But we can’t fix everything. We’d go mad trying.”

Solo says something too quiet for her to make out, but it sounds like an agreement. For a few moments, all she can hear is the sounds of someone moving about the kitchen.

“How is he?”

She can hear the sigh in Solo’s voice. “He’s asleep,” he says. “It’s a miracle he still is, to be honest, so don’t go waking him up.” He sighs again. “You know how he gets after these things. Can’t switch himself off, sometimes.”

“Last night?” Gaby asks.

“Not too bad, honestly,” Solo replies, and there’s a clattering of what sounds like mugs in the kitchen. “Took a couple hours, and it was a little different because we’ve got Cassie here, but he’s doing well.”

Gaby coos. “Look at you, all proud of your angry Russian husband for not smashing any glasses this time,” she says, and Cassie can hear the grin threatening to break out on her face. “Honestly though, Napoleon-”

He cuts her off. “Oh, this is serious,” Solo says. “You only ever use my first name when you’re being serious, or when I’m really pissing you off.” He pauses. “I honestly don’t know which I should be more worried about.”

“Shut it, you,” Gaby says fondly. “What I was going to say, if you’ll permit a very tired agent who has been herding young agents and running on the dregs of terrible coffee for far too long now to speak her mind before it catches up with her, is that I’m honestly proud of the two of you. It’s nice to see you both out of this as much as you can be, living your own lives. It doesn’t happen often.”

“I know, Gaby,” Solo says softly. He clears his throat. “On the subject, I would really prefer it if you didn’t try and bring Illya in like that again.”

“I had to ask,” Gaby says, her voice suddenly much firmer. “You know what was at stake here.”

“Yes, but that’s just it,” Solo replies, and he sounds more tired than she thinks she’s ever heard him. “We always know what is at stake whenever anything like this happens. As Illya is so fond of saying sometimes, we can’t ever really leave this job. But Gaby...” He trails off, and sighs. “We’re tired, darling,” he eventually says. “We’re good at the job, some parts of us will always love it, but...we’re so tired. And every time you call like you did last night, for something we could help with but ultimately aren’t crucial for, it makes it that little bit harder to walk away again.”

There’s a long silence. Eventually, someone must stir, because she hears the clinking of mugs, and can suddenly smell the coffee being poured. “Oh, Napoleon,” Gaby says softly. “Darling. You and Illya really are the most stubborn people I’ve ever met, and Waverly is still my boss.” There’s a muted laugh from Solo. “If anyone was ever going to be able to terrify,

swindle and charm life into giving them an after to the game, it was always going to be the two of you.” Solo laughs, and this time it sounds real.

“Stop worrying yourself over it,” Gaby says firmly. “So Illya still has a few rough nights. You do as well, and you don’t walk back into UNCLE the moment you start to miss it. *Dummkopf*. He’s not ever going to leave you, not for anything.” There’s a clink of a mug on the counter. “Now give me more coffee, please. I’ve spent all night chasing wannabe fascists around this damn city which has had no planning system whatsoever, and the roads are terrible to drive on.”

“For you, maybe,” Solo points out. “But you drive like the German maniac that you are. No road is good enough for you unless it’s a racetrack.”

“I don’t know,” Gaby muses. “Tbilisi was pretty good fun. Anyway, want a debrief of the whole situation before...what was her name, Cassie? Anyway, before she wakes up? There’s plenty of gossip.”

Solo laughs, and Cassie suddenly jumps upon hearing her name. There’s a guilty lump in her throat as she suddenly realises she’s been listening in on their conversation, and she thuds down the last few steps of the staircase before she can think about it too much.

There’s a gorgeous woman sat at the table in the kitchen, dressed in what is probably a very expensive suit despite its rumpled appearance, mug of coffee in her hands. Solo is opposite her, still in pyjamas and a baggy sweater, the beginnings of dark circles under his eyes. They both look up as she walks in.

“Ah,” Gaby says, getting to her feet. “You must be Cassie.” She holds out her hand, and Cassie has to fight the urge to kiss it to shake it instead. “You had an eventful night last night, I suppose?”

She just blushes, nodding, and Gaby smirks. Solo swats at Gaby with a newspaper on the table. “Cassie, would you like something to eat?” he asks, gesturing at a seat at the table. “There’s virtually anything you want. I was thinking of whipping up a batch of pancakes once Peril wakes up, if you want to wait for that, or there’s a variety of cereal and toast if you want to eat and then head off. I’ll drive you wherever, of course.”

“Stay for the pancakes,” Gaby whispers to her conspiratorially, winking. “Even I have to admit they’re good.”

She hesitates, and then her stomach overrules her head. “If there are pancakes, then I won’t say no,” she says, and Gaby laughs.

“Good,” she says. “I was hoping you’d say that. Now I have an excuse to stay for a while.” She looks at Cassie again. “Are you wearing my pyjamas?”

She cringes, and glances down at the pyjamas she’s wearing. There’s a look in Gaby’s eye when she looks up at her, a similar one in Solo’s smirk, and she opens her mouth and speaks before she really thinks it through. “It wasn’t as if I had any pyjamas in my bag,” she points

out. “I wasn’t actually planning on being here last night, even if half the students I know would kill to be this close to your elusive husband that they’re all way too curious about.”

Half a second later her brain manages to catch up to her mouth, and she winces at what she’d said. Gaby, however, just laughs. “Oh, I want to sit in on one of your classes and see if it’s really true,” she says to Solo. “I’ll bring Illya with me, see the whole class explode upon realising who he is.”

Solo snorts in amusement. “The day that Illya voluntarily comes to one of my classes is the day that I should become very worried about how bored he is getting, and if he’s started messing around with the more dangerous things in the house.” He sips at his coffee. “Anyway. What type of pancakes do you want? I think there’s buttermilk in the fridge, so I can do the proper American ones, or I can make crepes.”

“*Eierkuchen*,” Gaby says immediately.

“Bless you,” Cassie says automatically, and Solo laughs.

“*Eierkuchen* are German pancakes,” he explains. “Specifically from Berlin, right? They’re a bit thicker than crepes, but ultimately the same thing.” He levels Gaby with a look. “I wasn’t actually asking you, though, what type of pancakes you wanted. I was asking the actual guest here, not the person who technically broke into my house this morning.”

“Darling, if you hadn’t wanted me to break in, then I wouldn’t have been able to,” Gaby points out, arching a brow. “And I was just offering up an option for pancakes. You know Illya likes them.”

“Illya eats anything put in front of him, and you know it,” Solo counters. “Cassie, it’s your choice. American buttermilk pancakes, or crepes?”

“Will you mark my work more harshly if I don’t pick the American option?” she asks, a grin curling her lips. “Not to offend your home country or anything, but I’m with Europe on this issue. Pancakes should be thin.”

“Well done,” Gaby says, and Solo rolls his eyes. “And if he does mark you down for choosing real class and culture over whatever America has, then I’ll have some words with him.”

“Which means she’ll tell Illya,” Solo says with a grin. “And he’ll tell me off. But you’re being ridiculous. I’m not marking you down for not picking American pancakes. It has nothing to do with your degree.” He pauses, and looks thoughtful. “Unless you want to write about how the diverging consumerism between Europe and America influenced, or even prompted, the divergence of their respective art, and how European art is broadly much more focused on a historical influence, whereas American art is influenced much more by the artist’s direct experience.”

Gaby hits him with the newspaper on the table. “No art at the breakfast table, isn’t that one of Illya’s rules?” she asks.

“No, that’s actually an interesting point?” Cassie muses. “Even with the extent of globalism today there’s still a significant enough schism between European and American art, and even more so in terms of consumerism. It would be interesting to expand that out to other social and economic models for the two differing regions. You’d have some trouble doing anything that doesn’t make very broad assumptions, though, for either region.”

Gaby sighs as Solo hums, looking interested. “You shouldn’t have said anything,” she murmurs. “He’ll never stop now.”

“I mean, I am a postgrad arts student,” she feels compelled to point out. “Like, I won’t stop talking about art and the history of art either if you get me started.” She looks back at Solo, who has that look on her face that she recognises from workshops, where he’s starting to pull together the threads of a convoluted narrative to try and make some sense of it. “You’d have to narrow it down somehow, but doing that risks side-lining important areas of art in both regions. It would be complicated as fuck.”

Solo snorts. “PhD idea, then?” he asks. “I know a few professors who would support that line of research, myself included. You’d get funding once you narrow down the idea sufficiently.”

Gaby groans. “No arts talk, please,” she mutters. “I’m too tired to make sense of anything you’re saying.” She cushions her head in her arms on the table, tilting her head just enough so that she can see Solo and Cassie. She nudges her mug towards Solo, and he gets up to refill it from the coffee pot on the side.

It takes another half hour for Illya to appear, during which Gaby appears to doze off at the table as she and Solo talk quietly about whatever crosses their minds. Most of it is something to do with art or art history, but she can’t remember half of what she says once it leaves her lips. Eventually, though, there’s the skittering sound of claws on the floor and Laika hurtles into the kitchen, heading straight for Gaby. Illya follows far more quietly, dark circles beneath his eyes.

“Morning,” Gaby says at him as she pets the dog, and Illya just grunts something in Russian. Solo, whisking up pancake batter at the counter, presses a kiss to Illya’s cheek as he passes him. It takes Illya almost twenty seconds and a gulp of coffee to realise that Gaby is there, and then he levels her with a glare over the rim of the coffee mug. “Oh, shush,” Gaby says. “Like you didn’t expect me to be here after last night.”

“How is country, chop shop girl?” Illya just asks. “Still standing?”

“Oh, it barely even wobbled,” Gaby replies with a smirk. “Partially thanks to what you found, of course. Now, no more shop talk this morning, not over pancakes. And no arts talk either. Let’s all pretend to be British and just talk about the weather.”

It’s surreal, she thinks, sitting at her professor’s table with him, his husband and their friend, all of whom were once or are still agents for an international intelligence agency, eating a seemingly never-ending supply of pancakes slathered in Nutella. Illya seems barely awake, and Solo carries most of the conversation with Gaby. Cassie gets drawn into a conversation about Paris, and when she talks about how much she’d like to see the rest of Europe at some

point, go out to Vienna and Berlin and anywhere she can think of, Gaby gets a thoughtful look in her eye.

Eventually, though, the pancakes run out, and she couldn't manage another one anyway. She gets dressed and gets her bag together. Gaby is still there when she comes downstairs, talking quietly to Illya in what sounds like German.

"Ready to go?" Solo asks.

Gaby gets up from the kitchen table. "Good to meet you, Cassie," she says, and she hands over a business card. "If you want to talk to anyone about this, what happened last night and everything you now know, then this is a consultant that we occasionally use at UNCLE. She knows what we do, and she'll be able to help, if you want to talk." She winks at her. "Let us know if you decide you want an alternate career path. I'm sure I can help out."

Illya waves a goodbye from the kitchen table, and then she's out the door with Solo and in the car. She draws in a shuddering breath as they drive through the city, the riots evident in the debris left behind. Solo drums his fingers on the steering wheel, and looks over at her.

"Doing okay?" he asks.

She takes a long, long moment before she nods, staring out at the city passing them by, the same bricks that have been standing there for up to hundreds of years. They drive past the Tate Britain on their way to cross the river, heading into South London, and she remembers walking past the walls there that are still pitted from bomb damage during the Blitz, remembers reading about the collections of art that had gone missing during the war, how even though they've been lost for over half a century there's still hope some might be found one day. She thinks of Raphael's famous self-portrait that has been missing since the war, how maybe, just maybe, there's a slim chance it's sitting in an attic or a basement somewhere, a masterpiece hidden beneath a dusty cloth. Somewhere out there, it might just exist.

She takes a deep breath. "Yeah," she says in answer to Napoleon. "Yeah, I think so."

## Chapter End Notes

For some reason the Blitz, and WW2, became more prominent in this story than I had intended, but I think it all worked out in the end!

I've just realised that this is the last chapter of this story from Cassie's PoV- the epilogue that wraps this all up will be from Napoleon and Illya's PoV, so whilst you'll see her again, that's the last from her own view! I honestly never meant for this outside PoV to go on for so long, and it was horribly frustrating to write at times, but it has let me write some touching scenes that I now absolutely love, that wouldn't have been possible without Cassie.

Anyway, the epilogue will probably go up in a few days, depending on how much work uni throws at me, so I'll see you soon.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

So this is the final chapter! I would have put it up earlier, but my weekend didn't quite go as planned- I spent most of Sunday hungover, and then it snowed again and uni was shut, again. On the plus side, I got to see the new Tomb Raider and it was pretty good!

Anyway, here's the final chapter. I hope you all enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### *Two Years Later*

“I’ll put twenty on them not realising for ten days, and another ten on it taking two weeks for them to start asking mildly invasive questions.”

Napoleon arches a brow as Cassie breezes into his office. “Good afternoon to you too,” he says, taking a few moments to switch his brain over from writing a chapter of his research paper to whatever Cassie is talking about. “I thought you’d gone home already. Are we talking two weeks from when I start teaching them, or two additional weeks after they first realise?”

She dumps her bag on the table and perches on the edge of the table. “The latter, because I wouldn’t put it past this year’s lot of freshers to be annoying and lose me twenty quid.”

Napoleon can feel his lips quirk in a grin. “Ah, the perils of being an assistant lecturer,” he muses. “Shouldn’t have started the PhD, you wouldn’t be in my office half the time griping about pretentious *gap yah* students.” Cassie just rolls her eyes, like he knows she would, and he huffs a laugh. Too often she’s in his office complaining at him about pretentious freshers, and he takes more joy than he probably should sometimes reminding her that she was one of those, years ago.

“I’m two years in, I can hardly back out now,” she says darkly. “And just wait, one more stuck up idiot goes on at me about their *gap yah* and I will...I don’t know, I’ll do something and it will be awful.” Napoleon huffs a laugh at that, and she grins in answer. “Hey, I’ve suffered through two years of this now. I want payback.”

“Get in line,” Napoleon remarks. “Just wait until you start lecturing properly. Although, if Gaby has anything to say about it, she’s going to snap you up as soon as you walk out of the Institute.” She hasn’t quite let it go ever since she took over from Waverly and propelled UNCLE into the realms of near-indestructibility, though he would never admit that to her, and tries not to even think it himself. Think of the devil, and all that. But Gaby has gotten curious about his students and their possibilities, especially any that seem to her to have potential. By whatever benchmark she has, she thinks Cassie could be a good fit.

Cassie just scoffs. "As I've said a thousand times before, I am not working for Gaby," she reminds him. "Now, add me to the betting pool before you forget and I miss out on my winnings."

Napoleon shakes his head, and opens up the online Google docs that some enterprising professor set up for this. It's become a thing, now, between the professors and some graduate students, and it just gets funnier each time. "I think they might be a bit more observant this year," he mutters as he does so. "It took last year's cohort only two weeks to realise I was married, and they were remarkably quick at trying to quiz me about my mysterious husband." He huffs a laugh. "It doesn't really ever grow old, this. Every time I get a new class, inevitably they all start asking about Illya."

"Just don't make him come into the Institute to skew the bet in your favour," she warns him. "I've already had two of my friends ask me to make sure you don't do that."

"Well, if he happens to show his face at some point, then that's not my fault," Napoleon says, a wicked grin curving his lips. "I can't stop him if he starts taking an interest in art." She looks at him, and his grin just widens. "Technically, it's not cheating. And there aren't even any official rules to this bet."

"There's your own morality," she points out.

She jumps when there's a laugh and the door swings open behind her, and Napoleon looks up to see Illya in the doorway, obviously having just heard what Cassie said. He still can't help the small skip of his heart, even after all these years out of the game, when he sees him and remembers that that's his husband, that's the man he loves, that they've survived all these years and that they actually have this. "You are thief and liar, Cowboy," Illya says, a quirk to his lips that Napoleon knows so well now. "Nothing more. Don't encourage him, Cassie."

"Peril," he says. "I didn't know you were coming in today."

"Surprise," Illya says dryly. He pulls out what looks like two plane tickets. "Sorry Cassie, but I need to steal my husband. Going away for bank holiday weekend." He makes a gesture at Napoleon to get up, and Napoleon rolls his eyes but humours him. "Laika is with Gaby, and I cleared it with the department to leave early," Illya tells him. "Your bag is in car."

"Your holiday or one supplied by dear Gaby?" Napoleon asks, remembering Vienna with a certain fondness. They may be retired, but as Illya still says, they never really leave. It's refreshing to take a job or two now and then, ones which are usually low risk and involve him having to steal something, Illya tagging along and mostly offering unhelpful commentary. Vienna was one of the best, seeing as Gaby actually let him keep the painting he'd taken. Besides, the food there had been excellent.

Illya shrugs. "Bit of both," he says, and Napoleon grins at him. Illya just shakes his head. "Impossible," he mutters. "You are impossible. Stop looking so pleased, you don't even know where we are going."

Napoleon just laughs as he grabs his bag and heads to Illya, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. "If you're there, then that's all I need," he says. Illya rolls his eyes, but Napoleon just sees the



quick upturn of his lips and reaches for his hand. He tangles his fingers with Illya's, and Illya squeezes back lightly.

Cassie is still perched on the table in his office, but she gets up as he pulls on his coat and shoulders his bag. "Have a good weekend," Illya says as she slips out behind them, and she waves at the two of them over her shoulder as she heads off.

Napoleon takes advantage of Illya's momentary distraction to try and pickpocket the plane tickets, but Illya swats him away. "Impossible," he says again, grasping Napoleon's hand to hold him at bay. "You are magpie, Cowboy. Magpie."

"Come on, Peril," Napoleon says, making an admittedly poor attempt for the tickets again. He knows it's a poor effort, knows that Illya knows that, but it's more of an excuse to annoy Illya than anything else. Illya knows this as well, which is why he lets Napoleon perpetually try and steal things out of his pockets. Both know that if Napoleon really wanted to steal something from him, Illya wouldn't even notice until it was gone.

"Come on," Napoleon says again, tugging at Illya's hand. "Don't you love me?"

"Always and forever," Illya replies easily. "Doesn't mean I'm giving you the tickets yet. I have plans." There's a curl to his lips as he looks at Napoleon, a helpless smile on his face, and Napoleon can't help but kiss him as they stand in the quiet corridors of the Institute. Illya kisses him back, one hand curling around Napoleon's waist to pull him close, and Napoleon thinks that out of everything in this old building, all the art and creation so carefully stored and treasured by people for hundreds of years, this is the most precious thing that will ever exist to him.

Art defines humanity, Napoleon thinks as he pulls back and traces a thumb down Illya's jaw. He understands that burning need to create, that inescapable desire to pour out an existence into something else, to attempt to breathe life into something inanimate because to be alone is too much to bear. Art is the history of people who could not bear to be alone, who called out for someone else to recognise themselves in the broken shards of their existence that they managed to pull out and set into medium. There is such a cry buried deep within his bones, buried within every human, because art defines humanity, and humans never want to be alone, even if the only other person accompanying them is themselves staring back from their canvas.

Illya brings his hand up, tangling his fingers with Napoleon's. "What are you thinking?" he asks softly.

Napoleon hums. He is thinking of how even with a thousand hours and all the tools invented, he wouldn't be able to put into existence a shade of what he wants to describe. He is thinking how sometimes, late at night, he can feel the weight of all the history in this building, the quiet comfort of people long since dead, how their art may be remembered but they themselves have faded into the obscurity of the history books. He is thinking of the Guernica, of all paintings, the chaos and the silent screams that reverberate from the canvas, how the painting is infamous but the subjects long since forgotten, as everything eventually is. If art defines humanity, if everything they make is ultimately art, then he thinks there are worse things than to fade into obscurity, with only the art left behind. There's a certain sort of peace

in that. In this moment, standing in the corridors of the Institute, Illya still pulling him close, he thinks that he could be content if that's all they get to keep.

Illya nudges him, a questioning look on his face. "Nothing interesting," Napoleon says in answer, instead of the indescribable tangle of thoughts on his tongue. "Just some things about art."

Illya rolls his eyes, and tugs at his hand. "Impossible," he says again.

Napoleon smirks. "You wouldn't have it any other way," he says. Illya's smile, the quick curl at the corner of his lips, is all the answer he needs.

*It's everything you ever want.*

*It's everything you ever need.*

*And it's here right in front of you: this is where you want to be.*

*finis*

## Chapter End Notes

And that's the end! The quote is from The Greatest Showman (I love the songs soooo much from that movie, Hugh Jackman is a gift and he just wants to sing show tunes).

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and enjoying this story, it means a lot to me. There is a sequel in the works for this story, though it's a ways from being finished. In the meantime, I shall be publishing a shorter story that will be about five chapters long, and then the Tour de France AU that I have been promising for a while now!

Thank you all, again. It's been great.

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