

Author's Note: Written for the **EASTER EGGS 2016 challenge** on **LiveJournal's mfuwss** community.

This story references **THE UGLY DUCKLING** fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen, as well as the song **The Ugly Duckling** from the movie **HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN**. Lyrics for that song can be found [here](#), and the video [here](#).



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Margaret Wolfe Hungerford

THERE ONCE WAS...

BY [LAH](#)

Spring 1967
Barton Broad, Norfolk, England

"There once was an ugly duckling
With feathers all stubby and brown
And the other birds said in so many words
Get out of town."

Napoleon's vocal burst into unexpected song took Illya somewhat aback. "Not to dispute your very musical analysis," he countered his partner, "but technically that is a goose, an Egyptian goose."

"So technically an ugly gosling," conceded Napoleon with a grin, "but still just as ugly."

"I will have you know that such geese were considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians."

"Who also painted gods with human bodies and jackal heads. Not exactly a ringing endorsement regarding beauty, tovarisch."

"My chief concern at the moment," supplied Illya pointedly, "is not its beauty or perceived lack thereof, but rather the known territorial behavior of the species. Such geese can be very aggressive, Napoleon."

"And we have to take a dive into the territorial waters of this gaggle to retrieve that black box dropped from the U.N.C.L.E. private plane before it crashed."

"In order to discover if Thrush had any hand in that supposed accident," supplemented his partner with a nod.

"Yes, I do understand your concern and most heartily second it," Solo noted with a nod of his own. "But we don't really have much of a choice, Illya."

"We have no choice at all," agreed the Russian agent with a small sigh.

Both men were dressed in wetsuits and now rummaged into nearby backpacks to retrieve the rest of their scuba gear.

As they geared up, Napoleon asked, "Whatever is a breed of Egyptian goose doing here in East Anglia?"

"They were introduced as ornamental birds during the 18th Century and many escaped into the wilds. As a result, a rather significant feral population flourishes here in England."

"Upper-crust folks and their penchant for exotic pets," tsked-tsked Solo with an accompanying shake of his head.

"Indeed," concurred Illya.

Once fully decked out in their scuba apparatus, the two men stood for a few minutes at the water's edge watching the flock of waterfowl – the adult birds all displaying a distinctive eye-patch coloration – swim in various patterns.

"I doubt they are going to take flight any time soon," decided Kuryakin somewhat glumly.

"Certainly doesn't look like it," agreed Solo. "Shall we press on into the breach, I.K.?"

Illya nodded his reluctant acquiescence.

The two men waded into the broad and were barely chest-deep in the water before the gaggle swam excitedly toward them, squawking as noisily as only geese could.

“Here comes trouble,” voiced Napoleon unnecessarily.

“Indubitably,” vouched Illya just as unnecessarily.

The geese left no doubt as to their rage at the trespassing intruders. To put it bluntly, the birds were all over the two men “like a duck on a June bug”. Bills nipped at fingers, at wrists, at arms, at stomachs, at any and every area on the men’s bodies they could get close enough to attack. Several dove underwater and took to snapping at the knees and calves of the human interlopers as well.

“These birds are vicious!” exclaimed Napoleon as he shook away the pain on a hand on which one goose had just savagely pinched together several of his fingers.

“They are not renowned as the most aggressive of all waterfowl for no reason!” exclaimed Illya in turn as he wrenched an elbow out from the grip of the beak of another goose. That goose – a rather large one to be sure – pursued the Russian mercilessly, forcing him to retreat further and further toward shore.

However for Napoleon the story was different as the ugly gosling he had originally “serenaded” swam close and then began to circle him, squawking an apparent warning to the other geese. They gave ground to the gosling, its circling motion apparently some sort of signal.

“Hey tovarisch, if I don’t come out of this alive, please keep the ridiculous method of my death an absolutely sacrosanct partnership secret!” yelled out Napoleon toward the other man.

Illya had now collapsed on his bottom on the shore, forcefully expelled from the gaggle’s domain. He looked over toward his partner and the circling gosling. “I actually think she is protecting you, Napoleon.”

“She?” questioned Solo. “How do you know it’s a she?”

“Because you always have such a way with the female of the species,” responded Illya acerbically.

“Ha ha, very funny, Kuryakin.”

“Actually I can tell the gosling is female by the resonance of the quack,” admitted Illya more straightforwardly. “The female Egyptian goose has a very distinctive honk, very noisy and raucous. That of the male is more subdued and somewhat hoarse sounding. And male Egyptian geese actually seldom quack at all, except during the mating ritual.”

“Very informative, I’m sure, but it hardly helps me at the moment.”

“Go with the flow, Napoleon,” advised Illya.

“Huh?”

“See if you can lead the gosling out into deeper water where you can make the dive. If she continues to protect you from the flock, you will be in good shape to make an attempt at retrieving the black box.”

Taking Illya's advice, Napoleon slowly edged further out into the broad, changing from a walk to a swimming stroke. The gosling shadowed his movements, expanding her 'circle of protection' around him. Solo dove underwater when he felt secure enough in his location and twenty minutes later returned with the black box in hand. As he subsequently stroked and then waded toward shore, the gosling followed, tightening her circle and ceasing her shadowing only a few feet from the water's edge.

Once on dry land, Napoleon bowed and gave the little bird a one handed salute. With a final quack as if acknowledgement, the gosling then turned and returned to the main of the gaggle.

"You know," Solo commented to Kuryakin, "that little gosling isn't really so very ugly."

Illya smiled one of his patented half-smiles. "Something of a swan then after all?" he teased.

"No, Illya," shot back Napoleon, "technically still a goose."

—THE END—

