

“WE ARE WHAT WE LIVE”
(PART 2: “THE TEST OF WILLS AFFAIR”
OR
“WHY DO OUR VACATIONS ALWAYS TURN INTO WORKING VACATIONS?”)
BY [WENDIEZ](#) AND [LAH \(CARABELE\)](#)

Technical Note: *Once again, I am pleased to have Carabele’s collaboration on this story.*

Author’s Note: *While still on vacation, Napoleon is kidnapped by Dr. Dabree’s minions and taken to her latest test facility in an uninhabited area on Martha’s Vineyard. She has been planning retribution against Solo (“**The Brain Killer Affair**”) for a long time and finds the perfect set of circumstances in a reprisal of the events in “**The Gurnius Affair**”.*

Prologue

Napoleon Solo deftly maneuvered the *Pursang* into the slip, while his partner, Illya Kuryakin, finished tying the mainsail to its boom, which would keep the fabric from flapping should a strong wind come up. When the boat was alongside the pier, the agile Russian leapt onto it, rope in hand, to secure the bow end of the sloop to its mooring. Solo cut the engine and tossed the aft rope to his friend.

“I’ll make a sailor out you yet,” Napoleon said with a grin.

“Interesting statement, considering that I was in the Navy, while you were traipsing around Korea as an infantryman.”

“But the only boat you managed to get yourself assigned to was a submarine.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Napoleon hopped from the boat to the pier. “If your comrades could only see you now.”

“They’d wonder the depths of depravity to which I’ve sunk.”

“And secretly envy your good fortune.”

“Referring to what? You, as a companion or the boat that brought us here? Because if it is you, I would be quick to point out that while I may have shared a bed with you in the past, it was out of necessity and not some unorthodox carnal need. Now, if you’re referring to the boat—well, then, you might have something.”

Solo looked up at his friend, who was grinning mischievously and gave him his famous frown of distaste. “Very funny.”

Kuryakin chuckled softly at the victory of one-upping his partner. “Let’s go get the rental car.”

The pair walked the length of the pier to a car rental office located beside the marina office. Illya could not help but notice a shiny, bright red Thunderbird two-seater convertible in the lot as they entered the rental office. “I think I saw your car, Napoleon,” he quipped. “Every bit the epitome of a bourgeois capitalist such as yourself.”

"I saw it. She's a beauty, isn't she? I was hoping they'd be able to get one."

"You actually ordered that car?"

"Of course."

"You might just as well have hired a publicity agent to let everyone know you're coming. I'd prefer to ride into town anonymously, if you don't mind."

"Nobody's forcing you to ride with me to wherever you're going. You don't like the T-bird, rent your own set of wheels." Solo snapped his fingers. "That's right! Then, you'd have to put out some of that hard-earned cash of *yours*."

"I won't be needing a car the whole week. I'll just ride with you."

"You're as constant as the tides, my friend. If you promise to be pleasant for the trip to Cape Cod, I'll even let you drive." Solo paid for the rental and dangled the keys in front of his friend's face.

"Don't bother, I'll be meeting someone before we get to the Cape in the National Seashore area."

"Oh?" Napoleon's eyebrows raised. "I didn't know you knew anyone from around here."

"She's a marine biologist with the National Park Service and she happens to be studying the marine life in the National Seashore. I told her I'd enjoy helping her with her project if she arranged to do some diving. The area is full of sunken ships."

"Sounds exciting," Napoleon said as he covered a pretend yawn.

"I didn't say we'd be exploring underwater wreckages or counting shore birds the whole time, Napoleon," Illya retorted coyly.

"A little of that carnal need creeping up on you, *tovarisch*?"

"I never kiss and tell. You know that."

"Not vocally, anyway."

"Well, it's not hard to figure out what your beachside plans are going to entail."

"It's not going to be counting birds or looking for lost treasure, I can tell you that."

"You didn't have to tell me that. You, too, are as predictable as the tides. However, we probably should establish a time to meet up again."

"Why not see how the week goes? If you get tired of bird watching, you can call me on 'the pen'."

"Seriously, we should check in with each other every twelve hours or so."

"You aren't turning into a mother hen, now, are you?"

"I'm cautious. We have many enemies."

"You're right, of course. I'll take the first twelve hours." Napoleon started the T-Bird. "Listen to that engine purr," he said with a smile. He shifted into first gear. "Let's head up the coast and then you can introduce me to your lady marine biologist."

"Only if you promise not to try and charm her into taking my place in the car."

"Well, my friend, I can try. But there are no promises." Napoleon pressed his foot on the gas and the car responded as anticipated. He headed east for US route 6, which ran the length of the peninsula.

With the top down and the wind rushing by their ears, neither agent felt like shouting a conversation. Instead, Napoleon enjoyed the way the car handled on the road, and his passenger enjoyed the view.

After about an hour's drive, Illya pointed to a side road. "Turn here."

"If you ever wanted an out-of-the-way place to vacation," Napoleon observed, "I think you've found it."

"That's the idea," Kuryakin said with a slight grin.

"How often have you worked with her?" Napoleon said, suddenly a little jealous of his partner's find, even though he had not even met the lady yet.

"Several times over the years. I met her in Baltimore about four years ago when THRUSH was poisoning the local blue crab populations."

"You never mentioned her."

"How many women that you meet on assignment do you tell me about?"

"You always roll your eyes in annoyance when I start to."

"That's because with you, there's always another one to talk about. I'm not interested in your conquests."

"You're just jealous."

Illya snorted. "Hardly." A few miles further on the narrow road, they saw an old lighthouse perched one hundred feet from the edge of a cliff. Beside the stone tower was parked a colorful dune buggy.

Solo raised his eyebrows. "Going dune-hopping, are you?"

"We have to get to the beach somehow."

"You could always jump."

"Are you making an effort to be amusing, because if you are, you might want to quit while you're behind."

The dark-haired agent wrinkled his nose at this friend. “You’re not staying in the lighthouse, are you?”

“No, Gretchen has a camper on the beach.”

“Cozy.”

“My thoughts exactly, but she usually pitches a tent in the sand, too, for observations.”

“You and the lady have done this before?”

“Now, you sound jealous,” Illya said, obviously pleased to one-up his partner—*again*.

“Well, I am,” Solo said as he straightened up in the driver’s seat. A slender brunette got out of the dune buggy and was walked towards the car, waving.

“Illya!” she called.

The blond agent grinned and exited the car without benefit of opening the door. “This is my stop. Thanks for the ride, Napoleon.” He pulled his rucksack of clothing from the floor. “Remember, you have the first check-in. ‘Bye.” Without another word and with apparent excitement, Illya threw the duffle bag over his shoulder and trotted towards the delectable-looking young woman in short-shorts and snug tank top.

As Napoleon watched in amusement mixed with curiosity, his usually reserved partner dropped his burden and pulled Gretchen into an embrace, the pair twirling around and laughing. Rarely, had he seen Kuryakin in such a naked display of emotion—except, perhaps, two days earlier, when rage and hate filled the Russian’s bearing as he spoke of the first of what had eventually become too many lives taken to enumerate. Once more, Solo realized that there was much he did not know about the man he called brother and confidant. As he pulled away, back onto the road, he saw the pair walking towards the lighthouse, their arms encircled about the other, and smiles on their faces.

Act I: “A Brunette and Two Redheads”

“I thought you’d never get here,” Dr. Gretchen Moore sighed, her arm around the Russian’s waist and her head on his shoulder.

“I was becoming impatient too. Fortunately, I could count on Napoleon violating the speed limit.”

“You should have asked your partner to stay a while.”

“He has an agenda of his own and was anxious to be on his way,” Illya lied smoothly.

“A shame. I would have liked to meet him.”

“No, you wouldn’t. He can be very wearisome, trust me.” He gave her a light kiss on the cheek to emphasize his point.

“I’m never quite sure when you’re being straight with me.”

“Believe me, Gretchen. You’re a find I’m not about to share with my partner any time soon.” This time, he kissed her full on the lips, long and deep, to show her he was sincere. It was a kiss effectively designed to change the subject, so much so that Napoleon’s name did not come up again until much later.

When they arrived on the beach via the dune buggy, Illya discovered that the ever-efficient Dr. Moore had lunch prepared and waiting. They sat opposite each other with a bucket of steamed clams and mussels between them complimented with buttered corn on the cob and bottled beer.

Kuryakin shook hot sauce on the taupe-colored flesh on the clamshell in his hand and downed it with glee. “How did you know I was hungry for steamed clams?”

The brunette smiled. “Just lucky, I guess. What did you want to do after lunch?”

“I told you I’d help with your observations.”

“Most of my observations are at dawn and dusk.”

“That leaves considerable free time this afternoon. Did you have something else in mind?” the blond-haired Russian said with an impish grin.

She echoed his expression. “We haven’t seen each other for over a year.”

“Has it been that long? I didn’t realize.”

“You always liked my back rubs.”

“As I recall, the word I used to describe your back rubs was unbelievable. However, I think I would enjoy something a little simpler to start, if you don’t mind.”

“What could be simpler than a back rub?”

“You’ve added several inches to those lovely dark locks of yours. I would very much like to become lost in them as soon as possible.”

“And you know I love to have someone brush my hair,” she said nodding.

Illya smiled and ate another clam. It was going to be a very pleasant afternoon.

Napoleon arrived in Provincetown on the tip of the Cape and immediately realized this wasn’t his kind of town. It was too rural in nature and lacked the type of vibrant and sophisticated nightlife he relished in Manhattan. This quaint community boasted a plethora of cafes with obvious hippie connections amidst the more stuffy historic tributes to Massachusetts’ founding Pilgrim Fathers. He wandered about, feeling out-of-place and rather blue. His mood wasn’t enhanced by his solitary state. He desperately wanted companionship of the feminine ilk, but barefooted gals scarcely past their high-school graduations (if they even were) sporting about in appliquéd jeans and flowered tees just weren’t his style for such a companion.

He decided he would spend all day tomorrow investigating the beach bunny opportunities, hoping to catch some touristy females of a more inviting age sunning themselves upon the sands. Satisfied with that plan for his next day’s activities, Napoleon ventured into one of the

small local cafes with a nice outdoor setup where he didn't have to breathe in the inevitable pot smoke of the interior environs. Ordering some crab cakes and a coffee for lunch, he settled back to enjoy the late afternoon sunshine and the refreshing salt air. Thus he was actually lounging with his eyes half-closed behind his sunglasses when an alluring female voice from very nearby caught his attention.

"The budding toddlers do all seem to have come to frolic here rather than in their own neighborhood sandboxes, don't they?"

Napoleon cracked an eye open to glance at the commentator. The redhead sat at a table not more than an arm's length from his own. The tight linen Capri pants and fitted cropped shirt she wore left no doubt she had curves in all the right places. Her manner was languid, somewhat bored, and bespoke a certain chic indifference. This gal wasn't jailbait; she was pure man-bait.

Straightening in his chair, Napoleon bantered back with a ready smile, "I suppose they haven't yet discovered the beaches of the French Riviera."

"Don't even joke about that!" the lovely tutted smoothly, letting a devastating smile of her own feed the flirtation between them. "They will be the ruination of all the holiday havens of refinement."

"And of the morals of a civilized society, so they tell me," retorted Napoleon with yet another of his most charismatic smiles as he just as smoothly picked up on the peculiar tenor of their conversation for the obvious casual seduction it was.

The redhead laughed delightedly at his willingness to deftly participate in the inanity – and to so readily detect the underlying temperament – of the verbal repartee.

"Fleur Harpip," she introduced herself as she whipped off her sunglasses with one hand and extended the other to Napoleon.

"Ah, a flower child yourself then," he gently teased her about the name as he accepted her proffered hand.

Her eyes, the most intense shade of emerald green he had ever seen in his life, pinned themselves to his face.

"A flower in a stone, so never doubt my survival instincts, Mr...?"

"Solo," answered Napoleon simply, "Napoleon Solo."

"A lone conqueror, therefore?"

Napoleon laughed. "Only sometimes," he granted with impassive agreeableness as he bent his head over that hand of hers he yet held and kissed it with continental flair.

"Perhaps a conqueror not adverse to company at present then?"

"A conqueror of any ilk could never be adverse to such stunning company as yours," he complimented her prettily as he discarded his own sunglasses.

There was something about her; something familiar. He couldn't place it, but the removal of his dark glasses was as much to get an unimpeded look at this temptress as for any other reason. The brilliant red hair that caught the rays of the sun so spectacularly seemed somehow wrong, as did the astonishingly green eyes.

"You're being ridiculous, Solo," he mentally chastised himself. *"She's positively gorgeous and there is absolutely nothing wrong with any of the perfect package."*

"Ah, perhaps then you would agree to a stroll on the beach? I hear the sunset views are stunning in their own way."

"Mother Nature will need to go a long way to eclipse the stunning view you present, my radiant flower in a stone, but I am certainly willing to observe her attempt."

Brushing Gretchen's chocolate-brown tresses, Illya remembered fondly how, as a young child, he did the same for his *babka*, his maternal grandmother. It was one of the few pleasant memories he had from that time of his life, a fact that he had glossed over quickly when Napoleon had asked him details of his past.

Gretchen noticed how he applied the brush almost reverently to her hair. "This is a side of you I haven't seen much of," she remarked.

"You mean my hair-dressing skills?" he asked obliquely.

"What were you thinking about, Illya?"

"Why should I be thinking about anything in particular?"

"Did you used to brush your mother's hair when you were little?"

He paused in mid-stroke. "No, why do you ask?"

"Your grandmother's, then."

"Occasionally. Again, why do you ask?" He resumed caressing her hair with the brush.

"The way you are touching me; it's not sexual, at all."

"Why does brushing your hair have to be sexual?"

"It doesn't, it's just that I was expecting it to be and it isn't."

"Is this an expression of disappointment?"

She turned to look at him. "No." When she saw his closed expression, she reconsidered. "Yes."

The expression turned momentarily confused, then settled back to unreadable.

"You can be so aloof when you want to be."

"So I'm told. Do you wish me to be more sexual when brushing your hair?"

“Are you being deliberately obtuse or do you just don’t get it?”

He sighed in resignation. “I was reminiscing. My grandmother had hair longer and thicker than yours. I used to brush it and braid it for her.”

“Why was that so difficult to tell me?”

Illya suddenly dropped the brush and stood up. “I believe a walk along the beach is in order,” he said capriciously.

“Really? What might have brought that on?”

“It seems that whatever amorous mood we were both in earlier has been altered.”

“I can’t image how that could’ve happened.” Gretchen stood up to face him. “Is that a walk for both of us?”

“If you like.”

“As long as I don’t ask you any personal questions.”

“Gretchen, we’ve been down this path before. I give what I am able to give. Please, don’t ask anymore of me than that. However, I would very much like you to walk with me.”

She held out her hand. “Why do I put up with you?”

He took her hand in his. “That’s a question only you can answer.”

She followed him as he led her to the water’s edge. She knew the answer—and it was probably the same answer had by every woman who had ever had contact with this man. But now, she wondered if it was still enough. She was hoping to soon find out.

The walk along the beach turned out to be more than a casual stroll. He seemed intent on recalling their earlier happier temperament as well as making amends for annoying her by becoming playfully teasing and enticing her with affectionate little games. Though she tried not to forgive him, his blue eyes seemed to plead her for forgiveness, a trick she was sure he had tried, quite successfully, before. She could not resist the mysterious seductiveness that was his charm.

They found their way back to the camper and tent where she encouraged him to lie down on the blanket for a back massage. She soon had him lying prone, moaning in obvious delectation at her manipulations.

“Your muscles are rock-hard. You under a lot of stress?”

“I’m always under a lot of stress,” he mumbled with his face in the blanket. “But you’ve certainly managed to alleviate a good portion of it.”

“You’ll be putty in my hands when I’m through with you.”

This time he lifted his head and turned to look over his shoulder. "I'm counting on it," he said with a coquettish grin.

"Are you now?" she said as she mirrored his smile. "Turn over."

"Why?"

"Because, I'm giving the orders right now. On your back, Kuryakin." He rolled over slowly and she straddled him once more. "Prepare to be putty in my hands, my delicious Russian delight."

Illya stared up at her quizzically for a moment until she slid her hands under his shirt, and began to massage his chest, paying very specific attention to the sensitive skin of his nipples. The delighted Russian half-coughed a gasp.

"Want more?" Gretchen whispered and leaned forward to grab his lower lip between her teeth. She held him there until he gave a faint nod. Then she engulfed his mouth in hers.

Illya had wanted to make their first sexual encounter in this meeting one of mutual gratification, but his lover had quickly taken control and refused to let him do little more than return her passionate kisses. He had a fleeting thought about the joys of putty malleability before the real massage began.

If his mind was not quite ready for her intent, his body was, and she smiled almost voraciously as she pulled down his fly and released his swollen penis from the confines of his underwear. And then—

Oh, God, he cried out in his mind, almost as an annunciation of praise. Gretchen was skilled as a masseur; she was a consummate artist at what she was doing to him now. He could only lie before her and relish in the bombardment of intensely pleasurable sensations she was creating. He was almost relieved when she finally permitted him to reach a climax.

He relaxed, though his body continued to tremble from the hormones still surging through him. He closed his eyes with a deep sigh, totally sated and thoroughly exhausted, even though he had scarcely moved a muscle the whole time she was pleasuring him. A cascade of hair touched his nose and he opened his eyes to look into her smiling face.

"Alors, Illya, qu'est-ce que tu dis de ça?"¹

She was as fluent in French as he, so he answered softly in the same language, *"Vous êtes ma joie et mon bonheur."²*

A smug smile crept across her lips as she lay down beside him with her head on his shoulder. *"C'est bon,"* she said, *"très bon. Je peux vivre avec cela."³*

A few hours after meeting, Napoleon and Fleur were enjoying a barefoot walk along a surprisingly deserted section of beach. The woman was as breathtaking at sunset as she had been in the full glare of day. Still, there was something about her that Napoleon was finding

¹ So, Illya, what do you have to say to that?

² You are my joy and delight.

³ Good, very good. I can live with that

disconcerting. He couldn't place it; it was almost as if he had met her before and not in the most pleasant of circumstances. But no specific memory came into his mind; just a vague uneasiness to which he could assign no cause.

Had this been a working situation, Napoleon likely would have given his gut instincts free rein and asked Section IV for a background check on the woman. But he was on vacation and he was tired of being wary of everyone and everything. He wanted desperately to relax, especially in the wake of that dreadful GURNIUS affair and more particularly Illya's subsequent confession regarding his feelings while torturing him. That had been difficult to hear and even more difficult to accept. So for the moment, Napoleon wanted to forget all of it, forget everything related to U.N.C.L.E., and just take simple pleasure in the company of a beautiful woman. And Fleur Harpip was certainly that.

They had been walking along that deserted stretch of beach for a while. Fleur subtly instigated her hand into his as they reveled in the tickling swirl of the incoming tide about their ankles and the soft squish of the damp sand between their toes. Each carried their shoes in hand and Napoleon had even rolled up the legs of his linen trousers to mid-calf. He had previously discarded his sidearm and holster along with the lightweight sports coat that had served to conceal those tools of his trade. The seaside breeze tousled his dark hair, dropping his forelock rakishly over one eye. There was a gentle hint of uncustomary stress-free abandon in his physical appearance and in his whole attitude. And for the moment it all seemed an incredibly liberating experience to the usually on-guard and on-point agent.

A sound caught Napoleon's ears from amidst the steady roar of the waves. He perked up and listened intently.

"What is it?" Fleur inquired perhaps a bit suspiciously, but Napoleon was too focused on listening for the sound again to note his companion's non-circumspect behavior.

"Out in the surf. Hear it? Someone is out there, calling for help."

Within a heartbeat Napoleon dropped his shoes to the sand and began a run into the rolling waves. Truth be told, he hated making any ingress into large bodies of water. Oh, he was a competent swimmer as U.N.C.L.E. simply wouldn't have it any other way for any of their agents. He was a fair scuba-diver as well. And sailing was indeed a personal passion, but sailing was done atop the waves, not beneath them. Thus letting water of any kind become the immersive force in his personal physical environment was something he merely tolerated and steadfastly avoided whenever possible. Yet at the moment there was no choice. Someone was drowning and there was no lifeguard here to provide assistance.

With strong swimming strokes and total suppression of his own anxiety about the insistent tug of the waves, Napoleon reached the hapless victim in short shrift.

"My leg is caught," gasped out a girl, little more than a teenager by Napoleon's quick estimation, as she attempted with less than complete success to keep her head above the wild breakers. "Kelp or something."

Napoleon dove under the water, found her trapped leg by feel and then grabbed at the stuff encircling that leg and yanked hard. Enough of the seaweed about her calf and ankle pulled loose from the sands below for the girl to kick her way free of the remainder. Resurfacing, Napoleon quickly assessed the choking and coughing still wracking the girl's frame. Deciding

she certainly was not yet fit to make the swim back to shore unaided, he wrapped an arm around her body under her armpits and pushed determinedly through the ocean swells to bring them both safely to shore. Once there, they splayed flat on their backs side-by-side in the sand, panting to regain full breath.

The girl sat up first, uttering a still somewhat breathless “Thanks.” Then she turned to look at her rescuer lying there on the sand. The moon had risen and was providing a surely romantic haze of silvery light. And as well Napoleon’s soaked cotton shirt and most particularly his sopping light-colored linen slacks were more than surely clinging to him a bit too close for conventional modesty.

“My, my, my, quite a feast for the eye!” enthusiastically remarked the girl without any pretense of embarrassment as her pale gray-green eyes appreciatively raked him up and down.

“Oh for the love of...” muttered Napoleon in frustration as he pushed himself up into a seated position. “Here I am: as water-logged as a drowned cat after risking my neck to save yours, and you consider my unfortunate state of attire an appropriate segue for a less than subtle pass? Don’t you self-named flower children employ any pretext at all for commonplace good manners?”

Truth was he wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of such a frank physical evaluation. He definitely preferred being the initiator in such matters. And he positively would not himself be engaging in that pastime with this gal who, in her purple-and-white candy-cane-striped two-piece swimsuit, impressed him as more likely to engage in a pastime of smooching boys behind high-school gym lockers.

“Free love accepts no boundaries of either time or place with regard to indulgence in the simplest of pleasures,” declared the girl with a negligent shrug. “Looking, liking and saying so doesn’t translate as depraved behavior, you know. Besides, you certainly have no call to get all uptight and overhyped with the presentation of the package,” she furthered as her eyes ran another comprehensive inventory of his assets.

“If you make any insulting comment referencing drenched beefcake or the like, I’m throwing you right back into the ocean.”

“What about slam-on gritrock?” taunted the girl with a mischievous smirk.

“What?” questioned Napoleon with a perplexed blink.

“Never mind, good-looking: You don’t have to understand the lingo to be the genuine article. Ginny Naline straight from the breath-stealing waves to your lifesaving arms,” she then introduced herself.

“Short for Ginger no doubt,” quipped Napoleon with a still grumpy edge to his tone as he eyed the carrot-hued locks now glued by moisture and salt to her head and about her shoulders.

“Duh-dumb no. For Virginia,” corrected Ginny. “My folks had no clue I would come out wearing this tangerine crown when they grabbed a handle for me whilst I wallowed in a prenatal state. I was just labeled the same as my granny is all.”

“Fortunate coincidence then,” noted Napoleon. His crankiness was wearing off as the realization the ocean was no longer something he had to battle for survival sank fully into his consciousness. And he had to admit the girl’s jaunty manner and blunt (if only partly comprehensible) speech was both uncomplicatedly amusing and flatteringly – if unnervingly – complimentary.

“Napoleon? Are you all right?” called Fleur as she made her way toward the two beached survivors.

“Ah, I see you are indeed fond of redheads,” stated Ginny as she watched the pomegranate-tressed Fleur move closer to them.

“Only if they are past legal drinking age,” retorted Napoleon.

“Then I qualify,” Ginny made her case, “by some three years.”

“In your dreams, Carrot-top,” he teased, bestowing one of his full megawatt smiles as he playfully tousled her dripping orangey mane before rising to his feet to greet the oncoming Fleur.

“Oh Napoleon,” gushed Fleur as she flew into his arms, “I was terrified you wouldn’t make it out of those waves! Are you really okay?” she demanded as she pulled back a little so to give him a quick visual once-over.

“I’m fine,” said Napoleon simply.

“I’m fine too, thank you,” remarked Ginny as she rose to her feet and began brushing damp sand from her bare legs.

Fleur stared at her like she was a bug under a microscope. “How fortunate for you,” she commented in a wholly indifferent tone.

“Your name really Napoleon?” Ginny pointedly ignored Fleur as she turned her attention back to her rescuer. “Just so I know to whom to send the prerequisite ‘with sincere gratitude for saving my life’ fruit basket commonplace good manners likely demands.”

“Napoleon Solo,” he acknowledged with a nod. “And you can thank me by keeping to less deserted stretches of beach for your evening swims from now on.”

“But how else would I get to meet handsome strangers except by taking on the part of a damsel in distress?” bantered back Ginny with an exaggerated flutter of her golden eyelashes. “And he does have the look, don’t you agree?” Ginny now inquired of Fleur with a little elbow nudge.

“The look?” repeated the mystified Fleur as she moved out of ready range of Ginny’s jabbing elbow.

“That of the irresistibly dark and intriguingly mysterious heart-stealer with a penchant for moonlight heroics,” clarified Ginny.

Napoleon laughed lightly. “I prefer to engage in much different, if equally daring, activities by moonlight,” he intimated suggestively and quite clearly to Fleur.

Ginny sighed as she watched Fleur bodily cozy up to Napoleon in response to the evocative comment. Damn! She wasn't going to get a real chance with this delectable knight-errant. How disheartening!

"Better take him somewhere completely private for those activities then," Ginny brusquely advised Fleur. "Scrumptiously saltwater saturated like that, he'll get more personal invites than he can handle in any public venue."

Fleur gawked, but Napoleon only laughed again at Ginny's unedited forwardness. She certainly was not one of those awkward blushing virgins.

"I assure you I can adequately acquit myself in any situation, Carrot-top," he countered with a sly wink.

Ginny grinned widely and approvingly at Napoleon. Fleur, however, was soon fussing about how he really should get into some dry clothes before he caught his death and purposely drawing Napoleon by the arm away from the other woman.

"That hardened bit of butter brickle will wind up giving you a bad case of indigestion, my hunk of gallant and gorgeous," Ginny muttered quietly as she watched with just a hint of speculation in her gray-green eyes as her erstwhile champion and his female arm-candy moved off down the beach.

The encounter on the beach had been too close. Not only had she come very near to literally losing her prey to drowning in the ocean's currents, but also of figuratively losing him to the coquette games of a sodden hippie sex-kitten. Coming across the U.N.C.L.E. agent in Provincetown had been a stroke of luck Fleur, aka Nurse Flostone, still found hard to believe had been bestowed upon her by whatever fates tampered in the lives of humans. But she certainly was not going to let luck be the determining factor in subsequent dealings with Mr. Solo. She took a deep calming breath to settle her nerves as she and her male companion made their way into the underground nightclub she had insisted they try for a "walk on the wild side". Napoleon hadn't really been keen on the idea, but she had inevitably won him over with some well-placed feminine wheedling. From here she could put into motion a seemingly innocent set of circumstances, circumstances that would end with Napoleon Solo secreted in the private Martha's Vineyard "retreat" of Dr. Agnes Dabree.

Napoleon sighed discontentedly as he gazed about him at the clientele in the antiestablishment haven. Even his casual polo and chinos seemed much too dressy a style for this crew. Bell-bottomed jeans, many of them adorned with often rudely-worded needlepoint patches and boasting baggy spots around the knees, were the norm. And many of the male patrons didn't even bother with shirts, just draped their bare chests in layers of what were known as "love beads". Himself, he couldn't elevate this place with the description of nightclub; it was more just a bar and not at all a swanky one. He was amazed at Fleur wanting to party in such a tawdry atmosphere, but then likely she was just craving some novel experience. Well, he would provide her that later, he promised himself with an unquestionably smug grin. For now he would indulge her reckless folly with amiable broadmindedness.

They weren't seated (squished in like a pair of sardines more like) for more than two minutes at a tiny table too much in the open for Napoleon's comfort when a pair of arms wrapped themselves about his neck from behind.

“My hero!” exclaimed Ginny exuberantly.

“Don’t do that!” Napoleon warned her, knowing that – had he been wearing his gun in his usual shoulder holster instead of one strapped to his calf – she might have wound up shot through the head. As it was he had needed to strongly suppress his defensively honed instinct to throw his surprise assailant bodily across the room.

“What are you doing in my personal stomping grounds?” Ginny inquired with real interest, totally ignoring the edge that had invaded Napoleon’s voice with his verbal admonition. She pulled up an empty chair from another table and crowded in close as she sat without invitation.

“Your personal stomping grounds?” questioned Napoleon.

“I’m the bartender here, Sir Brave and Besotting.”

“The bartender?” repeated Napoleon incredulously.

“Told you I was past the legal drinking age,” Ginny teased with a ready wink.

“Well, since you are the bartender,” interjected Fleur quite scathingly, “perhaps you will take the initiative to serve us up two martinis?”

“Here?” Ginny sniggered. “I’ll get you both draft beers. That’s better quality than most of the rotgut served in this joint.”

“Pretty crowded for a place that serves rotgut,” put in Napoleon.

“The liquor is dirt cheap and besides most of this crowd is more interested in the stuff being served up in the head shop in the back.”

“Grand,” remarked Napoleon drily. Just what he needed: to be spending an evening in a counterculture saloon with illicit drug connections.

“Oh come on, Napoleon,” prompted Fleur with an enticing smile. “Where is your sense of adventure?”

“I had hoped to leave it at home this vacation,” he responded glumly.

“Oh darling, we’ll observe the unwashed masses while commenting wittily behind our hands,” proposed Fleur, “and then seek a more intimate setting for our own version of a love-in.”

Fleur’s intense green eyes promised a myriad of future delights. Still, there was something disquieting about all of this: the location, the set-up, and most particularly about the woman herself. Napoleon, however, pushed his uneasiness back down into his subconscious, mentally chastising it to keep out of the way of his current reprieve from the responsibilities involved in “saving the world”.

He smiled engagingly at the curvaceous redhead. “Such tempting rewards make the current discomfort worth the stress,” he assured her as he lifted one of her hands to his lips.

Ginny leaned her chin on her open palm as she observed Napoleon kiss the hand of the other redhead at the table.

“You’ve got the whole continental savoir-faire thing down pat,” she complimented him.

“Years of practice,” he bantered back with a ready wink of his own.

“You said something about bringing us beers?” Fleur pressed less than subtly. This little tartlet she found annoying in the extreme, and of course the girl was just another obstacle she needed to overcome in order to successfully pursue her own plans for the evening.

“Course,” acknowledged Ginny as she rose from her purloined seat. “And don’t worry, prima-donna: I’m a professional. Thus I would never even dream of spitting in your beer.”

With that Ginny made her way back to the bar, pointedly wiggling her pert little behind as she did so. Napoleon couldn’t help but smile at the gal’s undaunted ebullience even when facing competition well out of her league, as was the worldly Fleur. And, truth be told, she was rather pretty. Tending more toward cute actually, with a nicely shaped – though not voluptuous – figure to match. Her carrot-colored hair fell in wispy curls about her shoulders and those gray-green eyes were arresting in their own way. She was not his type of course, but still he couldn’t deny she did provide a pleasant vista. In fact, physically Ginny seemed almost like a much more natural and very youth-washed version of Fleur. Except for that pert little behind: that was utterly her own asset and worthy of special admiration as such.

With Ginny safely out of the way, Fleur decided it was time to take advantage of the moment. “I have to powder my nose, Napoleon,” she excused herself with a small smile. “Don’t find any other hippie baby-dolls to warm my chair in the meanwhile.”

Napoleon smiled wickedly. “I’ll make no promises, so you’d best hurry back,” he teased.

Once Fleur was up and gone in search of the ladies’ room, Napoleon decided to take advantage of the moment himself to check in with Illya. He walked toward an inconspicuous corner of the room behind a potted plant, which seemed to be a very healthy sprout of marijuana, and opened his communicator. “Open Channel A.”

Illya was alone when he awoke; the sun had set and the only light came from the windows of the camper. An appetite-stimulating aroma also emanated from the camper that enticed him to investigate.

“Well, sleepy-head,” Gretchen teased from in front of a small propane burner. The skillet she was stirring was the source of the mouth-watering bouquet. “I thought I might have to come out and kick some sand in your face to wake you.”

“Bird-watching is a very draining activity,” Illya replied with a slight smile. “What are you making?”

“Goulash,” she answered with a shrug. “I’m not much of a cook.”

“I haven’t found your culinary skills lacking.”

“That’s because you’d eat sand if I put a sauce on it and served it up on a plate.”

Illya chuckled at the joke at his expense and poured two glasses from the bottle of red wine on the counter. He handed a glass to her and laid his cheek against hers. "I should very much like to reciprocate for what you did for me this afternoon," he murmured.

She smiled up at him. "And I would very much like to be on the receiving end of your reciprocation. As I recall, you're very good with your hands." She grinned broadly and laughed.

He echoed her smile, commenting to himself how much he liked hearing her laugh. It would be easy to rationalize staying longer than just the few days they had together. He was about to nuzzle her neck with his lips when a familiar two-toned warble shattered the mood he was trying to establish.

They both straightened as if they were two children caught with their hands in a cookie jar. Illya sighed apologetically. "I'd better answer that." He stole out of the camper door as he pulled the communicator pen from his pants pocket. "Channel A is open. Kuryakin here."

Napoleon's voice answered: "Hare to tortoise: Creep across any new intriguing marine life?"

"You're twenty minutes late. *Hare*," Illya censured through the slim silver pen.

Napoleon grinned. How like his partner to comment on that. "Sorry, but I've been a bit busy acting as lifeguard to the indigenous flower-child population."

"Should I ask you to explain that further?"

"It's a long story."

"Then I'll pass on hearing the explanation until the long, boring drive back to the boat. I take it all is well?"

"Well enough that I have not one but two redheads vying for my attentions."

"Spare me the details. Where are said redheads at the moment?"

"One is bringing me a beer and the other is powdering her nose."

"How cozy."

"Uh-huh, as long as they don't decide to scratch each other's eyes out."

"Napoleon, how do you get yourself into these situations?"

Napoleon laughed lightly. "Just lucky I guess. Listen Illya, I better sign off before someone spies me talking to my pen behind a *Cannabis* plant. Though," he considered as his eyes circled the cavalcade of characters in the room, "I doubt that would really raise any eyebrows in here. Next check-in in approximately twelve hours to initiate from your end, *tovarisch*. Solo out." Napoleon snapped shut his communicator and returned to his table just as Ginny came over with a tray holding two mugs of draft.

Back at the camper on the beach below the old lighthouse, Illya closed his own pen with a partly-amused and partly-disapproving shake of his head and replaced the device in his pocket.

As he went back inside to see if dinner was ready, he mused how, later that evening, he was going to show Gretchen how he could be just as skilled pleasuring a lover as she had been for him.

Ginny placed one mug down on the table in front of Napoleon and plopped down the other before Fleur's empty chair.

"Will your girlfriend be back before the head goes flat on this?" she inquired coolly of Napoleon. "Or is her chief concern with other head life?"

"You want to talk in English, Carrot-top?" asked Napoleon with a bemused smirk.

"Your lady-friend: she going to drink or smoke?"

"My lady-friend is currently in the restroom, but I presume she will be drinking upon her return."

"That the line she handed you, hunny-bunny?"

"Line she handed me?" questioned an obviously perplexed Napoleon.

"Listen my dark prince, I don't know what Lady Macbeth recited to you about her intentions, but I saw her wander off in the direction of the head lounge, if you catch my drift, not the head."

"Damn!" muttered Napoleon mostly under his breath. He rose quickly to his feet and demanded of Ginny, "Show me the way."

"Don't get manic," advocated Ginny with a surprise blink at Napoleon's sudden about-face into deadly (and rather gripping) seriousness. "Plenty of those society divas take a one-time hit of the weed as a thrill-ride. It's not cause for a fit of pique."

"Just show me the way, Ginny," he urged her in a tone that left no room for discussion.

Accordingly Ginny led him past the bar patrons toward a small back room fittingly separated by a beaded curtain from the main narrow hallway housing the restrooms. A few feet from that entrance Napoleon placed a restraining hand on her arm.

"You stay here," he required of her.

"Oh for pity's sake," complained Ginny at this directive. "I'm not exactly lily, you know."

Napoleon quirked an eyebrow at her in query.

"Stark white against an otherwise dark setting," explained Ginny.

"Be that as it may, humor me and stay here," he bid her.

She shrugged but remained where she was as Napoleon moved forward to and then through the suspended strings of clattering glass beads.

Within a small room that literally reeked of the smell of hashish, Fleur stood before a small table consulting with a bearded and shirtless man about a slender pipe she held in her hand.

She turned to Napoleon with an innocent-seeming smile. "Look, Napoleon!" she raised the pipe to his line of sight. "A real Japanese kiseru! Such intricate workmanship!" she admired the object further as Napoleon moved closer.

"This is not exactly the place to do your import shopping, Fleur," he chastised her.

"Hey man, my merchandise is top flight!" protested the guy Napoleon assumed was the shop dealer.

"Uh-huh, and provides top flights as well," deadpanned Napoleon.

It couldn't have been for more than an instant that Napoleon's eyes were turned toward the hippie shopkeeper. Yet in that moment the fine workmanship of the kiseru pipe in Fleur's hand ejected a fine needle that injected a powerful knock-out drug into Napoleon's bare right bicep. He reeled around, realizing he had been tricked and caught in a neat trap, and in that following instant Napoleon knew the woman with the masked hypodermic for who she truly was.

"I should have recognized the prominent cheekbones," he spoke half in a daze as he tried to fight the drug coursing through his veins, "my blonde death's-head."

"I'm flattered you think my bone structure memorable, Mr. Solo," commented Fleur with a self-satisfied smile just before Napoleon hit the floor and passed into total oblivion.

At the sound of a body making hard contact with the floor, Ginny was in the room like a shot. "What happened to him?" she demanded.

"Allergic reaction to the hashish I should imagine," suggested Fleur as she pretended solicitous concern for her unconscious date, kneeling beside him and undoing a few buttons of his polo and gently slapping at his cheeks. Stealthily she brushed a hand along his calf, felt his holster and positioned herself over that side of him just long enough to remove his semi-automatic from its holder and slip it into her purse.

"He needs a doctor!" insisted Ginny as she too knelt down beside Solo, her hand brushing the lock of dark hair off his forehead.

"I can't have ambu-meds banging through here!" the dealer exclaimed in panic. "They'll be shadowed by the fuzz!"

"I'm a nurse," put in Fleur competently. "Here," she said, opening her purse and pulling a business card from its depths that she then thrust into Ginny's hand, thus forcing that hand of the younger woman away from further contact with Solo. "Call that number," she ordered. "Tell the receptionist Fleur has a private patient and to send the quiet car."

"Quiet car?" asked Ginny suspiciously.

"A private ambulance that runs without lights or sirens used to transport dignitaries and celebrities and the like. I work for an exclusive private clinic and we handle a lot of those kinds of patients."

"This isn't a time for making with the twenty questions, Gin-gal. Just do as she asks," pleaded the terrified shopkeeper.

Ginny stayed still and uncertain for a moment or so more, but a moan from Napoleon had her up and off to the bar to phone for the private ambulance Fleur was so eager to provide.

After the other woman's exit, Fleur stood, opened her purse once more and retrieved a large wad of bills that she subsequently pressed into the hand of the dealer. "For services rendered," she thanked him blandly.

"No sweat, lady," spoke up the bearded man. "I ken the frenzied vibes radiating off a bossy john can make for a really bad scene. Hope you split to a faraway place before he regains his head."

"Oh, that won't be an issue," Fleur assured him with a smile, of course, neglecting to mention the supposed 'bossy john' would be coming right along with her to that faraway place.

Act II: "A good travel agent helps eliminate those annoying vacation glitches."

"Oh, my God, Illya! Where did you learn to do that?" Gretchen gasped between deep breaths as her heart began to slow down from its orgasmic high. She lay on the blanket in the tent, the breeze from the ocean raising gooseflesh on her sweat-glistening body.

A softly Russian/British-accented voice answered. "I have pleased you?"

She sat up and cupped her hands around the face belonging to the voice. "Pleased me—? My God, you've ruined me! No one has ever—or *will* ever come close!"

"I guess we've both learned some new things since the last time we spent some time together."

"You have a gift for understatement. What's the Russian word for 'thank you'?"

"*Spasibo.*"

Gretchen leaned forward until their noses were nearly touching. "*Spasibo, Illya.* You are a wonderful lover."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that."

"Well," she whispered, leaning closer. "You could thank me for the compliment and then hold me and kiss me like there won't be a tomorrow."

"Than—" was the only sound he was able to make before Gretchen lay on him fully, her mouth over his. He drew his arms around her and rolled their bodies until they lay side by side, locked in a seemingly endless kiss into eternity.

Illya awoke at dawn, his arms still around the beautiful woman he had fallen asleep kissing. As he lay listening to Gretchen's soft breathing, he pondered again how much he and Napoleon differed in their philosophy regarding women. Much of the time, he was celibate, inviting little contact with the opposite sex. Napoleon, on the other hand, would willingly take more than one woman to bed in a night, if he could manage to keep them unawares of the others. Could it be that, for Solo, every sexual encounter was on the level of intensity that he experienced with Gretchen? It could explain his partner's insatiable appetite. As if prompted, he could suddenly feel his own mind and body yearn for a glorious encore of the previous day.

Almost immediately, he chided himself for the very same things about which he was forever upbraiding his partner. *We are men, not rutting bull elk*, he told himself, but in the next moment, another voice countered: *This is time to regenerate, to enjoy the life we fight so hard to give others.*

His mind made up, he carefully drew his arms out from under his sleeping partner, and slipped out of the tent. Just inside the door to the camper, Gretchen had a stack of towels, and he took one, wrapping it around his hips. He was going to do something he had never done: he was going to go for a swim in the ocean at dawn, and he was going to be naked when he did it.

A devilish grin formed on his lips as he trotted to the water's edge. *If Napoleon could see me now, he'd think I'd gone completely daft*, he thought, and threw the towel on the sand. The water was chilly, but he was not deterred. He ran out into the surf until the swells were above his knees and with a laugh, dove into the gray-green water.

The cold water took his breath away, but at the same time was invigorating—or was it the total spontaneity of his action that was making him feel giddy? He could not recall the last time he had ever experienced anything to make him feel what he felt at this moment. No—Ilyya Nickovetch Kuryakin: UNCLE agent, former GRU agent, Doctor of Philosophy in Quantum Physics, Soviet Naval Captain, Ukrainian/Gypsy orphan had *never* felt this way before. *Truly and undeniably jubilant.*

After fifteen minutes, the chill of the water was becoming uncomfortable, so Ilyya reluctantly returned to the beach and his towel lying on the sand. He was half-way to the tent when saw Gretchen, dressed in his shirt, standing by the front of the camper, watching him. The giddy feeling returned, starting in his groin and spread quickly throughout the rest of his body. With a loud whoop, he threw off the towel, ran up to the astonished woman and caught her in an embrace that ended with them both on the blanket inside the tent once again. He drew her open lips towards his own, and as the sun rose over the National Seashore, Ilyya Kuryakin made passionate love to Gretchen Moore.

Napoleon drifted slowly back into consciousness, attentive that at least the air yet held the characteristic tang of salt spray. Still somewhere along the Atlantic seaboard then.

“Might as well open your eyes, Mr. Solo,” the distinctive cadence of the speech of Dr. Agnes Dabree broke through the fog in his mind. “I am quite aware you’re no longer under the main effect of my little knock-out potion.”

“For something little it sure packs a big wallop,” complained Napoleon as he slowly raised his eyelids. His head was pounding and he felt somewhat nauseous.

“I taught Flo better than to use minimal measures on U.N.C.L.E. agents,” explained Dabree, “especially one of your caliber.”

“I’m flattered, but you really didn’t have to go through all this trouble to deliver me safe and sound,” quipped Napoleon as the fact he was securely strapped down on a hospital gurney filtered into his range of sensory perception. “I did advise my travel agent I wanted to keep transportation methods simple this trip.”

“Quite the witty conversationalist, aren’t you? Well, I do have many topics I’d like to discuss with you. But first suppose we get out of the way the annoying possibility of a daring rescue by your partner. Where is he, Mr. Solo? I’d like to offer him my hospitality as well.”

“Sorry, I prefer to be selfish and keep this charming hideaway all to myself.”

“That won’t do, Mr. Solo. You see, my generosity knows no bounds and I do so enjoy showering it on as many as needful.”

“Get yourself a publicist and leave me out of the mix for inviting new victims... uh, guests into your lair.”

“Obstinate young man,” she fussed. “That attitude won’t avail you anything, you know. A healthy dose of my singular form of pentathol forced into your veins will soon relieve you of it in any case.”

“More special treatment?” jibed Napoleon. “How lucky can one guy be?”

“Enough badinage. I doubt you’ll be quite so devil-may-care once my formula travels throughout your nervous system. I brew it particularly to treat stubborn U.N.C.L.E. agents. Aside from its main objective as a truth serum, it has some less than pleasant side-effects. Your whole body will feel like it’s on fire, Mr. Solo. As if acid had replaced all your blood.”

“You Thrush scientists do so like to brag about your supposed innovations,” complained Napoleon, refusing to be cowed by her threats. “For a change of pace, why don’t you just get on with your dirty work in non-boastful silence?”

“If that is your wish: I do aim to please.” Dabree then turned toward the other occupant in the room. “Flo, prepare the injection.”

Nurse Flostone, long hypodermic needle held within her long-nailed fingers, came into Napoleon’s line of sight. The red dye had been washed out of her pale blond locks and the green contacts had been removed from her dark brown eyes.

“The flower in the stone that turned out to be a snake under a rock,” Napoleon greeted her with a bitter smile.

Flo smiled back nastily. “I was rather surprised you made it all so easy.”

“I was attempting a respite from all things work-related,” he admitted. “Silly of me to think that a state Thrush might actually allow me to achieve for a few days at least.”

“Yes, very silly of you,” agreed Flo. “Though it’s quite unfortunate that you won’t get a chance to benefit from that life lesson, for I’m afraid you simply won’t have any future opportunities at living.”

“Expectations of my impending demise have always turned out disappointing.”

“Not this time, Mr. Solo,” pronounced Dr. Dabree with steadfast certainty. “You’re on vacation. Once I take your partner out of the equation, no one will miss you for days. By that time you’ll be nothing more than a memory. Now just relax,” she counseled as she took the needle from Flo’s

hand and ejected a small amount of fluid from the tip to check its readiness, “and think satisfying thoughts of how nobly you’ll be eulogized at your funeral.”

The hypodermic descended deep into Napoleon’s flesh just below his left elbow and then the physical agony of the serum and the mental agony of the endless questions began.

“He is really quite obnoxiously mulish,” grumbled Dr. Dabree with regard to her ‘patient’.

She had been hammering away at Napoleon for well over two hours and had thus far gotten little more out of him than reams of totally nonsensical information. Certainly he had provided her nothing of any use in her current determination to locate his partner for likewise deliverance into her clutches. She had already given the U.N.C.L.E. CEA two additional injections of the pain-inducing truth serum and all to no particular avail.

“He seems to have quite a high tolerance level,” noted Nurse Flostone clinically.

“Yes,” agreed the disgruntled Dabree. “Come on, Mr. Solo: no need for you to suffer alone,” she pressed Napoleon.

“Contrary to popular opinion, misery does not love company,” panted out Napoleon.

He was finding it harder and harder to resist the truth serum. His concentration centered solely on the sizzling stinging and flaring throbbing echoing throughout his veins, and he was beginning to lose mental connection with what he was saying. He didn’t know how much longer he could hold out. If he wasn’t such an optimistic person by nature, he would have prayed for death. But it just wasn’t in him to do that. No matter how desperate the situation, there was always hope, wasn’t there? Always.

“Give him another injection, Flo,” Dabree ordered.

“Pushing toward overkill, aren’t you?” Napoleon barely managed to get the words out. His throat was hoarse from screams he didn’t even want to remember making.

“Rest assured I will only kill you in my own time and in my own manner, Mr. Solo,” Dabree pledged. “Thus, for the present at least, your life is safe enough. Now I will ask you again: Where is Mr. Kuryakin?”

“Not here at least,” Napoleon struggled to keep some focus.

“The injection, Flo!” demanded the frustrated Dabree.

Nurse Flostone stuck the filled needle into Napoleon’s forearm and pushed the plunger in one swift stroke. Napoleon’s tormented shriek, as the acid-like fluid sped additional flash-heat into his veins, surely could have roused the dead.

“You’re second-rate even as a torturer, Dabree,” he nevertheless hissed out through resolutely clenched teeth. “My partner did a better job.”

Dr. Dabree’s ears pricked up. “A better job at torturing you? Now that’s an odd teambuilding technique for U.N.C.L.E. to employ.”

Napoleon bit his bottom lip so hard, it split and bled. He desperately wanted to keep silent but the odds were stacking against him far too rapidly now.

“Sometimes things are necessary,” Napoleon found the scratchy words dropping unintended from his mouth.

“Why so they are, Mr. Solo. And right now it is vitally necessary for you to tell me where to find Mr. Kuryakin.”

A plan was forming in the mind of Dr. Dabree. One U.N.C.L.E. agent torturing another... to death. It had so many nuances of shivery satisfaction to savor that she could barely contain her excitement.

“Way too sure of yourself, like every Thrush I’ve ever met,” Napoleon commented with a brief if awkward smile. “But national parks are big places. You’ll never find him amid the marine life.”

Napoleon wasn’t even sure what he was saying anymore. His own words seemed far-off and garbled in his pain-sealed state of vague semi-awareness.

“Won’t I?”

“No, you won’t, you sadistic loony!” the verbal attack erupted from Solo with all but the last of his strength. He was losing this battle and he knew it. Even drugged out of his mind and half-insane with physical hurt, he knew it. “He and his Gretchen are safe within the shadow of that lighthouse,” he found himself verbalizing a sentiment he had only intended to reflect upon in his head.

“Lighthouses are built so sturdily, I do agree.”

Suddenly terrified of what he had revealed in the mental haze and physical agony inflicted by the multiple doses of the re-engineered pentathol, Napoleon began to thrash about wildly in a fruitless attempt to break free of the restraints that mercilessly bound him tight to the gurney.

Dr. Dabree only tut-tutted at the violence of his movements as she tested the undeterred strength of his bonds.

“Do give him a sedative, Flo,” she urged her cohort. “I think we can be charitable for the moment and let Mr. Solo sleep awhile. After all, he has generously provided us with quite enough information to successfully sniff out our next quarry.”

“I’m sorry Illya.” Napoleon’s anguished but barely audible croak was the last coherent sound he made before the narcotic Flo introduced into his embattled system lulled his ravaged senses into the black void of sheer exhaustion.

It took a great deal of willpower to leave the camper while Gretchen was cooking up breakfast sausages and eggs, but it was time for his twelve hour check-in with Napoleon and Illya was half-curious how his partner had fared with the two competing redheads.

He walked a discrete distance from the camper and tent and opened his communicator. “Open Channel A. Napoleon, are you still in one piece?”

The only thing he heard was the soft hiss of his communicator searching for its compatriot device. He looked at the silver pen somewhat critically, as if his expression could be transmitted to his partner's end, and looked at his watch. Nine-fifteen: Napoleon should be expecting him to call.

With a mental shrug, Illya closed his communicator, and headed back to the camper. He was not worried, for Napoleon had missed check-ins before when on vacation and it usually meant he was in the middle of a very intense "conversation" with a lady friend. Solo would call back when he realized he had missed the check-in and Illya would get the chance to hear, yet, another fabricated excuse.

The Russian agent smiled to himself. He would make it a point to ridicule his partner again for his tardiness. He walked up the two steps to the camper door and was met by a plate piled high with eggs, sausages and light, fluffy pancakes. The smile widened to a grin as the cook announced that "breakfast was served."

Later that morning, Gretchen drove the dune buggy south along the coastline with Illya in the passenger's seat. "I've chartered a small cabin cruiser in Hyannis Port for us to take out to a very interesting sunken vessel: the *Aransas*."

"Really? I did some reading on a few of the boats in that area. A passenger and freight steamer carrying a cargo of brass, as I recall. Went down after hitting several barges in 1905."

"Show off," Gretchen said and her companion grinned.

"We can explore the wreck in two dives. On the second one, I fully intend on catching a couple of lobsters for supper. The currents can be rather strong there so it's recommended that you plan any dives in that area during what they call 'slack time'.

"When the tide changes direction," Illya said.

"How do you know so much about tides and currents?"

"Soviet Navy; and my partner has a forty foot sloop we take out once in a while. A sailboat is much more efficient if you're running with the tides instead of against them."

"You never cease to amaze me, Illya."

"How so?"

"You're very knowledgeable about a lot of things."

"A product of the line of work I'm in. If I'm supposed to impersonate a coal miner, I should have a working knowledge or better of the subject."

"What's the most dangerous assignment you've had?"

"You've asked me that before and I told you that they all have the potential to be dangerous," the Russian answered evenly, wishing she would quickly find a different topic of conversation.

"Then, what was the hardest thing you ever had to do on an assignment?" She noticed a slight change in his body language, and regretted the question. "I'm sorry, that wasn't fair."

“Then, you will not be offended if I don’t answer. Perhaps a change in topic is warranted.”

“All right, let’s talk about your partner. What’s Napoleon like?”

“He’s an American,” Ilya relied as if that was explanation enough.

Gretchen looked at him curiously. “And that’s all?”

“Why do you want to know about Napoleon? It’s not like we’re going to be spending a lot of time with him, if I have anything to say about it.”

She smiled coyly. “Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

“No, because there isn’t any, but that doesn’t mean I would consider sharing you with him.”

“Now you make me sound like a commodity.”

“Perhaps another change in topic is appropriate here.”

“You haven’t told him about me, have you?”

“He knows very little and I don’t intend to expound on that anytime soon. Change the subject, please.”

“In a minute. Why haven’t you told your partner anything about me?”

Ilya sighed heavily, annoyed. “Because what I do in my leisure time is my business and no one else’s. And while I call Napoleon my partner and best friend, among other things, I don’t feel it’s necessary to tell him about everything. Am I not allowed a few secrets?”

“Of course, you are. But I have the feeling that you have more than a few secrets.”

Napoleon Solo awoke to the haunting memory of his body being consumed by the relentless agony of Dr. Dabree’s truth serum and the remorse of knowing that he had given away enough information to allow his captors to find his partner. It would only be a matter of time before he would be sharing his cell.

He sat up slowly; there was not much pain except a throat raw from screaming and the dull body-ache from being confined. He was miserably thirsty and nauseous from an empty stomach. He expected those needs to go unfulfilled for a long time.

The door opened and Agnes Dabree walked in to gloat over her prize capture. “Good morning, Mr. Solo. Or, should I say, good afternoon.”

There was only one thing he was interested in and it wasn’t the time of day.

“I’m sure you’re wondering if Mr. Kuryakin has joined us yet.”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Napoleon said, though his throat hurt to speak and his voice was little more than a croaking sound.

“My associates have just begun to search the Cape Cod peninsula, but don’t worry, we’ll find him soon.”

“I’m not worried, at all,” he lied with a grin. “I really don’t know where he is. The place you forced out of me was where I dropped him off. He could be anywhere by now.” *God!* he thought desperately, *let him be anywhere else but where I said he was.*

“Your voice is quite hoarse, Mr. Solo. Perhaps you would like something to drink.”

“I wouldn’t want you to go out of your way, Dr. Dabree, but since you seem to be offering, water would be fine. Something to eat as well would be even better.”

“I’ll see what can be arranged. I wouldn’t want to get the reputation for mistreating my guests.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, if I’m asked, I’ll certainly give my sparkling recommendation to my friends. Provided, that is, your cuisine warrants it.”

“I would appreciate the gesture, Mr. Solo, but I don’t think your chances of being able to recommend me are very good. You see, I have every intention of either killing you outright or making you wish you were dead.”

“Maybe you’d like to tell me how Illya fits into all of this.”

Dabree smiled wolfishly and her eyes behind the thick glasses grew feral. “Mr. Kuryakin will be fitting into this quite well, I assure you.” She turned to leave. “I’ll have Flo bring you something.”

The twenty-two foot cabin cruiser bobbed gracefully on the swells, anchored at the target site of the sunken *Aransas*. Inside the cabin, the two occupants prepared for their dive.

“It seems a shame to cover such an eye-catching figure with a wet suit,” Illya commented affectionately as he slid a pair of rubbery leggings over his own body.

“I could say the same thing to you, Illya dear, but the water is cold and I’m not sure you wouldn’t try to make love to me sixty-five feet underwater if I didn’t.”

“That’s a notion I hadn’t considered. Perhaps we should try it.” The blond Russian grinned.

“That’s just plain silly!” She paused for a moment, then looked at him more seriously. “How long can you hold your breath?”

“I don’t know exactly; a minute-and-a-half, two minutes, maybe more.” The grin widened. “With the proper encouragement, of course. How about you?”

Gretchen stared at him, as she considered and shook her head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were crazy.”

“Maybe I am. How long can you hold your breath?”

“A minute-and-a-half,” she replied and smiled. “Maybe more, with proper encouragement, of course.”

“Then, I’d say, we’re both just a little crazy. But, since you insist on wearing that wetsuit, I won’t try to seduce you at sixty-five feet.”

“Too bad. I might have just let you try.”

“On the contrary. At fifteen feet, it’s not such a long way back up to finish what I started.”

“What about the *Aransas* and the slack water?”

“I’d put the currents on hold.” Kuryakin brandished one of his rare warm smiles.

Gretchen zipped up the wetsuit jacket. “I believe you *could* stop the tides if you chose to,” she said thoughtfully. “I really do.” She kissed him on the cheek. “You finish getting ready; I’m going to check the gear and put up the diving flag. I’ll wait for you on deck.”

“Nothing personal, Gretchen, but I prefer to check my own gear.” He shrugged slightly. “Professional habit.”

“Forever the suspicious agent,” she replied softly, but Ilyya could sense a twinge of annoyance at his apparent distrust.

“I’m afraid so,” he responded apologetically. He shrugged the neoprene jacket up over his shoulders, zipped it closed and fastened the snaps at the crotch, all the while, contemplating what seemed to be a fast approaching end to his vacation.

While he could honestly say he had been enjoying himself a great deal since Napoleon dropped him off, he realized that there had been more venturing into discordant discussions than the last time he and Gretchen spent a few days together. It was beginning to follow that ever-familiar pattern: good times, great sex, but the woman wanting more of him than he could give. Once again, he wondered how his partner was able to provide the intimacy women craved, yet be forgiven when he walked away, free and clear, from a relationship that never had a chance of blossoming.

An axiomatic answer came to him, and its applicability amused him to the point that he chuckled to himself aloud. “Practice makes perfect,” he murmured, picked up his swim fins, and went on deck to find Gretchen and his diving equipment.

Whenever Kuryakin strapped an Aqua-Lung tank to his back, he was on a mission. He did it with the full knowledge that there were more than even odds that someone would be trying to stop him, and that they might succeed. Therefore, donning the equipment was a prelude to the entry into survival mode. Before planning this vacation, he had never considered diving for the sheer fun of it. Even now, it was hard to ignore the autonomic response to danger expressed as tightness in his upper abdomen.

Gretchen sat on a bench by the portside railing, watching him as he tightened the straps attaching the tanks to his body, and hooked a weighted belt about his slim hips. “All ready?”

He caught the face mask she tossed to him. “Lead the way, my trusty tour guide.” He donned the mask as Gretchen jumped feet-first into the blue-green water, and followed. The pair added the swim fins to their attire and began the descent down the sixty-five feet to the underwater corpse of the freighter *Aransas*.

As they approached the wreck of the freighter, Illya felt the nervous energy of unperceived danger give way to the nervous energy of excitement and intense interest. Here, stretched out before him, was a thing to be studied and examined—and he was actually going to have fun doing it! *Imagine, Illya Nickovetch*, he said to himself, *exploration with no practical purpose but that of amusement!* It was almost decadent!

Excitedly, he swam past his trusty tour guide to reach the vessel first. He was on his knees examining the twisted metal plating from a demolition performed to make the ship less a hazard to surface vessels, when Gretchen caught up with him. Curiously, she pulled him by the shoulder to look at his eyes behind the faceplate. In one quick motion, Illya pulled off his mask, removed his mouthpiece, and proceeded to kiss her, first on one cheek, then the other. It was followed by a broad open-mouthed grin that was reminiscent of earlier that morning when he raced to her from the surf: wet, naked and wildly jubilant.

Even as she watched him de-don his mask, empty it of water, and replace his mouthpiece, returning him to the semblance of sobriety once again, she couldn't help but be amazed at the complexity of the man with whom she had been sharing her bed and her body the last few days.

Dr. Agnes Dabree was unhappy. The search for Kuryakin was not going well. Though she had a dozen pairs of agents deployed up and down the coastline of the Cape Cod peninsula, no one had seen the Russian and his female companion.

For a fleeting moment, she considered dosing Solo with her truth serum again to force more information from him, but, at best, getting anything useful the first time had proven to be a time-consuming venture. In spite of herself, she had a grudging admiration for the UNCLE agent's tenacity to resist both the pain and the potent truth serum.

No, she would have to be patient and wait. Kuryakin would be found, and then she would continue studying the fascinating concept of stretching the boundaries of trust between partners through applied torture.

Late in the afternoon on the second dive of the day, Gretchen took her underwater camera under the guise of photographing the marine life known to inhabit the freighter hulk. In reality, she wanted to capture on film the images of a normally reserved and emotionally-guarded man experiencing what might have been the most fun he had ever allowed himself to have in his entire life. The shipwreck was home to myriads of fish, crustaceans, and other creatures; the Russian appeared to be fascinated by all of it.

He didn't even seem to mind when he caught her photographing him. Instead, he held up two large lobster trophies like an angler displaying his prized catch. After stuffing them into their mesh bag, Illya swam over to what appeared to be a school of fish lazily swimming along the bottom. Instead, he startled a large group of small sharks, called spiny dogfish, which engulfed him like a fountain.

When the group had dissipated, Gretchen saw that he had caught one by the tail and was running his hand over its sandpaper-like skin like a child stroking a kitten. He let go of the shark and watched it disappear into distance to find the rest of its kindred dogfish. He swam back to her and pointed to the camera. *Let me take a picture of you*, he motioned. She gave him the camera and he finished the roll of film.

At that point, Gretchen gestured that it was time to end the dive. The currents were increasing and the air in their tanks was nearly depleted. Illya handed back the camera and retrieved their mesh bag of lobsters, but she thought she could see the disappointment in his eyes.

Ten minutes later, he was offering his hand to her to help her climb aboard, and he quickly undid the straps holding his gear to his body. He reached out and grasped Gretchen by the arm and pulled her towards himself.

“Allow me, please,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. He undid the clasps and lowered the air tanks to the deck. The weighted belt, he let fall while he reached for the zipper of her wetsuit jacket. “I can’t seem to get enough of you,” he murmured. “I don’t know why.” When he pulled down the zipper, he was surprised to see that when she had left him to go on deck, she had removed her bikini top. “Were you really expecting me to seduce you on the dive?”

“I wanted to be open to the possibility,” she said as she laid her hand along the side of his face.

“Don’t you realize how dangerous that would have been?”

“Why? Because it was underwater or because you’re a deadly UNCLE agent?”

He took her face in his hands. “You would never have any reason to be afraid of me.” Scooping her up into his arms in a single fluid motion, he carried her to the cabin where he carefully and meticulously seduced her.

The sun was beginning to set when they motored into dock. Illya unloaded the scuba gear and wetsuits while Gretchen settled with the dock manager and secured the name of a restaurant that would cook their lobsters for them. As luck would have it, the restaurant was along the beach, catering to the locals and tourists alike who wanted to eat their catch of the day.

An hour later, they were enjoying their steaming hot lobsters with dipping butter, corn on the cob, a plate of crudities, and a bottle of champagne, at Illya’s request. They sat on the beach, at first, silently satisfying the hunger the day’s dives had created, and then later, the conversation started with a pleasant debriefing of the exploration of the wrecked steamship.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone get so excited over a sunken hulk before,” Gretchen mused with a smile.

“I could point out that you didn’t exactly seem disinterested.”

“I didn’t pull my mask off and plant a kiss on each of your cheeks either. For a moment, I thought you might have a touch of nitrogen narcosis.”

“In sixty-odd feet of water? Hardly. I can free-dive that deep.”

“Well, I was hardly expecting you to do what you did.”

“But you were expecting me to try to seduce you.”

“Not really.”

“Then, why the shedding of the bikini top?”

“Maybe I wanted to see if you’d notice.”

The blond Russian smiled. “I hate to put a pin into your bubble, but I didn’t notice. I was quite distracted by my fascination of the wreck. You know, I’ve never dived when it hasn’t been in training or for a mission.”

“I believe that. Haven’t you ever done anything just for fun?”

“I was trained to use time in purposeful pursuits, to not waste time.”

“Having fun isn’t necessarily a waste of time. Especially if you’re with someone you enjoy being with.” Gretchen smiled to show him that he had made the time special by being with her.

He echoed a pale reflection of her smile. “Then, I must confess that it was a doubly pleasant afternoon for me, as well.”

“And I’m guessing it was one of those rare times you did do something just for fun’s sake.”

“More like it was one of those rare instances when I’ve had the time to use in such a pursuit.”

“I imagine your work doesn’t give you a lot of free time.”

“Sometimes, it gives too much,” he admitted.

Gretchen looked at him, wondering exactly what he meant, but knew enough not to ask if she wanted to keep this evening as pleasant as the day had been. Instead she asked: “Who taught you that idle time was unproductive time?”

He shrugged. “Nearly everyone I had contact with as I was growing up and beyond. My grandparents, the people I lived with when they died, the State schools, the Soviet military, UNCLE.”

“Yet, here you are, enjoying yourself. You *are* enjoying yourself, aren’t you?”

Kuryakin chuckled. “Am I so aloof that you can’t tell?”

“I would hope not.” She slid over until she was beside him and then lay back against him until her head rested on his shoulder. “My friends tell me that I shouldn’t settle for seeing you only once a year or so.”

“If you see no one else in the interim, your friends advise you well.”

“My work keeps me pretty busy.”

“As does mine.”

“Do you see other women?”

She heard him sigh that familiar sigh of annoyance. “Occasionally,” he answered evenly. “Gretchen, I sincerely hope we are not venturing into old territory again.”

She sat up. "I know, I know. But, there never seems to be much else to talk about otherwise. You won't talk about yourself and your work is off limits. I can't always dominate the conversation."

"My answers haven't changed." He looked at her with sympathy. "But, you keep hoping they will. As I said before, your friends have advised you well."

She turned around and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Let's go back to the camp. I want to give you another back rub." She smiled widely. "And we'll see where it leads."

He returned the smile as she hoped he would. "I think we know exactly where it's going to lead."

Napoleon Solo sat in his small, windowless cell and wondered if his internal clock had been keeping accurate time. Without external clues, he could only surmise how much time had passed since his capture. Dr. Dabree had been an infrequent visitor, giving him glimpses of the time frame by her grumbling about the difficulty her people were having trying to locate his partner.

Her threats to put him under her truth serum again did not disturb him; it was probable that Illya and Gretchen were not where his ramblings under duress had suggested. If that was true, no amount of truth serum was going to give her the information she wanted. It was also obvious to him that she had not tried to contact Illya directly via his communicator. Intelligent as many of their adversaries were, it was something few of them ever thought to do.

Solo also knew that enough time had passed that his partner was aware of his disappearance. He was sure he had missed one check-in time, more likely, two. However, without the communicator set to broadcast a homing frequency (another oversight by his captors), Illya would have no inkling where he was either.

And so, he played the waiting game: one of the most difficult and nerve-racking gambits in his profession. The stakes were always high: one or more lives, very often his own, and/or his partner's, and the fate of the world, or a smaller portion of it. However, at present, he only knew that Dr. Dabree was centered on revenge for her fallen cohorts, and that Illya was a necessary player in her scheme. The longer the Russian remained elusive, the more frustrated she would become, and, perhaps, the quicker she would abandon her first plan and proceed on her own. Bad for him, healthy for the rest of humanity. It was an option he could live with, or rather, die with.

"Don't let her find you, Illya," he whispered out loud, not caring if she heard him or not. He sat back against the wall and played another game of mental chess.

Gretchen's hair cascaded down to cover her enigmatic lover's face, while he grasped her head gently to guide her smiling, full lips to his. The early morning observation of Plovers, Herons, and Sandpipers they'd been engaged in, had given way to a leisurely course of mutual physical exploration by the two non-indigenous humans, culminating in the ultimate sexual satisfaction of the other, and afterward, satiety, as their bodies lay intertwined in the enjoyment of their shared experience.

Gretchen lay with her head in the hollow of Illya's shoulder, her hand caressing the scant hair on his chest and stomach. "Illya, I know the sex is fantastic for both of us. Why then, do we wait so long between the times we see each other? We could make the time, you know."

Her touch renewed his sexual excitement, and instinctively, he drew her even closer to himself, encircled in strong arms. Two days ago, he had been thinking along the same lines, but now, Napoleon had missed three twelve-hour check-ins. Reality, his dangerous reality, was encroaching quickly on this fantasy time.

When he didn't respond vocally, she said his name, and he looked at her, confused. "I thought you were being wistfully rhetorical," he replied evenly.

She wiggled out of his embrace and sat up, leaving him to stare at her, still not understanding. "No, actually, I was I was looking for a romantic, rose-tinted lie. Or at least, a noncommittal grunt."

"Gretchen, why do you keep returning to the same tired subject?"

"Indulge me."

"I don't know how to explain it any other way. The only other options are to just say flat out that the relationship is at an end, or to start an argument that will have you happy to see me go. Neither of which I want to do."

"So, what, exactly, *are* we doing here, then? Do you come around every year or so because you want to get laid and we already have the preliminaries out of the way?"

"That's a particularly saturnine comment, coming from you. As I recall, you've been doing a fair portion of the initiating. And while I find that particularly erotic, I am here primarily because I enjoy your company." He sat up and faced her. "However, if you truly believe that I've just been using you for little more than personal gratification, I will gather my things and leave."

"You don't have to do that."

"But it's apparent that I am not fulfilling your idea of what you wish me to be. Perhaps, I *should* have introduced you to my partner when he dropped me off. He seems to be much more knowledgeable about what women like to hear than I do."

"You can be so damned disagreeable at times," she grumbled, folding her arms. "As a matter of fact—"

Illya cut her off with a hand to her mouth and a soft, "Shh—" When she shook her head at him, her eyes angry, he added in a whisper, "I hear voices." He slowly got to his hands and knees and crawled to the camper to peer under it at the beach. He was back in a moment, quickly gathering his clothes. "We've got company. I want you to get into the camper and lock the door."

"But, Illya—!" she protested only to have him glare at her.

"Do as I say!" he scolded her in no uncertain terms, and when he was certain she was as focused as he, he continued urgently, "Inside is my gun and communicator. Lock the door and shoot anything that comes through it."

“Even you?” she questioned, disbelieving his apparent intent.

“Yes, unless I tell you the scientific name for the Piping Plover.”

“*Charadrius melodus*?”

“Yes.”

“Illya, what’s happening?”

“There are two men coming towards the camper who, I believe, are here to take me. I’ve been expecting it since I lost communication with my partner almost thirty-six hours ago. I’m going to try to lure them away from you. If I’m successful, I want you to use my communicator to report what’s happened. You’ve seen me open it; call for Channel D. Whoever answers, tell them you want to speak to Mr. Waverly. Tell him that Napoleon and I have been captured. He will tell you what to do.”

“You mean besides shoot anyone coming through the door?” She looked at him, eyes wide with fear.

He gave her a humorless smile for her ability to make light of her terror. “Something like that.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

He pulled on his trousers and slipped a shirt over his head. “I sincerely hope so. Go, now, get into the camper.”

While she followed his orders, he walked around the front of the camper, hands casually in his pockets. “Hi, there.”

The two men were startled at his sudden appearance, but merely stopped walking. From where he stood, Illya could not see any weapon. “Good morning,” one of them said courteously.

Kuryakin continued to feign innocence. “Are you lost?”

“Looking for someone.”

“Well, it’s just been me and several hundred water birds for the last few days.”

A gun appeared. “We were told you were here with a rather attractive lady scientist.”

Illya looked at the gun without changing his facial expression. That information could have only come from one source. “She went for groceries.”

“In what? Her dune buggy is parked over there.”

“She isn’t here,” Illya said emphatically.

“I think we’ll just check to make sure.”

At that moment, Kuryakin broke into a full run towards the surf and away from the camper and the tent. As he’d hoped, the two THRUSH began to run after him, all interest lost in who might

still be in the camper. Now, if he could lure them far enough away, they might decide to not to check the camper, content with their quarry.

He was on wet sand when he felt the sting of a tranquilizing dart in his back. He pushed himself to run faster, even though it would shorten the time before the drug stopped him. Thirty seconds later, he tripped over his own feet, and landed hard and flat on the wet sand. The incoming tide splashed across his face, but the unconscious agent felt neither its chill nor tasted the salt as it flowed into his half-open mouth.

The two THRUSH looked down at the incapacitated UNCLE agent. "I'm betting his girlfriend is still in the camper," one of them said. "Want me to go back and check?"

"Too much trouble," the other one replied. "She can't do anything about it anyway. We got what we came for."

From the window in the camper, Gretchen gasped as she saw Illya collapse onto the beach. She watched as the two men who had followed him, picked up his limp form and slung the arms roughly over their shoulders to drag him to where they had parked their car. She found herself almost wishing they would come back for her, so she could empty Illya's gun into them. She shook off that foolish idea and waited instead as they disappeared across a small dune. Then she pulled both ends of the sleek silver pen, reversed the top to expose the microphone, and in a calm voice that actually startled her, spoke: "Open Channel D."

Illya Kuryakin awoke with stiff neck and a throbbing headache. The stiff neck, he could immediately attribute to sitting for an extended period of time with his chin on his chest. The headache was a little side effect from the tranquilizing dart the THRUSH kidnapers had fired into him as he ran from the camper. Both discomforts were probably the least of his worries at this point, he decided.

He lifted his head cautiously, not wanting to aggravate either the headache or the neck ache. He had little success; a sharp pain across his shoulders greeted him as he straightened, and in turn, caused his head to throb all the more. He sighed in resignation to both and opened his eyes.

He was alone in the room, seated in a straight chair, his wrists bound to the arms of the chair by rough leather straps. A quick glance at his unclad feet revealed a similar situation with his ankles, and another leather band encircled his chest, just below the armpits. He straightened, knowing he wasn't going anywhere quickly.

The door opened and a diminutive woman walked in, followed by a tall, classically beautiful blonde-haired woman. Kuryakin recognized the short, older woman immediately and the realization of what her presence meant sent chills down his spine. Her thick eyeglasses reminded him of an owl. The toothy smile as she looked at him made him feel like he was the rodent slated to be the owl's next meal. "How nice of you to join us, Mr. Kuryakin," she said in an uncharacteristically pleasant voice.

"Your invitation was so compelling, I simply couldn't refuse," the Russian answered in kind. "Where are you keeping Napoleon?"

"What makes you think that I have the tenacious Mr. Solo?"

“He was the only one who had the vaguest idea of where I was. You really don’t expect me to believe that finding me was just a lucky happenstance.”

Dr. Dabree smiled. “Since it doesn’t matter, I will admit that your Mr. Solo told us where you were, though he was trying very hard not to.”

“Mr. Solo is highly resistant to most of THRUSH’s current concoctions. Playing with something new, are you?”

Behind a one-way glass, Napoleon, bound in a chair exactly like his partner, watched the exchange between Dr. Dabree and his friend, agonizing again over his own fragility against the truth drug and the fear that Illya would fare little better. And he didn’t even know what questions the maniacal doctor could possibly ask of the Russian. “Stay strong, my friend—fight it,” he whispered.

“Very perceptive, Mr. Kuryakin. It’s quite new, and entirely my own formula. Eminently effective, too, I might add.”

“I’m sure you’re very proud of your achievement. What does all this have to do with me?”

The small-statured doctor grinned wolfishly. “Surely you don’t think I’d only run one trial on a human being before releasing it to THRUSH for general use, do you? What kind of a scientist would I be?”

“Several adjectives immediately come to mind.”

“It was a rhetorical question, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“What a shame. They were highly descriptive adjectives. However, I do feel that I should give you this warning. THRUSH truth drugs usually make me sick to my stomach, and I had a very large breakfast before your minions caught up with me. I’ve also gotten fairly adept at aiming.” He grinned mockingly. “Didn’t you get a copy of my updated dossier?”

Napoleon had to smile in spite of himself. Leave it to his partner to attempt to torment his own tormentors.

Dabree was unfazed. “An upset stomach will be a minor inconvenience with my new formula. It had your partner writhing on his gurney screaming at the top of his lungs.”

From behind the window, Napoleon felt his stomach churn in remembrance. He couldn’t recall ever being in so much continuous pain as he was with her formula racing through his veins. But, those electrodes on his forehead a couple of weeks ago had come pretty close—*My God*, Napoleon thought, *what do you have going on in that sick mind of yours, Dabree?*

“Of course,” Dabree continued, “if you agree to answer my questions truthfully, I will spare you the ordeal.”

“I can’t guarantee cooperation without knowing the nature of the questions beforehand.”

“I can promise that the questions have nothing to do with UNCLE.”

Illya looked at her, perplexed. What other questions could there possibly be? “I’m afraid I don’t follow,” he said slowly.

“I’m interested in your last mission, Mr. Kuryakin. Particularly, when you willingly put Mr. Solo under torture.”

Kuryakin’s mouth dropped open slightly, but he quickly composed himself and glared back at his captor. “I’m afraid you’d find it a rather dull story.”

“On the contrary, I find the whole idea fascinating. An UNCLE agent *actually* torturing his partner, inflicting pain on the one person who has complete trust in him; suffering at the hands of the person you trust completely. That must’ve been a psychological nightmare for both of you.”

Illya tried not to make his words sound like the pleading it was. “How about if I just say yes and we leave it at that?”

Solo shook his head. *Dabree, for God’s Sake, don’t make him go through that again—or me—!*

“Oh, no, Mr. Kuryakin,” the doctor beamed, “this is much too interesting not to study it. So, let’s begin with how the two of you came to be in this situation.”

“I’m really sorry to disappoint you. Mission reports are classified material. I could draw a serious reprimand from my superiors if I divulged—” He faltered a moment when Dr. Dabree took a syringe from the leather case her assistant was carrying and expressed a drop through the needle. “—any informational details about—” The needle found a vein in his lower arm. Illya gasped loudly as the first drops of serum entered him, shocked at the intensity of the pain. He struggled against the increasing excruciation, his voice rasped as his own breathing seemed to burn in his lungs, “—the—mish—” He shook his head and groaned a whimper: “*no—*” Dabree pushed the plunger of the syringe, emptying the contents into the vein in her subject’s arm.

As Napoleon watched helplessly, Illya threw back his head and cried: “*Napoleon —!*” Then, he began to scream from deep in his throat as if to never stop.

Solo leaned forward in his chair as far as the bonds would let him. “*Illya—!*”

After two hours and two more double-dose injections of the serum; one, when he resisted speaking English: giving his oratory in a multitude of tongues even Napoleon didn’t know he spoke, Kuryakin sat slouched in the chair, breathing raggedly. His clothes were soiled from vomit and drenched with the physical cost of enduring the excruciating pain and fighting the overwhelming urge to speak freely. The Russian’s face below the sweat-slick hair was swollen and flushed from screaming, glistening with perspiration, tears, blood-tinged mucous and saliva.

“You are being most uncooperative, Mr. Kuryakin,” Dabree commented, “but you’ll be happy to know that your Mr. Solo had given you up by this time.”

“*She* must have been asking the questions,” Illya mumbled in a gravelly voice.

Dr. Dabree looked up at Flo, her assistant. “Why do you say that, Mr. Kuryakin?”

Inside the room, Napoleon sighed heavily, knowing his partner was probably about to render an uncensored assessment of his love-life. “Go ahead, Illya, it won’t be anything I haven’t already heard before from you.”

“Women—it’s always women—all the time—everywhere. All the time—don’t you ever turn it off, Napoleon?”

While their subject rambled on, Flo smiled in remembrance of her encounter; he had been very charming. When she saw Dabree still staring at her, she cleared her throat. “He’s definitely telling the truth, Dr. Dabree.”

The diminutive woman nodded. “Mr. Solo has a reputation for being a womanizer. Mr. Kuryakin appears not to approve.” To the haggard figure on the chair, she said, “You don’t like Mr. Solo’s philandering, do you?”

“Gets in the way—the work we have to do—more important—stop THRUSH—the others—have to stop them—all of them.”

“Like the ones on the last mission. You had to stop them, isn’t that so, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“THRUSH wanted to use Dr. von Etske’s mind-controlling device.”

“I hadn’t heard of that venture. Tell me about it, Mr. Kuryakin.”

The drugged and pain-wracked agent tried feebly to break free of his bonds to divert the pressure to answer, but his efforts were futile. “The hardest thing I ever had to do—” he mumbled, his voice almost a sob.

Dr. Dabree smiled. Here was the information she was seeking. “What did you have to do?”

“No help for it—I was acting a part—Col. Nexor was dead and I had to impersonate him. We both knew what might happen—Napoleon set up the conditions—”

“How did you torture him?”

“Trigeminal nerve—electrical stimulation. Like having your head in a vise.”

Solo shuttered in remembrance. The pain had been more like a live thing devouring his brain.

Kuryakin’s voice was thick with regret. “Stalling for time—always—stalling for time so they wouldn’t have to die—”

“How did you feel while you were torturing your partner, Mr. Kuryakin?”

Illya pulled against his bonds again. It was clear that he was fighting not to answer.

“Answer me or I’ll have Flo give you another injection of the serum.”

Kuryakin shook his head, his face twisted in a grimace.

“Answer the question!”

Dabree's raised voice crumbled the Russian's resolve. He drew in a ragged breath and the words tumbled from his lips. "We tortured Napoleon to his physical limits'," he moaned softly, "and a part of us reveled in it'."

Napoleon sat forward. *Who is we?* he thought, unaware that Illya was quoting from an internal conversation he had had with his own reflection in the mirror in that hotel room in San Rico; the conversation that ultimately led to the mirror being shattered into numerous shards of glass on the floor and in the washbowl.

Dr. Dabree smiled broadly. "Excellent." She looked up at her assistant. "I think Mr. Kuryakin has earned a rest, Flo. Give him the other needle."

A growl from the gaunt figure strapped to the chair caught her attention. Illya had lifted his head and glared at her with red-rimmed, blood-shot eyes. Again, words began to pour from his mouth: vulgar insults and curses in Russian, each one viler than the one before. He tried to stiffen his muscle to make it harder for the needle to penetrate his arm, but his strength was gone, and she injected the solution easily into a vein. The hate-filled curses died on his lips and his head fell forward onto his chest. His limbs, however, trembled in their bonds, the muscles over-stimulated and unable to completely relax.

Behind the one-way glass, Napoleon Solo heaved a deep sigh for his friend. As he continued to watch, two of Dabree's strong-armed guards entered, carrying two buckets of water, each.

"Clean up our squalid guest and show him to his 'suite'. It's time now to attend to our other guest, Mr. Solo."

The first bucket-full of water splashed over the decrepit agent, and forced a gasp from him, even in his drugged stupor. Napoleon surmised the water must have been ice cold to elicit that much of a response. Once again, a deep pang of guilt wrenched his gut as the guards emptied their remaining buckets over Kuryakin, undid the leather straps, and carried their water-logged burden from the room.

Dr. Dabree "looked" at Solo through the one-way glass. "Time for a chat, Mr. Solo," she said with a smile.

Act III: "It's gratifying to know one's work is appreciated."

"I've known a lot of sadistic monsters in my life, Dabree, but you have to be at the top of the list," Napoleon said as Flo loosened the straps holding him to the chair.

The agent had considered bounding out of the chair after all of the bonds were removed, but the THRUSH guard in the traditional grey-blue jumpsuit and beret, was holding his own Special on him. Solo had a common prejudice with many law enforcement officers: he felt it the height of degradation to be shot with his own weapon. For the time being, he was resigned to go with his captors' agenda with the hope that a more favorable situation would present itself. *Before he and Illya were face-to-face as victim and torturer*, he added hopefully.

Agnes Dabree smiled a cruel smile. "I will take that as a compliment, Mr. Solo. It's gratifying to know one's work is appreciated."

"I fully intend to repay you for your past services."

“That won’t be necessary. The outcomes are reward enough.”

Napoleon looked up at Flo, who continued to undo the straps. “The one I can’t quite figure out is you, Miss Flostone. You’re beautiful and intelligent; why are you in cahoots with this fruitcake?”

“Listen to yourself, Mr. Solo,” Flo replied smoothly. “Your own words are the answer.”

“I really thought I was being extremely complimentary.”

“I’m sure you did. You are correct: I *am* intelligent and I *am* beautiful. Which attribute do you hold in the higher esteem?”

Her meaning became clear and Napoleon smiled in understanding. “I think I’m beginning to grasp the idea of where this is going. You’re a man-hater.”

“And it’s men like you who are only able to see the outward appearance. To you, we’re one thing and one thing only: a toy to play with, and when you’re done, you discard us without a second thought.”

“Well, at the risk of getting my face slapped, I would dearly love to prove to you how wrong you are about me. I appreciate all the qualities a woman may possess, but especially her mind.”

Flo laughed, a sound Solo found all the more cruel because of her apparent intelligence and beauty. “Even your partner thinks you’re a bed-hopping philanderer.”

“My partner can be quite a prude when he wants to be. Truth be told, I think he’s just jealous.”

“He didn’t sound jealous in the least, and he *was* telling the truth.”

“Illya and I have differing philosophies when it comes to women and we respect each other’s differences.”

“The speculation at THRUSH is that your Russian partner doesn’t like women at all.”

Now, it was Solo’s turn to laugh. “You didn’t see who he dragged me all the way up the coast to get a glimpse of. A shame you didn’t ask him about that when you had him juiced up with your truth serum.”

Dr. Dabree had been enjoying the exchange between her assistant and Solo, but she was beginning to see a tell-tale look of doubt in the younger woman’s eyes. “That’s enough, Flo. You’re becoming mesmerized by the legendary Napoleon Solo charm. Remember what he did to Dr. Elmont and David.”

Flo stood back from the chair and the straps, now completely undone. “You’re right, Dr. Dabree.” Then she took a step forward and slapped Solo hard across the cheek.

Napoleon sighed against the pain, and then looked up. “Well, you can’t say I didn’t try.” The guard pulled him out of the chair and slipped handcuffs on, behind his prisoner’s back. The dark-haired agent had little choice but to be led back to his cell.

Illya awoke face-down on a rough mattress in a cot frame, to which he had been shackled, both wrists and ankles. He shivered from the still-damp clothing that clung to his skin, his body one giant ache. For a long moment, confusion clouded his mind, until the memory of the truth drug burning in his veins surfaced and twisted in his stomach. There was little wonder in his mind why Napoleon had given away his location; and he had a disquieting feeling the information he had provided would be equally damaging to both of them.

The door to the cell opened and Dr. Dabree entered with two gun-bearing guards and the strikingly beautiful woman he had seen before.

“Rise and shine, Mr. Kuryakin,” the diminutive doctor said cheerfully. “We have some things to discuss.”

Kuryakin twisted around so he lay supine on the cot, facing her. “I hope it’s not the bill for the accommodations,” he said hoarsely. “As dungeons go, I’ve stayed in better. Though, I must admit, the entertainment was certainly unique.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was anything but a compliment.”

“No matter. I’m going to tell you what I want from you and you’re going to comply.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed, because the answer is, unequivocally, no.”

“You UNCLE agents never seem to grasp the concept of ‘you have no choice’ without threats, do you?”

“It’s the first thing I learned in Defiance 101.”

“We’re going to study the phenomenon of UNCLE agents being tortured by their partners.”

A cold icicle of anxiety bored itself into Kuryakin’s gut, but his expression remained impassive. “Is there such a thing? I should think that would be a contradiction in terms.”

“You understand my interest, then.”

“Not really. But, then I never understood the sadistic perversions you and most of your cohorts seem to be so deeply steeped in.”

“On the contrary. You understand perfectly.”

“I believe we did cover that in Know-Thine-Enemy 101. I was a straight A student.”

“I’m sure you were. But surely you remember our little talk while under the gentle persuasion of my truth serum. We talked about the torture you put Mr. Solo through for the sake of your mission.”

Illya gave her a questioning look. “Did I? I don’t recall.”

“I’ll wager that you remember everything in vivid detail.” A hint of the remembered agony showed in her captive’s eyes and she smiled. “Yes, you remember.”

“Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that you are correct. What of it?”

“Psychology, Mr. Kuryakin. The concept of trust and betrayal; what does it take to shatter that trust between partners. Trust that must be absolute for partners to function well together.”

“A concept that would be foreign to you, Dabree. Trust isn’t a word in the THRUSH vocabulary.”

“How much damage was done to your partnership when you pretended to be Colonel Nexor, pasted those electrodes onto Mr. Solo’s forehead, and turned up the voltage? Does he know that, secretly, you enjoyed the power you had over him?”

The cold dread in his stomach escalated to full nausea. “I will not participate in your experiments, Dabree. And neither will Napoleon. You’ll have to find your amusement elsewhere.”

“Very well, we’ll play this your way.” She turned to one of her guards. “Bring him to my laboratory. He needs an incentive.” She looked at Ilyya again. “And if you insist on being obstinate, I will have Flo inject you with another concoction of mine that paralyzes the voluntary muscles and the guards will carry you. They have orders to be less than gentle with you.”

The guards unshackled Ilyya and allowed him to stand. “That won’t be necessary. I can make an exception in this case.”

Dabree nodded. “Very good. Flo, put the shackles back on him, and the blindfold.” She smiled. “You see, I really don’t trust you to keep your word.”

Resigned, Kuryakin waited as Dabree’s assistant re-cuffed his hands behind him, shackled his ankles and finally, tied a black cloth over his eyes. They led him to the door and through a series of hallways until Dabree was confident that her prisoner was disoriented enough to not be able to find his way back to this room if the unthinkable, his escape, occurred.

Flo pulled the blindfold from his eyes, which widened abruptly when he saw what he had been led to the laboratory to see.

“So, you recognize this little apparatus, Mr. Kuryakin?” Dabree said with a smirk.

“Your brain-killer machine was dismantled, Dabree,” he replied, trying to convince himself that he was not seeing what was plainly in front of him. He had been with the team that took apart that machine, bolt by bolt.

“Did you honestly believe that I was incapable of duplicating my work?”

“We had hoped—” Ilyya said, as he stared at the device and a cold shudder permeated his body that had nothing to do with his damp clothing.

“This model is untested. You and Mr. Solo would make ideal test subjects.”

“I saw the results from this one’s predecessor. You realize that’s it’s my duty to prevent you from using this one as well—”

“Yes, yes, I know, or die trying. UNCLE agents are so predictable. How would you like to be the first test subject of this new model?”

“It’s an honor I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. Sorry.”

“Predictable response. Very well, Mr. Kuryakin. What would you do to keep Mr. Solo from being my first test subject?”

“You haven’t proven to me that Napoleon is even still here or that that machine of yours isn’t just a mock-up.”

Dabree turned to her assistant. “Flo, have the guards bring Mr. Rollo here from his cell.” The beautiful blonde woman nodded to Dr. Dabree exited to carry out her task. “As for Mr. Solo being here,” Dabree continued, “bring Mr. Kuryakin over to the monitor so he can be convinced.” She pressed a switch and a dark-haired male figure pacing in a cell appeared. “And to convince you that this isn’t just video representation of your partner—” She picked up a microphone and spoke: “Good morning, Mr. Solo.”

As Illya watched, Napoleon became instantly alert and looked up in the direction of the sound. “What have you done with Illya?” he demanded.

Illya strained forward to be near the microphone, but the guards held him firmly. He got out the first syllable of his partner’s name before the cloth that had been over his eyes gagged him.

“He’s fine, for the time being. He wanted proof that you are still our guest, so I have provided him with that proof.”

She snapped off the monitor just as Solo began to blurt out: “Illya, don’t—!”

“Are you convinced, Mr. Kuryakin?”

Still gagged, the blond-haired agent could only nod.

“Good.” Dr. Dabree smiled as Flo returned with a small-statured man, Illya assumed was Mr. Rollo. Dabree addressed the man cordially, but Rollo cowered before her.

“Please, Dr. Dabree, I only make that one mistake. Please, give me another chance!”

Dr. Dabree looked over at Illya. “This stupid, incompetent individual has displeased me with his ineptness. I think he can be exonerated by convincing you that my device is quite real.” She returned her gaze to the frightened little man. “Do you think you can do that if I wipe clean your mind, Mr. Rollo?”

The eyes of her test subject widened further in terror and he began to struggle.

“Put him on the gurney, Flo.”

Dabree’s assistant and one of the guards holding Illya dragged Rollo to the gurney situated beneath the business end of the mind-kill apparatus. With just one guard holding him, Illya was able to free himself from the gag.

He pulled against his captor as far as he was allowed. “Surely he couldn’t have done anything to warrant this kind of punishment,” he argued.

She walked over to the control panel for the device. “Oh, he hasn’t, but he’s more useful this way.” She flicked on the power switch.

“Don’t do it, Dabree. He’s an innocent in all of this.”

“Yes, I believe you UNCLE agents take an oath to protect the innocents, don’t you? Then, you know the words that will stop it.”

As much as Kuryakin hated to admit it, she had his Achilles’ heel. He was duty-bound to protect the Innocents, with his life, if necessary. “I concede to your wishes,” he said, defeated.

Dabree turned off the machine and smiled wolfishly. “Very good, Mr. Kuryakin.” To the guards: “Take him back to his cell and get him some clean and dry clothing. And some food, if he wants it.” As the guards led him away, she called after him, “We’ll discuss the ‘experiment’ later this afternoon.”

When Kuryakin was gone from the room, she turned back to Flo. “You know what to do.”

A malicious smile spread across the beautiful woman’s face and she nodded.

Napoleon Solo sank down on his cot and gazed disconcertingly about the cell that had been his world for the last few days. The solitude of his captivity was beginning to weigh on him. Gregarious by nature, he was missing human contact; even Dabree’s infrequent visits when she taunted him were more desirable than this isolation. Weighing just as heavily, however, was his own guilt for allowing Dabree to extract Illya’s whereabouts from him.

Now, she had them both, ready to use his partner to mete out the revenge she must have been planning for years. For the first time in their partnership, Napoleon was unsure of Illya’s strength of will, despite the assurances to the contrary from the stoic Russian, *correction*, Ukrainian/Gypsy orphan. The Gurnius Affair had deeply wounded his partner, and Solo knew psychological wounds healed slowly and were easily reopened. Dabree was determined to do that very thing.

Napoleon knew he could withstand the physical pain of any torture the maniacal doctor could concoct, but he had been psychologically wounded, too. In his solitude, his mind played and replayed the superlative performance of his partner as Colonel Nexor. Even knowing that the man in the Nazi uniform was his trusted partner and friend did not change what had been done to him; it was still torture. Then there was Kuryakin’s shame-filled confession later—Solo had put up a convincing argument; but now, his mind was beginning to second-guess his conviction of absolute trust in his partner for all things. That doubt was beginning to chip away at his own strength of will.

Dr. Dabree looked up from her notebook as the guards ushered Kuryakin into the lab. “Why, Mr. Kuryakin, you almost look human.”

“I want to discuss a counter-offer to your initial proposal.”

“I’m listening.”

“Reverse Napoleon’s and my roles, have him put me under torture and afterwards, keep me for your experimentation.”

“How noble of you. But, why would I ever consider letting Mr. Solo go?”

“You want to wound him psychologically. If you do as I suggest, you will succeed. And he will be able to recall what you did to him countless times in the future. Just as you remember what he did to you.”

The small woman’s face changed as she automatically thought of her beloved David and Dr. Elmont. For Illya, this was a glimmer of hope. “Napoleon might even be driven to reckless revenge. And you would have him once again.” In reality, the blond agent knew Solo would go on, just as he would under the same circumstances. He would grieve, certainly, but the focus would be to do the job even better than before as an apt memorial to a fallen partner. At least, that was the official story.

Dabree looked up from her reverie and smiled at her prisoner. “An excellent try, Mr. Kuryakin. But it eliminates what I want to study.”

“Then, I refuse to co-operate.”

“Are you forgetting Mr. Rollo?”

“No, I’m just still dubious about the functioning of your machine. You played me quite well before, but I’ve had time to reconsider.”

“I thought you might.” She looked up at one of the guards. “Have Flo come in now.”

The guard opened the door and the blonde bombshell of a nurse entered leading the small-statured Mr. Rollo. The man shuffled along, his face devoid of expression, the eyes blank and staring. Illya looked at him uneasily, a hard knot forming in the pit of his stomach.

“After you left, we gave the machine its first trial run. I’m quite satisfied with the results. Are you sure you want to subject Mr. Solo to this kind of a life?”

“I don’t believe for a moment that if I do what you want, you won’t use that thing on him anyway.”

“And if I said I’d consider setting Mr. Solo free after you do? You can call your people to have him rescued.”

“Your past performance fails to elicit confidence in any of your promises.”

“I can promise that if you don’t do what I want, Mr. Solo will be brought to the laboratory right now and I’ll erase every trace you ever knew of him. Then, I’ll see he’s delivered to Mr. Waverly with a message that you’ll be following in a few days after I’ve tried a few of my other new formulas on you.” When the blond Russian did not respond, Dabree continued. “Flo, take a guard and deliver Mr. Solo.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Illya answered quietly.

“I’m surprised it took you as long as it did to decide.”

The blue eyes glared back at her. “You’ll have to forgive my lapse. I was preoccupied by the determination of the amount of pressure I would need to apply to snap your neck.”

“At least you weren’t wasting your time.”

“It’s generally not a weakness of mine. Be assured that if I am able to get free, you will know my agenda.”

Dabree smiled. “What a shame you’re not working for THRUSH. Does UNCLE know how cold-blooded and ruthless you are?”

“Invariably, but I keep it all contained until it’s needed.”

“That’s good, Mr. Kuryakin, because you are certainly going to need both very soon. Take him to the ‘interrogation’ room. In a half hour, put Mr. Solo in the observation room. Mr. Kuryakin should be prepped by then.”

Act IV: “How to sever a friendship”

“Mr. Kuryakin, here is how this little experiment is going to be performed.”

Bound to the same chair in which he had endured the agony of Dabree’s truth serum, Illya looked up at his captor and assumed an air of indifference. The memory of the pain and humiliation suffered in the chair, however, made the effort doubly hard.

“I am going to set up an IV through which you will be infused with a harmless yellow fluid. Mr. Solo, however, will believe that it is a potent hypnotic formula that will alter both your conscious and subconscious mind. You are expected to act like you are resisting the so-called ‘drug’, but in the end you will succumb to it. Then, you will be instructed to assume the persona of this Colonel Nexor you impersonated. The lab will be set up with a slant board and electrical panel. You will attach the electrodes to Mr. Solo as before and go on from there.”

“So, your use of the word ‘performed’ was not unintentional.”

“You understand me perfectly. I used that word because you are going to be giving the performance of your life. If Mr. Solo suspects in any way that you are not under the influence of my hypnotic drug, the brain-kill machine, as you called it, will be nearby to show you the error of your ways. I will then have the pleasure of watching the guards carry out their orders to riddle your body with their automatic rifles.”

It took Illya just moments to realize that he was facing a no-win situation. He was a casualty regardless of the final outcome. So, be it; he had been long prepared for the inevitable. But Napoleon’s future was not as clear-cut. “And if I give you a stellar performance? He will be allowed to escape?”

Dabree cackled a laugh that was almost comical. “Still negotiating, Mr. Kuryakin? That’s positively arrogant as you have nothing to bargain with.”

“But I do, doctor. I have my voluntary co-operation. All I need do is break character and your little experiment is a failure. And if I fry Napoleon’s brain with the electrodes, you have nothing. Your revenge goes unfulfilled.”

“You would willingly kill your partner?” Dabree was amazed.

“Yes,” Kuryakin lied. “And I would expect the same from him.”

“This is surprising. I’m intrigued. Very well, Mr. Solo will have the opportunity to escape afterward if he chooses.”

“Then it is a bargain.”

“How is it that you’re trusting that I will keep the bargain?”

A sinister, wolfish grin spread across Illya’s lips. “Because if you don’t. I will most assuredly break your neck, even when riddled with bullets from two THRUSH rifles.”

Though the blond agent was securely strapped to his chair, Dr. Dabree eyed him uneasily. The stories of UNCLE’s Russian agent were legendary throughout the THRUSH organization, giving him an almost supernatural aura. At the very least, the slight, short-of-stature man was one to be reckoned with. He had, after all, had had three double doses of her truth serum before he broke.

She turned to her guard. “Bring Mr. Solo to the observation room. It’s time to start the experiment.” She gave her captive a smile. “Break a leg, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Solo looked up at the sound of the key in the lock of his cell door. Two guards with rifles motioned for him to get up the cot and come with them.

“What have you done with Illya?” the dark-haired agent demanded, as he refused to comply.

“He’s unharmed,” one of the guards responded. “Dr. Dabree is ready to start her experiment.”

“What experiment is that?”

“I’m authorized to take you to the observation room. She only told me I couldn’t shoot you in a vital spot. Other than that I have no restrictions on how much force I can use to do that.”

Napoleon stood up. “Well then, let’s not keep the doctor waiting, shall we?” He went to the door where he was handcuffed from behind, and escorted to the room where he had watched his partner suffer under the influence of the truth serum.

In the other room, Illya was again, strapped to the chair, and an IV had been embedded into a vein on the back of his hand. The blond Russian was speaking to Dabree, but the connecting intercom was not turned up.

The guard tapped on the window, and the occupants turned to what was a mirror on their side.

Dabree smiled. “Ah. Mr. Solo has arrived and is ready to view your performance.” She turned to Illya. “Remember, you must be convincing or he will suffer the same fate as Mr. Rollo.”

Kuryakin glared back at her. “I know what to do. Get on with it.”

Dabree turned up the intercom. “Now that Mr. Solo has joined us, he can see how you respond to my hypnotic formula.”

“Then he won’t be seeing much,” Illya responded. “You’ve seen that I have a very high tolerance to mind-altering drugs.”

“That’s why we call this an experiment, Mr. Kuryakin. I’ll just keep giving you more until I get what I want.”

Illya looked up and gave her a taunting grin. “Is it as pleasant as the other stuff you used on me? I wouldn’t want to be disappointed.”

From the observation room, Solo growled at his partner. “Stop antagonizing her, Illya! When are you going to learn—?”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Dabree replied, “if you enjoy feeling your mind slipping out of your control.” She injected 20cc of a yellow liquid into the IV tube.

Kuryakin waited for an internal count of twenty and then grimaced as if the serum had begun to affect him.

“How’s your grasp on reality, Mr. Kuryakin?”

A small groan escaped Illya’s throat, and he began to breathe more heavily. “Just—just fine—” He pulled against his bonds. “Hang on—hang on—” he whispered breathlessly. “*Pi* equals three point one, four, one, five, nine—” He continued to recite numbers, pretending to use memory recall to fight off the serum, faltering and lagging between digits to show that he was losing the battle. He shook his head. “No—”

Dabree pushed another 30cc into the tubing, delighted with the Russian’s performance. She almost believed the yellow liquid was having this effect.

Illya turned to Shakespeare: “To set a gloss—on faint—on faint deeds—hollow welcomes—” He was reciting from a lesser known play⁴, but he hoped Napoleon would still pick up on it. “Recanting—good—goodness, sorry ere ‘tis shown—” He coughed a moan to make it appear that the rest of the quote had failed him, and switched finally to counting in his native tongue. “*Odin—dva—tre—chetyre—pyat—shest—sem—vosem—devyat—desyat—des—yat—ten—t—Nap—o—leon—I can’t—!*”

“Illya—” Napoleon whispered as Dr. Dabree injected another 30cc into the tube. Illya was silent, his chin on his chest.

“You can hear me, can’t you? Nod your head.” The blond head lolled loosely against the chest. “Very good. I want you to look up at me and tell me who you are.”

Illya lifted his head and opened unfocused eyes toward his captor. “I don’t know,” he replied, monotone.

Napoleon shook his head. “Fight it, Illya—you’ve got to,” he pleaded.

Dabree smiled once more. “I will tell you who you are. Your name is Colonel Maximillan Nexor, Jr.” She looked down at a sheet of paper on which Flo had written all that THRUSH had found out about the Nazi holdovers. “You are the son of Maximillan Nexor, Sr. and were raised with

⁴ TIMON OF ATHENS. The next line is “But where there is true friendship, there needs none.”

the purpose of taking his place. You idolize your superior, Marshall Zoltan Gurnius and have the singular goal of seeing his vision of world control come to fruition. He is the man you impersonated on your last mission.”

The dull eyes blinked once and began to scan the room. They settled finally on Dr. Dabree and grew glaringly cold. *“Was ist diese Stelle?”* he said harshly. *“Noch wichtiger ist, Wer sind Sie?”*⁵

In the other room, Napoleon scrutinized the blond man for a sign that it was really his partner giving another supreme performance and not his partner brain-washed into believing he was the elder Nazi’s sadistic accomplice. So far, he couldn’t tell. *Give me a sign, Illya. Any sign—*

“I am Marshall Gurnius. You’ve been held by the enemy and were given drugs, which altered your ability to think clearly. They are still being cleared from your blood.”

The blue eyes widened in surprise. *“Herr Marshall Gurnius, bitte verzeihen Sie mir nicht erkennt dich!”*⁶

“Don’t trouble yourself, my friend. Your mind will become clearer soon. In the meantime, it would be preferable for you to speak English.”

“As you wish, sir.” He looked down at his bound arm and feet, and looked up again at his leader, confusion in apparent on his face. “Marshall, sir, why am I bound like a prisoner?”

“We were concerned that you might hurt yourself while under the influence of the drugs.”

“I am under control now, Herr Marshall. These will no longer be necessary.”

“Be patient for a little while longer, please. We have a prisoner from the organization from which you were rescued. You will have the opportunity to apply your special kind of revenge to him.”

A malicious smile formed on the blond man’s lips. “I look forward to it, Herr Marshall.”

“Allow us to make the prisoner ready for you. Then we will escort you to him.”

“Please, do not take too long. Confinement has always been a problem for me.”

Dabree smiled at her captive as she switched off the communications through the two way mirror. “You are very convincing as Colonel Nexor, Mr. Kuryakin. And it had better continue to be convincing or your Mr. Solo will be pulled underneath my brain-kill apparatus, which, for your information, will be just behind his head with Flo ready to activate it. Too little time for you to save him if he sees through your persona.”

Kuryakin glared at her with barely concealed wrath. “I look forward to seeing the expression on your face when I snap your neck with my bare hands,” he said, venom dripping from his words.

“Rest assured, it will be the last thing you ever do,” Dabree replied, though she couldn’t completely hide the uneasiness his bearing did to her. This was a man filled with hate, and, if given the slightest chance, he would make good his threat. She was reluctant to see him

⁵ What is this place? More importantly, who are you?

⁶ Marshall Gurnius, Sir, please forgive me for not recognizing you!

released from the confines of the chair, but she could not keep him there with the part he was to play. Enough guards with them in the laboratory would have to suffice.

She looked up at the two armed men positioned on either side of the chair. “I will contact you when Mr. Solo is ready.” She motioned to Flo who joined her at the door.

Illya stepped through the open door of the laboratory, his gaze circumventing the room as if entering it for the first time. What he was actually looking for was another way out of the laboratory and how close the brain-killer machine was to Napoleon. He saw immediately that Dabree had been truthful when she said it would be just behind his head. It would take less than five seconds for her assistant to pull the slant board under the part which released the brain-destroying rays. In the same glance, he saw Solo strapped to a black upholstered bench, tilted at angle between 45 and 90 degrees.

The handsome, dark-haired agent stared back, eyes narrowed, scrutinizing. “Illya?”

Kuryakin hardened his expression and turned to Dr. Dabree. “He doesn’t look like much of a menace,” he commented mildly. “Who is he?”

Dr. Dabree was also evaluating the Russian’s continuing performance. “You don’t recognize him?”

Illya glared at the man strapped to the board. “Is there a reason for me to know him?”

Solo took the opportunity to try to break through the supposed conditioning or, at least, give his partner a chance to give him a sign the ploy was all an act. *And damn good one, too*, he thought. “Illya, you’ve got to fight the programming. You’re not Colonel Nexor.”

Kuryakin glanced sideways at Dabree. “He seems somewhat delusional.”

“Don’t let Mr. Solo’s appearance deceive you. He’s a dangerous man. Most importantly, Colonel, he’s our enemy and a threat to my plans.”

Illya grinned. “Then, we can’t have him running around spoiling what you’ve worked so hard to achieve, can we?”

“I knew you would agree. I believe the set-up here calls for electrical stimulation of the trigeminal nerve.”

“My favorite method.”

“Let’s proceed.” She escorted him to the slant board and picked up three wired electrodes.

Illya took them from her. “Allow me, Marshall Gurnius.” He held them in front of Solo’s line of sight. “Do you like games, Mr. Solo? We are going to play a game—a nice, *quiet game* of chess.⁷”

“So far, I don’t think much of your opening move.”

⁷ This is a veiled reference to a chess gambit Solo used against Gervaise Revel, in THE GUICCO PIANO AFFAIR. In Italian, guicco piano means “quiet game”

“The strategy will become apparent as we proceed. My way: slowly, painfully.”

“I know.”

“You have been in this situation before? How inept of you.”

Was that a signal? It sounded like a tease Illya would use. He wasn’t sure. “Yeah, my partner was doing it,” he said tersely, hoping Kuryakin would give him a less subtle clue.

“I would be inclined to find a new partner,” was the amused reply. “Although, it is quite academic at this point.” Illya moistened the electrodes with a low resistance gel and positioned them: one on the middle of the forehead, and the other two on the temples.

Desperately, Napoleon searched for something that might inadvertently make Illya slip if this whole scenario was nothing more than a frightening charade. When the solution finally came to him, he was almost reluctant to use it, for it was cruel and broke an unspoken trust. He had no other choice. “Get your filthy hands off of me, you half-breed *tsigani* bastard!”

Kuryakin smiled but it took all of his will to keep a reaction from leaking through to his voice. “I believe you have me confused with someone else, Mr. Solo.” Inwardly, he was despondent. *You have no idea how much it kills me to have to do this again to you, Napoleon. You can hate me later, if we survive.*

Solo stared at the blond-haired man, more than a little surprised that the insult had garnered no reaction. His innate optimism, however, would not let him admit that the Nexor persona, even drug-controlled, could not be breached. On the other hand, if his partner was faking it and didn’t give him a sign soon, there was going to be hell to pay later. Either way, he was going to crack the veneer, if it was the last thing he did.

Illya had no idea how long he had applied electricity to Napoleon’s facial nerves that first time in San Rico. The time seemed to have crawled interminably as he unwittingly watched his partner twitch and moan from the exquisite pain. But that was nothing compared to how it crept by now. He was moving the dial by infinitesimal degrees, increasing the pain in almost unrecognizable amounts to help Solo adapt. The ploy was undoubtedly effective, for Napoleon was not struggling mutely against the pain as before—quite the opposite: Solo was hurling strings of ethnic and personal affronts.

While Kuryakin understood the why of it, under ordinary circumstances, more than a few of the vilifications, would have earned the dark-haired agent a clout in the mouth. Under the deception, he could only accept the stinging remarks by turning up the voltage and swallowing the remorse.

Finally, the electricity level was approaching that which Kuryakin had used in San Rico. Illya glanced down at the dials on the panel in front of him, and then gazed hopelessly up at his partner lying rigid on the slant board, eyes squeezed shut. Illya had to end it, soon, for both their sakes.

Dabree was fascinated by Solo’s tenacity as well as Kuryakin’s resolve. “Hurry up, Nexor, finish him off,” she prodded under the guise of Gurnius.

"It is better done slowly, Herr Marshall," Illya said, desperately looking for a way out. She gave him none that he could see, so, finally, with a deep sigh, he broke character. "This has gone far enough!" he said loudly in his normal voice.

Napoleon opened his eyes wide and stared, astonished at the sudden change of his torturer's demeanor. "Illya—" he managed to whisper.

Kuryakin ignored him. "I'm not going to pander to your sadistic appetite anymore."

"Then you will reap the consequences of your decision." Dabree raised her hand to signal Flo.

Before the assistant could move, Illya pulled the electrodes from Solo's forehead and ripped open the damp shirt to reveal bare skin. Then he planted the electrodes over his partner's heart.

Napoleon gasped audibly and shook his head. "Illya, what are you doing?"

Illya turned to the console, hand on the dial, ready to twist to maximum. He looked over at Solo with a pained, apologetic expression. "Forgive me, my friend, but if this doesn't work, I'll not be far behind you," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Suddenly, the lights in the room and on the console winked out and the electrical hum that had been the background of the entire torturous scene was silent. *Kuryakin sighed heavily as the pressure of his performance left him in a surge and reached up to free Napoleon's wrist from the leather strap.*

"We've got to get out of here," he breathed as he freed the hand.

Before he could move to unloose his partner's left hand, the right one caught his throat in a stranglehold. "You goddamn son-of-a-bitch," Solo snarled as he felt Kuryakin's hands instinctively grasp at his wrist.

Illya was amazed at the strength of the hand around his throat. He tried to speak, but Solo had effectively collapsed his windpipe, cutting off speech and air, with his anger-fueled retaliation. He reached up with the heel of his hand to push against the dark-haired agent's chin. A moment later, he heard Napoleon grunt in pain. Almost instantly, the hand around his throat eased. Kuryakin managed to gasp Solo's name before he felt a needle-stick in his own neck. A wave of dizziness hit him and his knees buckled under his weight. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Solo's last, fleeting, conscious thought had been the realization that Dr. Dabree had saved him from being killed by his own, *trusted*, partner.

Napoleon awoke in his cell atop his bare cot; his head throbbed from the tranquilizer and the electrical stimulation of his trigeminal nerve. Wave after wave of knife-edged pain traveled along his facial nerves, swelling his headache towards a full-blown migraine. His stomach twisted with nausea and he almost gagged on the bile at the back of his throat.

A heavy sigh from the foot end of his cot brought Solo completely to alertness and he sat up quickly despite the nearly blinding pain in his head. A thatch of blond hair identified the source of the sound as Kuryakin, still senseless from the effects of the tranquilizer. Suddenly, Napoleon was furious without fully knowing why, the anger centered on the motionless blond-haired man.

Napoleon struggled up from the cot, and stumbled over to the other cot. “Get up,” he said loudly over agony of his migraine. He swayed slightly and leaned into the wall with outstretched arms across the cot to keep from falling. “Illya—wake up!” He reached down to shake a shoulder, but lost his balance and toppled over onto Kuryakin instead.

“Hey! That hurts!” the semi-conscious agent protested, instinctively pushing the weight off of himself. Solo was dumped unceremoniously onto the floor.

That indignity in conjunction with his pounding headache escalated the anger into rage. With teeth bared, Napoleon attacked the figure on the cot, grabbing two handfuls of the straw-colored hair and fell backwards, pulling the startled occupant from the cot. “I said, *GET UP*, you Slavic son-of-a-bitch!”

Kuryakin rolled away from Napoleon and retreated to the adjacent wall, his hands raised instinctively to defend himself. He came fully awake staring at Napoleon, who was glaring back at him from the floor beside the cot. “Napoleon—”

“I deserve an explanation for what happened in that room,” Solo hissed, barely containing his wrath.

The blond agent did not move. “I agree. I fully intended to give you one, if we survived.”

With effort, Solo pulled himself up onto the cot and sat facing Illya with an expression the Russian had seen before but never aimed at him. “*If we survived?* This had better be one hell of an explanation.”

Illya got to his feet, but stayed at the wall. He wasn’t sure what Napoleon might do if he did more than that. “Actually, it is. Where would you like me to begin?”

“How about where you were going to kill me with those electrodes? And what was that elegant line? ‘If this doesn’t work, I’ll not be far behind?’”

“I’d rather start at the beginning. And with you a little more in control of yourself.”

“You were frying my brain for the second time in less than a month and then you were going to shock me in the heart! You’re goddamn lucky I’m in as much control as I am!”

“Where’s that unconditional trust you’re supposed to have in me?”

“It gets really shaky when my *partner* gambles with my life without my permission.”

“You had a much different viewpoint several weeks ago when the situation was remarkably similar,” Kuryakin observed tersely.

“My *partner* didn’t keep me in the dark about his intentions several weeks ago.”

“There was nothing to keep from you several weeks ago, Napoleon. You set up the circumstances.”

“Well, I didn’t this time. Guess you feel pretty superior being in the ‘know’ when your *partner* doesn’t have any idea what’s going on. Kind of like that time with the mind-reading machine;

'Merlin: code seven'⁸." Solo's lip curled over his eyetooth in a scowl of disgust. "You *are* ignobly marvelous."

Illya frown deeply, rapidly losing own temper. "Do you want an explanation or don't you?" he snarled.

"Yeah, tell me why you couldn't even let me know what you were doing was an act."

"I did everything but hang a banner on the wall! How was I to know you were incapable of recognizing something that wasn't as plain as the nose on your face?"

"Call me obtuse, but you didn't *do* or *say* anything that could even be misconstrued as a message!"

"You *are* obtuse! Or are you just getting too soft to be able to *think* through a little pain?"

"Maybe you'd like to be on the receiving end sometime. I can arrange it."

Now the Russian was full-blown angry. "I *have* been on the receiving end, you pompous ass; more times than I can count. Dabree didn't leave me any options."

"Let me see: torture me or she'll kill me instead. Right? That's a goddamn lame excuse."

Furiously, Illya grabbed the front of Napoleon's shirt and pulled him up from the cot. "Will you listen to me? She has another machine like the one she was going to use on Waverly! She was going to test it on you if I refused!"

Solo pushed the shorter man away from the grasp on his shirt. "Did you even see this new machine?"

"Of course, I did! Do you honestly think I'd take what she says at face value with no proof?"

"Right now, you don't want to know what I'm thinking. How do you know the thing even works?"

"She was going to demonstrate it on one of her people, some underling who didn't perform to her satisfaction."

"*Was going* to demonstrate it. I take that to mean that she didn't go through with it."

"She did use it. I saw the man later; he was like Niles Bergstrom: vacant and unresponsive. She had the machine positioned directly behind your head the whole time! The only way I could disable it was to make her cut the electricity to the lab. I had to make her think I was willing to kill you than let her lobotomize you. Dabree doesn't really want you dead."

"So, if you were *wrong*, and she called your bluff, was that piece of eloquent phrasing you used going to be your *Russian* justification for killing me?"

"I wasn't wrong," Illya growled. He was quite ready to physically pay Solo back for the ethnic slurs he bore in silence for the sake of his partner's life. "And I did what I had to do."

⁸ THE FOXES AND HOUNDS AFFAIR

“That’s your problem, Illya. You can’t effectively talk your way out of a situation; it’s why you end up in Medical ten times more often than I do.”

Kuryakin crossed his arms belligerently. “So, *Napoleon*, what would have been *your* alternative solution to this dilemma?”

Solo smiled what would have been a charming smile if the eyes above it hadn’t been glaring. “I’m sure a solution would have presented itself.”

Kuryakin took a step backwards, a look of incredulity on his face. “That’s the most ridiculous, most inane thing I’ve ever heard. And what were you going to do if that solution never materialized? *Charm* your way out of her lobotomizing you?”

“No, Illya. *Talk* her out of doing it. Turn the situation to my favor. Show her how a live, intact UNCLE agent is worth more to her than a dead or brain-dead one.”

Illya’s reply was bitter. “I should have let her use that machine on you. No one would have known the difference. *Your* problem, Napoleon, is that you don’t like it if you’re not in charge. It’s why you always pull that ‘senior agent by two years’ card on me when it looks like I might disagree with your agenda. You forget who’s pulled your ass out of countless tight spots. You don’t do it alone, you know.”

Solo nodded. “Yes,” he said with mock gratitude. “I must admit, you do come when you’re called.” He turned his back on Illya’s shocked look of disbelief and went to the door. “Dabree!” he called, “I think Mr. Kuryakin would like to go back to his own cell now.” He faced his stunned partner once again and approached him. “Do you think she bought it?” he said softly as he passed on his way to the cots at the opposite wall.

“What?” Illya blurted out, his body twisting to follow Solo’s progress.

“You know, us taking pot-shots at each other.” When Illya’s expression didn’t change, he added, “Doesn’t feel very good on the receiving end, does it? And just to let you know, I gave you a signal that was like a banner and you didn’t catch it.

“You know, Illya, I understand that you felt you had to go through with this whole charade again. But, God damn it, why did you have to drag it out like that? Was it because you were enjoying it even more this time?”

Kuryakin was never quite sure if he would have throttled Napoleon with his bare hands if the guard had not caught him from behind and restrained him first. It was much less satisfying to hurl MAT vulgarities at him.

By the time he back in his own cell, the fire of his anger had dissipated, leaving him emotionally weary. He sank down on the cot and began to replay the altercation with Napoleon in his mind. Never had they struck out at each other the way they did just moments earlier. In the solitude, the emotionally controlled, pragmatic Russian had a desperate thought: was this scenario something that had been building up over the years to finally burst free or had it, somehow, been orchestrated by their captor?

Napoleon sank down on his cot, also reflecting what had just transpired. Why did he feel such outrage against his partner? Could it be that he had lied to himself and his only real friend when

he said the Gurnius Affair and Illya's subsequent confession hadn't affected the absolute trust he had in him? He had admitted as much to Terry while still strapped to the slant board: that the friendship had been strained, at least on his end. In the aloneness of the cell, the empathic, optimistic CEA of UNCLE had a disheartening thought: was what just happened between Illya and him, somehow, Dabree's doing or had he just, without really knowing why, irreparably damage the most emotionally-satisfying relationship he had ever had with another human being?

"I want Napoleon released," Illya demanded through the bars of his cell door. "I have fulfilled my half of our bargain."

"Your supreme arrogance amuses me, Mr. Kuryakin. You did not fulfill your part of our agreement."

Illya countered sternly. "I did what you asked—"

Dabree interrupted him in mid-sentence. "You ended the experiment prematurely."

"There was no need to continue it if your intent was as you said it was to be: the psychological effects of one partner torturing another. By breaking character, Napoleon knows I was not under the influence of one of your drugs. You heard us in the cell. He'll never work with me again. You've broken up the most successful partnership UNCLE's ever had."

Dabree considered. "A blow against UNCLE itself that I hadn't considered. Even better."

"And their top enforcement agent is crippled. I know Napoleon; it will be a long time before he'll trust a partner again. He'll press to work alone, making him even more vulnerable. And you'll still have me."

"To do with as I please."

"Yes, although, I won't be giving you any information about UNCLE."

"Perhaps not willingly." Dabree said with a coy smile.

"Perhaps not at all," Kuryakin replied coldly. "It isn't part of our bargain."

"And you said he might come back to try and rescue you even though he won't trust you; for old time's sake," she mused and nodded while a smile spread across her lips.

A spark of hope flashed into being where there had just been desperation; Dabree was agreeing with him: *his plan was working*. "Yes, it's one of his greatest weaknesses. All I ask is that you let me help him escape so he doesn't try to rescue me now. Then, I'll let myself be recaptured, and you have me; I'll be your guinea pig." He held a mental breath, allowing his words to reinforce his suggestion.

Dabree scrutinized him from behind the thick lenses. She didn't trust him, but knew the distrust was mutual. She tried to ascertain his sincerity. The partnership of Solo and Kuryakin was also legendary in THRUSH. The pair seemed to have almost a psychic/symbiotic connection between them. The destruction of the partnership was bound to be a psychological blow. Was Kuryakin's compensation for what he had done, his partner's freedom or was it all a ploy? The

blond Russian was not the smooth-talking conniver Solo was; otherwise, she could be certain. “What assurances will you give me that you’ll let yourself be retaken?”

Illya shrugged slightly. “You have more than enough guards to make sure that I do. After all, you’ll want my recapture to be convincing.”

“Why are you being so agreeable to this?” Dabree asked, still unconvinced. “Why would an UNCLE agent sacrifice himself so?”

“I’m trying to make the best of a situation with virtually no possibilities. I am a much better test subject for your studies. I have higher tolerances for all of THRUSH’s current truth drugs and my pain tolerance is higher than most. Don’t worry; I’ll give you an apt and willing test subject. All I ask is that you let Napoleon go to be captured another day.”

“Mr. Kuryakin, you are an enigma: a cold-blooded, heartless exterior, with a noble, sentimental core. How do you manage to live with yourself?”

Illya smiled soberly, but inside he was crowing in victory. “Vodka,” he said softly. “Russian tradition.”

The short, owlsh woman smiled. “We’ll have a drink together later when Mr. Solo has departed. I’d like to hear about some other Russian traditions.” She walked away and Illya watched her until she turned the corner. There was another tradition he had embraced since joining UNCLE and he was going to exercise it: freedom—not just for Napoleon, but for himself as well. His partnership with Solo may have been damaged beyond repair, but they were each professional enough to part with civility. And, they would each continue the fight for the world’s freedom from THRUSH.

The single clink of a light-weight metallic object brought Illya instantly from a half-dozed to full alertness. He lay stone-still on his cot, eyes closed, while he strained to hear any other extraneous sound that might accompany the first. He was rewarded shortly with the tell-tale sound of soft footsteps emanating from the hallway outside his cell door and retreating as their owner continued on their way. Kuryakin waited through a count of twenty before slipping his feet to the floor.

Just inside the cell door, he found a small cylindrical object he immediately recognized as an UNCLE pen communicator. *Probably Napoleon’s*, Illya thought as he picked it up and automatically manipulated the device to send. “Open Channel D,” he said softly.

His answer was a crackling, indicative of a frequency-jamming signal. He sighed and closed up the pen. It appeared that he was not going to be able to contact a rescue party until he and Solo were out of the building. Unfortunately, while the UNCLE communicator was a wonder of miniaturization technology, it was useless as a lockpick. Unless they planned to open the door for him directly, there would have to be another delivery sometime soon. He slid the communicator into his pants pocket and made his way quickly back to the cot.

“THRUSH could learn a thing or two from Sears and Roebuck,” he murmured to himself as he rolled onto the mattress. Waiting had always been one of the hardest parts of his job, and he was more than impatient to get Napoleon to safety. Then, he could prepare himself for his ultimate future, however long or short that was going to be.

The second delivery came with a soft, almost silent, ping of another metallic object hitting the floor. Illya, however, had been waiting for its arrival and nearly leaped from the cot to claim his prize. In the dark, his fingers wrapped around a large paperclip. “All right—” he murmured in satisfaction and quickly began to bend the steel into a usable shape to handle the door lock. He had the door open in minutes; the next task was to find Napoleon’s cell, which was more difficult. Dabree had cleverly placed prisoner cells in different areas of the compound. Finally, on a different level entirely, he found his partner’s cell.

“Napoleon!” Kuryakin called to the figure on the cot in a piercing stage whisper.

The shadow rolled over towards the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me! Illya!”

In an instant, the dark figure stood in front of the door. “Illya? What in the hell are you doing out there?”

“That’s a fine way to talk to your rescuer! Give me a minute to get this door open.” There was silence for a short while and then the cell door swung outward. “C’mon, let’s get out of here!” The words had barely left Illya’s mouth when a fist roughly grasped his shirt and pulled him inside. “Napoleon—! What are you doing?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Illya pulled away from Solo’s grasp. “And you need to stop looking a gift horse in the mouth. This is a rescue, a break-out, an escape, whatever you want to call it. We need to go—now.”

“How did *you* get out?” He heard the Russian sigh with exasperation.

“I crawled under the door, what else? Look, it doesn’t matter how I got out. What matters is that I’m getting you out. Stop being a skeptic and do as I say.”

“I can’t help being just a little skeptical based on recent events.”

“Screw recent events!” Illya snarled. “There’ll be plenty of time to deal with that when we’re far away from here! Get moving or I’ll knock you senseless and carry you out!”

A moment later, Solo felt a foot on his rump shoving him through the cell door opening. With curiosity over-riding his earlier hesitation, Napoleon followed Kuryakin through the maze of hallways. Incredibly, in their travels, they met with only one guard, which Illya dispatched with his usual efficiency. The rifle the guard was carrying, however, was unloaded and the only other weapon on the body was a switchblade.

Illya slipped the knife into his trousers pocket and murmured to the unconscious guard, “Go back to your gang, *malchik*, you’ll live longer.” He looked up at Solo. “Let’s go.”

The pair pushed open a heavy door and suddenly found themselves in bright daylight. “*Voila*,” Kuryakin said under his breath.

Napoleon caught his partner’s arm, halting him. “Illya, this is utterly ridiculous! One guard? This has got to be a set-up or a trap.”

Kuryakin turned around and the blue eyes flashed in anger. “What are you insinuating, Napoleon? That I’m part of some diabolical plot against you?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the pen communicator. “Here. Call for help.”

As Solo reached for the pen, Illya tightened his grip on it and added. “And just for the record, I’m one-quarter *tsigani*, not a half-breed and while it’s true, I’m a bastard in the technical sense of the word, I’d like to point out, that so are you. *The pot calling the kettle black*, I believe the saying goes. And—if you ever refer to my mother again as a Gypsy whore, I will see that you have one thing in common with the *castrati* in Vienna Boys Choir.” He released the pen into Napoleon’s custody. “Go ahead, call them. They should be waiting to hear from us if Gretchen did what I asked before I was captured.” He turned away from the dark-haired agent and began to walk into the brush.

Napoleon stared at the communicator in confusion for a moment before it struck him that just outside the door to Dabree’s complex was not the best place to call from. He ran to catch up with Illya.

“How did you manage to get a hold of my communicator? Did you make some kind of deal with Dabree?”

Kuryakin kept walking. “Need to know and you don’t. Are you going to call for help or aren’t you?”

Napoleon opened the pen. “You know, I ought to throttle you for being obstinate. Open Channel D.”

While they waited for a reply, Illya stood silent. *I sincerely hope you have the opportunity to do that*, he thought dourly.

Waverly’s voice was its usual calm, but Solo was certain he heard a sense of relief from The Old Man. They were quickly transferred to the Boston Headquarters where the Head of Operations told them they would have a helicopter ready to pick them up in a half-hour. They were to keep the communicator on a homing signal and head due east until they had a visual on them. “By the way,” Napoleon added, “where are we?”

“Martha’s Vineyard,” was the answer. Napoleon chuckled softly as he closed off communication and set the pen to the homing signal. “I’ll be damned.” He looked up to see Illya’s quizzical expression. “The Kennedys have a compound here. Remember when we were involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis back in ‘62, before we were partnered⁹? Well, I got a chance to get to know Bobby more than a little. He’s campaigning for President now.”

“Let’s hope you will have the opportunity to vote for him¹⁰. We need to keep moving.”

Forty-five minutes later, they heard a helicopter overhead and touch down about a hundred years in front of them. A young, black-suited man approached them, gun in hand. Both Illya and Napoleon paused and spread their hands to show they were not armed.

⁹ THE CUBAN MISSILES AFFAIR to be written, I hope.

¹⁰ This phrase has a double meaning, for Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in 1968 before he ever had the chance to be nominated. It was a very personal blow to Robert Vaughn who, in real life, was a friend of the Kennedys.

"I'm Brian Witherspoon, Section 2, Boston Headquarters," the young man said in greeting. "Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Yes, and very happy to see you," Napoleon said.

"We can take off as soon as you're on board."

"Excellent," Illya said and held out his hand. "I am going to need your weapon, Mr. Witherspoon."

Napoleon looked at his partner, puzzled. "What's going on, Illya?"

"This is the part where you get on the helicopter and I take care of some unfinished business." He turned to Brian. "You wouldn't by chance have any incendiaries on the helicopter, would you?"

"You're not thinking of going back there, are you?" Solo demanded.

"There are a fair number of THRUSH guards approaching us right now, and I guarantee that their rifles are not unloaded."

"How do you know that?"

"I know. That's all that matters."

"So you did make a deal with Dabree. What was it? You in exchange for me? You have no right—"

"I have every right to do what I think is best to ensure the success of the mission," the Russian interrupted bluntly.

"This wasn't a mission."

Illya caught the two square incendiaries and stuffed them in his shirt. "It became one as soon as I got captured and saw the brain-kill machine Dabree had recreated."

"I get it now. You're pissed that I gave away your location."

"No, Napoleon, I'm not. But I am annoyed that you allowed your guard to go lax. If you hadn't been so smugly pleased with yourself to have two redheads vying for your attention you might have seen through Flostone's disguise and we wouldn't be where we are now.

"But, even that doesn't matter anymore because I'm about to renege on my deal with Dabree. I suspect she already has other plans as well. Give me your communicator and about thirty minutes. I'll call you when I'm ready."

"I'm not going to let you do this, Illya."

Kuryakin raised the Special he obtained from Agent Witherspoon. "And you don't have a choice." He looked up at the other agent. "Mr. Witherspoon, Mr. Solo is feeling the after-effects of being tortured. His mental capacity has become diminished and he is not able to give orders. As Number Two, Section Two in New York, I am *ordering* you to take Mr. Solo on board the

helicopter so he can begin treatment for his injuries.” He turned his attention back to Napoleon. “Now, will you get on the helicopter like a good little UNCLE agent and let me finish what I started?”

“You better hope those guards put a bullet through your skull, because if you survive this, I’ll have you busted down to Section Eight in the most anti-Communist outpost UNCLE has.”

“Well, that’s certainly an incentive. I’ll see you later.” Kuryakin turned from the pair and began to run back in the direction of Dabree’s complex.

Solo watched the receding figure as a sense of dread clutched at his insides. Why had he said that? Perhaps, he was suffering from diminished mental capacity. He looked up as Agent Witherspoon touched his arm. “I shouldn’t have let him do this alone,” he said, shaking his head sullenly.

“If I may say so, Mr. Solo, I don’t think there was any way you could have stopped him.”

Illya threaded his way back across the wooded terrain leading to Dabree’s complex, his senses alert for evidence of THRUSH guards lying in wait. The first one made himself known when the tree he was leaning against suddenly ejected a large chunk of wood and bark. A second shot was all he needed to pinpoint the gunman’s location. He stepped out from behind the tree. “One down,” he said to himself and pressed onward.

In all, there had been five THRUSH gunmen. Kuryakin came face-to-face with number five when the complex was a little over two hundred yards away. As they stood, each holding their weapons on the other, Illya broke the silence. “We seem to be at an impasse. However, if you’re interested in staying alive, you’ll lower your weapon.”

The guard didn’t move. “She was sure you wouldn’t come back. We were sent to kill you and Solo.”

“I didn’t come back to offer my services as an experimental test subject. That mind-kill machine, as well as this building, is going to be a pile of rubble when I’m finished. Now, whether you’re a part of that pile is strictly up to you. You give me safe passage to the lab and I might be able to offer you a chance at a nobler life style. That chance begins with you handing over the gun.”

The THRUSH considered his options for mere moments, and lowered his rifle. Illya pulled it from the THRUSH’s hand and unloaded the ammunition. “Here,” he said as he tossed it back. “Now, you can take me inside.” Kuryakin stowed the UNCLE Special in his shirt and preceded the guard back into the building.

Napoleon could not remember when time had moved as slowly as it was now; not even when he was on the slant board wired for agony, did the minutes trudge by like this. Seeming like an hour had surely passed, he was astonished to see by Agent Witherspoon’s watch that it was only ten minutes.

“We should be able to see the fire from the incendiaries even at this distance,” Witherspoon said. “They’re a new model and make a rather impressive display.”

Solo looked over at the other agent. “You and Illya would certainly get along well. There’s nothing he likes better than an impressive display.” Silently, he was thinking about the impressive display the Russian would make when he and The Old Man gave Illya the dressing-down this little piece of mutiny had bought him. Then he and his, perhaps, soon-to-be-ex-partner, would settle the other matter.

Kuryakin expected to find Dabree in her lab, so when the small, wiry-haired doctor greeted him with a pleasant greeting and a gun in her hand, he was not surprised.

“My guards were more adept in bringing you back alive than I thought,” she said. “I was prepared to accept that they had killed you and Mr. Solo.”

“The only thing four of your guards were adept at was dying. Number five, here, has considered the error of his ways and wishes to tender his resignation.” Illya pulled the gun from his shirt. “I hope you will forgive me, but I don’t plan to stay long; just long enough to set these devices—” He pulled an incendiary bomb out of his shirt. “—and shut down your little operation here. You may want to make a hasty retreat; they have a very short fuse.”

“You’re forgetting that I’m holding a gun on you, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Illya moved his thumb across the square bomb casing and it began to emit a loud beeping. “This is timed to go off in five minutes. It can’t be stopped. That is courtesy of my cold-blooded and ruthless exterior. I’m giving you the opportunity to save yourself and your assistant, Miss Flostone, because I’m now tapping into my sentimental, noble core.”

Dabree lowered the gun with a scowl. “May you rot in hell, you and Napoleon Solo.”

Illya smiled mockingly. “It just so happens that I don’t believe in a hell, but should I be wrong, I’ll look forward to seeing you there as well. You have four minutes.” He set the square bomb on the table underneath the brain-kill machine aperture. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a helicopter to catch.” He tossed the second bomb behind a bank of computers and ran for the door, with the THRUSH guard not far behind. The incendiary bombs roared as two fireballs engulfed Dabree’s complex. The shockwave threw both Kuryakin and the THRUSH forward onto their knees.

In the midst of escaping the brunt of the blast, Illya failed to realize that their trajectory had taken them to the spot where he had dispatched THRUSH guard number four earlier. Number Five found the gun nearby and quickly pocketed it before his UNCLE captor noticed. The pair continued onward towards a destination the THRUSH determined they would never reach.

Kuryakin heard the safety of fifth THRUSH’s gun click and stopped walking. “You’re making a mistake,” he said evenly as he looked over his shoulder.

“Maybe, but you’re a prize that will get me out of this gun fodder uniform and into a position more to my liking.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Illya said, turning slowly.

“Look, I don’t have anything against you personally,” the THRUSH explained.

“I know, it’s strictly business.”

“You understand.”

“All too well. We do what we must for our cause.”

“Exactly.”

“Then, you’ll understand when I tell you that now I must kill you so not to become your means for advancement. Nothing personal, you understand. You can, however, drop the gun and I’ll overlook this little *faux pas* of yours.”

The THRUSH moved to aim his pistol; Illya drew his Special and fired, felling the man where he stood. While it was hazardous to approach a downed adversary uncertain of his status, it was standard procedure for an UNCLE agent, whenever possible, to confirm a kill or take the living into custody. It was foolhardy to turn ones back on an armed enemy without knowing if that enemy might be able shoot back.

Illya approached cautiously, gun at the ready, towards the silent, unmoving THRUSH agent. The blast came from the THRUSH’s gun before Illya even saw the man fire on him. He caught his breath and stumbled backward a step when the hot metal tore into his lower chest, staring dumbfounded as if the blast had come from thin air. The gun slipped from his hand as his balance wavered. He fell backwards, landing hard on his back, and looking dazedly up at the sky.

The THRUSH got to his feet, holding his wounded shoulder and stood over the UNCLE agent, noting the widening crimson stain surrounding the neat 9mm hole on the left side of the chest. “Die slowly, UNCLE man and die alone—” He picked up the gun Illya had dropped and walked away, confident that the blond agent was not a threat. A half-minute later, a six-inch knife blade imbedded itself into his back, the switchblade that the determined Russian had pulled from his pocket and thrown from a torturously acquired stance. Illya crawled to the dead THRUSH agent to retrieve his gun. “Not today,” he whispered fiercely to the body. To assure himself the truth of his own words, he struggled to his feet to walk back in the direction of the helicopter. He managed a weaving course of twenty yards before his knees gave way. He collapsed, landing on his wounded side, and the sun went black.

The sound of Napoleon’s UNCLE communicator called him back from the dark senselessness. He lifted his head, greeted by a wave of vertigo that turned his stomach. It was only by taking deep breaths, he was able to keep from retching, but with each, came searing pain across his chest that actually accentuated the feeling of breathlessness. *This is not good*—he thought. Perhaps the dead THRUSH had been right in his assessment.

With great effort, he fished the warbling pen from his pocket and set the device to emit the homing signal. He had no strength for more. Then, he thought he heard someone call his name: above the pain, above his struggle to catch his breath and beyond the gnawing realization that he might dying. “I’m here,” he whispered hoarsely. *I’m here, Napoleon—please, find me—find me before*—“Hurry—”

He sensed first, then heard, the approach of footsteps from the direction of his feet. Instinct lifted his head and shoulder, the gun raised in his right hand. Napoleon’s voice calling his name stayed the instinct to fire. With a painful sigh, his arm dropped to his side and his head bowed. In the next moment, he felt his partner’s hand grasp his shoulder.

"Illya, what's wrong? Are you hit?" Napoleon's voice was thick with anxiety. "Let me see—"

"There were five," Illya whispered hoarsely. *Maybe if he kept talking—*

"Yeah, we saw them, you got'em all. And we saw the flames from the compound. You did it. You destroyed Dabree's machine." Napoleon didn't want to think about the worst.

"Stupid—stupid—" the Russian mumbled. "Amateurish—walked right into it—" Kuryakin gasped a moan and his face contorted from pain he could no longer conceal. The blond head began to droop again.

Napoleon tightened his grasp. "Stay with me, Illya—" He tried to roll his friend onto his back to see the wound, but Kuryakin protested weakly. "Let me see," he insisted softly. He did not need to move his partner much to see his worst fear confirmed. "God—"

Napoleon looked up at the sound of footsteps running towards them. "Brian! How fast can you get the helicopter over here?"

The other UNCLE agent took in the urgency in a glance. "About two minutes."

"Get'em out here as quick as you can—" Solo leaned over his partner. "Stay with me, partner. We still have some things to resolve between us—" He slid his arm behind the blond Russian's shoulders to jostle him back from the overwhelming desire to let go of consciousness. "Hey, don't you give up on me—You've got to hang on; the copter's on its way."

Napoleon felt a fist wrap itself around the fabric of his shirt. When he looked into Kuryakin's face, the dull eyes that looked back at him had large, dilated pupils giving the bloodless complexion an unnervingly charnel appearance. Napoleon could hear the labored breathing. The pale lips moved silently.

"Don't try to talk. We're going to get you to a hospital. Just hang on, stay with me, Illya. Stay with me."

With an effort that took all of his strength, Kuryakin pulled air into the single lung that was still functioning. Two words came out as coughing groans. "*You—win—*" Then he visibly relaxed into his partner's arm, and his eyes lost their remaining focus as unconsciousness claimed him.

Solo was dumbfounded. "I—what—? Illya—!" He grasped the lower jaw. "Oh, no you don't!" His fingers went for the carotid artery at the base of the jawline to feel for a pulse. "You don't finish an argument like that and then *die* on me, you insolent Russian bastard!" He gasped a hard sigh of relief to feel a weak, rapid pulse under his fingers. "For God's Sake, Illya, don't leave me here to fight these THRUSH sons-of-bitches alone —!" he implored. Only when he began to lower his friend's body to the ground, did he notice that his shirt was still in Illya's clenched fist. He pulled it gently from the fabric and his own fingers automatically sought his partner's pulse point below the thumb.

"Napoleon," a voice above him said loudly. He looked up. Agent Witherspoon was by his shoulder. "The chopper's here."

Napoleon then realized that their clothing was flapping around their bodies from the rotors. He looked down at his friend. "C'mon, Illya, the bus is here." Something in the facial cast was off

and he leaned over. He looked up. “You got a doctor on board?” He shouted urgently above the sound of the chopper.

“Medics. What is it, Napoleon?”

“Have one of them get over here, quick—he stopped breathing—” Solo bent over his partner once again and pinched closed the nose. “Listen, Kuryakin, you’re not going to pull off this dying shit while I’ve got anything to say about it!” He took a deep breath, clamped his mouth over the cyanic lips and blew, satisfied to hear air move and feel the chest rise slightly. “I’m your senior agent by two years—” Another breath. “—and you don’t have my permission to die yet!” Another breath. “C’mon, you stubborn *Cossack*, you’re not going to let this beat you!” Another breath. “Illya,” he whispered, “I can’t do this without you by my side— *zadushevney* —”

Napoleon was light-headed from deep breathing and his own pep-talk by the time the medics from the chopper relieved him and began to intubate Kuryakin. When they had finally gotten the fallen Russian onto the ‘copter, Solo insisted on being the one in charge of the Ambu-bag, to continue giving Illya life-sustaining mechanical breathing support. The chopper took off, already in radio contact with the nearest major hospital that would be able to accommodate them: Rhode Island Hospital, teaching hospital of Brown University.

Napoleon pushed the button on the coffee machine in the hospital waiting room and watched as his fourth cup filled with strong, dark liquid. The coffee wasn’t helping the knots in his stomach, but he needed something to keep his hands occupied. Illya had been in surgery for nearly four hours, with no word about his condition.

He stood, staring into the shiny glass of the coffee machine, berating himself for the umpteenth time over how he had handled the situation in Dabree’s complex. That building was now a pile of rubble, but it had been vacated before the agents from Boston infiltrated it. Gone with Dabree and Flostone, was the new brain-kill machine.

He was about to return to his place on the less-than-comfortable couch when he caught movement out of his peripheral vision. He turned quickly, thinking it was the surgeon with news. Instead, he saw a vaguely familiar female face, lined with worry.

“Mr. Solo?” the voice ventured as it mirrored the concern in the face.

“Yes. Please call me Napoleon,” Solo answered, and then remembered where he had seen the beautiful brunette. “Dr. Moore, I presume?”

“Gretchen,” she answered, a bit relieved, but the timbre was still shaky. “Agents from your organization told me that Illya was brought here. Do they know if he’s going to be all right?”

Napoleon shook his head. “He’s still in surgery. I’m going on the assumption that no news is good news.”

“Is it working? Your assumption, I mean.”

Napoleon stared down into his cup. “No, not really. I’m afraid I can’t delude myself like I used to.”

“What happened?”

“Shot in the line of duty. That’s about all I can really say. I’m sure you know, having worked with him before, that much of what we do is classified or secret.”

“I got that impression. He hardly ever said anything about his work or what he does, even when we first met and were working together.”

A surgical-gowned nurse caught their attention. “Mr. Solo?”

Solo dumped his half-full cup into the trashcan and walked across the waiting room. “What’s the verdict?” he said softly.

“Mr. Kuryakin came through the surgery well, but he lost a lot of blood,” the nurse explained. “The surgeon would like to give you the details if you want to hear them.”

“Yes, I would. And I’d like to be in the room with him.” Napoleon suddenly felt uncomfortable having to explain. “We’re partners, you see, and, well, it’s something partners need to do.”

The nurse smiled in understanding. “Yes, I know. My brother is a police officer.” She indicated Gretchen with her chin. “Is she family?”

“Uh, yes,” Napoleon said quickly. “His sister. She’s the only family he has.”

“Then, if you’ll both follow me—”

Napoleon took Gretchen by the hand and the pair followed the nurse to the intensive care section of the hospital. They entered the first room on the right and saw the object of their concern surrounded by machinery, wires and tubing. The occupant of the bed was pale and small-looking, with a respirator tube still in his throat, and IV needles in both forearms.

“We’re going to keep him heavily sedated for about twenty-four hours,” the doctor explained. “I want to give our repairs a chance to begin healing. It was a nasty wound; caught the stomach, nicked the spleen, and after tearing a hole in the diaphragm, went into the left lung. I’m most concerned about the spleen and the diaphragm.”

“We’ll watch over him,” Napoleon said softly.

The doctor went to the door and motioned for Solo to come along. Once outside, he spoke very softly. “What can you tell me about the man I just operated on? His body is ravaged like a battlefield. He has puncture marks from countless needle sticks. Who is this man?”

Napoleon reached into his pocket and brought out a card with a phone number on it. “If you would call this number, doctor, and speak to my boss, Mr. Waverly, I believe he will answer all your questions to your satisfaction.”

“I believe that, Mr. Solo, just as I believe that if I asked you to remove your shirt, I would find a battlefield not unlike his.”

“You would be right,” Napoleon said with a smile.

“I don’t believe I will need to talk to your Mr. Waverly.”

“Then all I ask is that you keep what you’ve seen a secret.”

The doctor nodded. "I can do that, Mr. Solo. Go tend to your friend."

"Thank you, doctor." Napoleon went back inside the room to find Gretchen seated by Illya's bedside, holding his hand.

"He looks so cold, but his hand's warm," she said, her voice quivering.

"It's a contradiction, isn't it?" Napoleon agreed as he took the chair on the other side of the bed. As if guided by instinct, his hand slipped around his partner's wrist, the index and the middle fingers resting lightly on the pulse point. The exercise was usually comforting for him, for it reassured him that the person closest to him in the world was alive and would soon return to his side once more. This time, however, he felt little comfort. Even as he sat, saturated in worry, anger simmered underneath.

He had a nagging desire to drag this man out of the bed and demand that they settle their differences in a good old-fashioned bare-knuckles brawl. He felt a morbid satisfaction at the mental image of Kuryakin, face bloodied, broken-nosed, jaw smashed. His immersion was so deep he did not hear Gretchen say his name until she had repeated it twice.

He looked up. "Sorry," he apologized. "Lost in thought."

"I understand." She looked at him with a sad smile. "You know, Illya never talked about you."

The dark eyebrows raised. "Really? Well, I guess that's not too surprising. He never mentioned you to me, either."

"I know. I think he was concerned that you would try to steal me away. Do you do that kind of thing, Napoleon?"

"Well, we both try to—I mean, it's kind of a game we play, you know, one-upping each other. All I can think is that you're special to him."

"Do UNCLE agents ever get married?"

"It's not encouraged, as a matter of fact, it's pretty much discouraged. We don't make very good husbands; there's too much we can't talk about. Too much a wife wouldn't want to know anyway."

"He always became annoyed when I asked him about his work. I guess I understand why a little more now. He's such a complex man. When we went diving, he was like a little boy discovering something for the first time and you know what that was? It was that he could do something for no other reason than it was fun. And then on the reverse side, when those men came to take him, he was more concerned about my safety than his own. And somewhere in the middle, he's gentle and passionate."

"And you love him, don't you?"

A tear rolled down her beautiful face. "I guess I must or I'd listen to my friends' advice to find someone else." She looked across the bed at the handsome man grasping the wrist of the bed's occupant. "You love him, too."

"It shows, huh?"

Gretchen smiled. "Yes, it does."

Napoleon sighed heavily and turned his gaze to the still features of his partner. He didn't deny for a moment that this person was dearer to him than anyone else in the world. What bothered him was that right now, he felt a genuine animosity towards Illya, and he didn't know why.

Kuryakin had been floating in the sea drugged of semi-wakefulness for so long that he was not completely aware of his own return to consciousness until he heard the familiar voice speak to him.

"Well, finally; it's about time you woke up."

This was not Napoleon's usual greeting in situations like this. The way he felt, Illya was not sure he wanted to engage this hostile alterative of his partner. The visual image that eventually solidified into a three-dimensional person was as bad as the voice that accompanied it: disheveled, gaunt and grimly red-eyed. "You look terrible," the Russian observed with a gravelly voice.

"You spend three days sleeping in a chair, then tell me about how I look. Besides, you don't look so good yourself."

Kuryakin closed his eyes against a heavy ache across his left lower ribs. "No, I suppose not," he murmured. He decided it was best to keep things as neutral as possible.

"How do you feel?"

"I've felt better." There was a pause as Solo's initial comment sank in. "Three days, huh?"

"You came out of the sedation and thought you were on a mission. Survival mode and all that. Gave one of the orderlies a black eye. They thought it best all-around to keep you sedated for a while longer."

"In that case, I wouldn't have expected you to stay here for three days."

The haggard features frowned and the response was as harsh as his appearance. "What kind of a stupid-ass remark is *that*? Are you still delirious? Where in hell did you *expect* I would be?"

So much for him cooling off, Illya concluded, but he felt far from ready to take on Napoleon's fury. "Sorry," he conceded.

The apology was ill-received. "No, you answer my question. After all these years of sitting by each other's bedsides like this, just *where* did you think I would be instead?"

"It was a poor choice of words. I apologize. I'm not exactly at my best right now, as you can see."

"Well, while we're on the subject of words, maybe you could tell me what was that 'you win' bullshit was about."

"I don't follow." He remembered only a portion of what transpired after Napoleon found him.

"You don't back down from an argument when you think you're right." The answer came to him even as he was speaking. "But you might if you thought you weren't going to make it. That's it, isn't it? You thought you were going to die.

"And you wanted to tie up one last loose end." The frown returned. "Well, just for the record, Illya, in the future, *don't* do me any favors. I detest winning arguments by default."

Illya stared at him, silent. *If there is a future*, he thought. The pain was becoming more than he wanted to handle at this point, and Solo was showing no sign of backing off. "Napoleon, I think you should go back to your hotel, get a shower, get something to eat and take a nice, long nap."

Solo misinterpreted the well-meaning suggestion. "You're telling me to leave?" he said, his voice responding as if he'd been challenged. "So much for a little gratitude from one partner to another."

In an effort that nearly took his breath away, Illya raised himself up onto his elbows. "I'm asking you to go and do what you need to do to get out of this disagreeable mood you're in. Get laid for all I care. I can't abide you like this." He sank back down onto the pillows, spent and in real pain. "Please, leave, Napoleon. I hurt and I want to sleep."

"Very well, have it your way," the dark-haired agent replied curtly, then turned and strode to the door.

"Napoleon, I do appreciate what you did," Illya called after him, but Solo gave no indication that he heard. Illya closed his eyes and his hand instinctively went to cover his wound. After three days, he shouldn't feel this bad, no matter the amount of damage he had incurred.

He wasn't sure if he had dozed off, but suddenly Gretchen occupied the chair Solo had vacated, holding his hand. "Illya, thank God you're awake. We were so worried about you. Napoleon didn't leave your side the whole time." She looked in the direction of the bathroom. "Where is he?"

Illya grasped her hand tightly to pull her attention back to him. "Gretchen," he half-groaned, "I need you to find a doctor or a nurse."

She caught the urgency through the pain in his voice at the same time she saw the unhealthy pallor of his face. "Illya?"

"Pain—is wrong—hemorrhaging—I can feel—" He panted heavily. "Get—the doctor—hurry—" he finished in a whisper.

He felt the hand pull away from his and heard the retreating footsteps rush to the door. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as a cold, clammy chill crept across his limbs. He had a fleeting twinge of remorse that he had sent Napoleon away too soon and in too sour a mood, but then his mind was bombarded by a jumble of non-corporeal voices and later, he was moving rapidly towards an unknown destination as his senses went dark once again.

Kuryakin awoke to the sound of his name coaxing him to open his eyes. He recognized the mental muzziness associated with narcotic painkillers and wished the person talking would

leave him alone so he could sink back down into oblivion. No such luck, for the hand associated with the voice grasped his firmly, and another touched the side of his face.

He knew both the voice and the touch, so the face that finally coalesced in his field of vision was a welcome sight. "What was it?" he murmured with effort.

"Ruptured spleen," Gretchen replied softly. "It wasn't entirely unexpected. You were so heavily transfused from before that it just couldn't take the strain of the initial injury."

She was not sniveling all over him with concern and for that he was grateful. He'd known too many like that and could not tolerate their lack of control. "How long?" he whispered.

"About eighteen hours. It was a long surgery and you almost bled out again. They really want you to stay quiet and rest for a few days." Gretchen saw the blue eyes cast about the room and knew what he was looking for. "He's not here," she said, and the eyes centered back on her. "He got a call from your boss. Mr. Waverly?" Illya's chin lifted minutely in affirmation. "He had to be back in New York this morning. Something about a mission. But he was here last night when they brought you back from surgery. He said you'd understand."

The Russian nodded once again. At least, there weren't going to be anymore harsh words between Napoleon and him for a while. Curiosity satisfied, he realized he was struggling once more to keep his eyes open.

Gretchen noticed and kissed him on the forehead. "I'm going to let you sleep for a while. I have some things to take care of with the beach study and I'll be back later."

"You don't have to babysit me."

"I know. Perhaps, I just want to for a little while, okay?" She didn't wait for an answer, but Kuryakin was not in a position to give one, for the pain medication overwhelmed his ability to stay conscious and he was asleep before she was at the door.

Epilogue

Illya Kuryakin was released from the hospital after two difficult weeks of defying doctors' orders and being disagreeable with the nurses. During those two weeks, Illya never mentioned Solo's name or showed even a passing interest in his partner's activities. A trained observer of behavior, animal and otherwise, Gretchen knew something had changed in the complex man she sat beside every day. On the day of his release, she picked him up from the hospital lobby and drove him to the hotel where she had been staying to rest before she drove him back to New York City.

Curious, Gretchen went so far in her investigation to call Solo at the number he gave her for emergencies, but when she finally reached him, his response was in line with the blond Russian's: it was basically none of her business and it would be addressed when Illya was well enough to return to New York.

"Are you sure it's all right for me to stay with you for a little while?" she asked from the driver's side on the trip to New York.

"I said it was, didn't I?" he answered bluntly.

“If I can,” he answered with a distinct noncommittal tone in his voice.

“You’re not going to, are you?” she replied accusingly.

“I may be going out of the country for a while.”

She drove on for a while then against her better judgment, said, “Look, I know something happened between you and Napoleon—” He was about to interrupt her but she cut him off. “—No, you let me say what I have to say. I saw him in that hospital room, sitting beside you, for three days. What’s more, I saw the look in his eyes when they brought you down from surgery both times. I may not know your feelings towards him, but I sure as hell know his for you.

“Whatever has come between you, you’d better do everything you can to resolve it, or you’ll break his heart.”

Illya stared out the windshield of the car. “Nonsense. You make it sound like we’ve had a lovers’ quarrel. Napoleon and I are *not* lovers.”

“I didn’t say you were. But what the two of you do share, is nothing like physical love. You seem to be more like soul mates or something. A part of the other.”

This time Kuryakin did look at her. “The Russian word is *zadushevny*. It means ‘behind the soul’. How do you know this?”

“I observe animal behavior.”

Illya snorted a humorless laugh and faced the front again.

“I’ll have you know, I gave Napoleon the same advice the last time I talked to him.”

“And?”

Gretchen gripped the steering wheel and drew a deep breath. “I think you’re a couple of complete idiots and you deserve each other.”

“He told you to mind your own business. And I agree with him. Napoleon will always be *zadushevny* to me. On the other hand, I’m not sure we will be able to work together again. A lot of unpleasantness has passed between us, things that have touched us at the deepest levels.”

Gretchen looked at him sympathetically. “Will you, at least, try?”

Illya sighed as deeply as his healing chest would allow. “I never said I wouldn’t.” He leaned forward and turned on the radio, leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes effectively ending the conversation. And there was no more conversation for the remaining drive to New York.

—END OF PART 2—

[...continued in Part 3...](#)

