

WE ARE WHAT WE LIVE (PART 3: “YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE”)

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Prologue

Illya Kuryakin turned the key in the deadbolt of his apartment door, slid his hand around the jamb to flip the switch to the alarm, and pushed the door open, his extended arm inviting Gretchen to precede him. “Be it ever so humble,” he said.

The shapely brunette walked inside and scanned the room. “This is definitely a single man’s apartment,” she commented. She dropped her purse on the couch and Kuryakin’s rucksack on the floor.

Illya laid the bags of Chinese carry-out on the kitchen table and picked up the duffel to transfer it to the bedroom. “It is what it is,” he countered matter-of-factly. “I could have carried this up the stairs, you know.”

“You’re on the mend. What did the doctor say? No heavy lifting for at least several more weeks.”

“He’s not familiar with UNCLE agents and the bag isn’t heavy.”

Gretchen stood at the bedroom doorway. “Right,” she agreed. “I carried it to humiliate you.” She took in the bedroom furnishings in a glance. “You don’t bring many ladies home, do you?”

Illya turned to face her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have a single bed.”

“I don’t need any more than that.”

“Never mind.” Gretchen turned back towards the living area.

Illya followed her. “Would you rather have a hotel room?”

This time she turned to face him. “No, this is fine. A little Spartan, but it’s okay.”

“It serves me well. I’m an infrequent occupant as it is.”

The pretty, dark-haired marine biologist sighed apologetically. “I’m sorry, Illya, I didn’t mean to judge. I guess this is a lot compared to what you would have in the Soviet Union.”

A slight smile touched the Russian’s lips. “Positively bourgeois.”

Gretchen went to him and laid her hands on his shoulders. “I was just wondering where we were both going to sleep tonight.”

He nodded. “I see. Well, I really don’t recall us needing very much sleeping space before. But if you are truly concerned, you may have the bed and I’ll take the couch.”

Her mouth opened in surprise. "That seems a long way to go for a kiss in the middle of the night."

"I'm afraid a kiss is about all I can manage right now. No heavy lifting, remember?" He was smirking mischievously.

She smiled. "A kiss will do, Mr. Kuryakin," she said as she leaned into him.

He met her lips half-way, and suddenly they were tightly pressed against each other, hungrily seeking the other's tongue. Finally, it was Illya who pulled back. "We have to stop," he said a little breathlessly.

Gretchen looked at him, puzzled. "You don't have to stop on my account. You're ready to jump my bones, and, hey, I approve. We can accommodate your injury."

He pulled away from her and went to the kitchen to empty the bags of Chinese food. "This food is going to get cold if we don't eat it soon." He looked up when she spoke his name.

"The vacation's over, isn't it?" Gretchen said softly. "Back to business as usual."

His gaze dropped back to the table. "No, not completely," he said almost apologetically. "Well, at least, not until tomorrow when I have to report to Mr. Waverly and then to Medical."

"Why did you pull away from me just now?"

"May I ask a question before I answer?"

"Yes."

"What did you hope to gain by driving me back to New York?"

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do." He looked up once more. "Gretchen, at what point must I blatantly try to drive you away?"

Now it was her turn to be annoyed by the repetitious restating of reality. "Why I drove you back here is my concern, but if it bothers you that much, I can go to a hotel in the morning."

"You don't have to do that." He went to her and kissed her on the cheek. "But, please keep it foremost in your mind that as much as I may care for you, and enjoy your company, there can never be any more than what we have now."

"So you keep impressing upon me. And for your information, I've had time to think about that, and it's okay. I'm a big girl, Illya."

"And very capable, I know. But I also know that people tend to cling most strongly to that which they know they cannot have."

Gretchen saw a flicker of regret in his eyes and decided that a change of subject was in order. "Would you like me take care of the food? You look tired; maybe you should rest for a bit."

Kuryakin nodded. "You're also very perceptive. I believe I will sit down for a little while, thank you."

Gretchen nodded and went to the kitchen area, while Ilyya sank wearily onto the couch. She found plates in the cupboard, utensils in the drawer, and clean cups in the drain board. The teakettle was empty so she filled it and set it on the stove to boil. After the tea had brewed, she spooned some of each Chinese entrée onto the plates with a generous helping of rice. "Do you want to eat at the table or over there?" she called to the man slouched on the couch, head resting on the back, eyes closed. He did not answer, so she went over to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Ilyya?" she said and shook gently.

The result was akin to the springing of a bear trap. In one swift sequence of motions, the Russian vacated the couch, drew his Special from its holster and pushed Gretchen halfway across the room, his left hand encircling her throat, and the barrel of the gun pressed against her temple. A pair of piercing blue eyes regarded her with suspicion. She was too shocked and frightened to even scream. A moment later, he came fully awake. She heard him inhale sharply; then quickly he lowered the gun and pushed away from her. "How many times have I told you not to touch me like that when I'm asleep!" he rebuked her angrily as he replaced his gun.

Gretchen could only stare back at him, her hands at her throat, body trembling. The alarm in her face chilled his anger and he sighed heavily. "Gretchen, I'm sorry."

She found her voice. "Why did you do that?" she stammered.

"Because, it's how I'm trained to react. It's why I keep telling you that to wake me you must say my name and nothing more."

"You said I would never have cause to be afraid of you."

"It appears that I was mistaken. Again, I'm sorry."

Gretchen continued to hug herself. "Where's your bathroom?"

He pointed to a closed door beside the bedroom door. A moment later, she was gone, slamming the door behind her. From inside, he could hear the muffled sounds of her retching. He bowed his head, closed his eyes, and bemoaned, "Why do these kinds of things never happen to you, Napoleon?"

Act I: "I'm going to work for UNCLE!"

Napoleon Solo twisted the coat hook in the small dressing room of Del Floria's tailor shop and pushed the heavy door inward. Counter-balanced, the door opened easily into the reception room of UNCLE Headquarters, New York. An olive-skinned, black-haired Oriental beauty with deep brown almond-shaped eyes smiled at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Solo. How was Greece?"

"I'd love to tell you, Wanda, had I been west enough¹ to actually be in Greece. But thanks for asking." He leaned forward to allow Wanda to pin his badge onto his lapel.

¹ Solo was on the remote island of Irbos. "THE MAN FROM THRUSH AFFAIR"

“Mr. Kuryakin’s back,” the pretty receptionist said, a little surprised when Napoleon quickly straightened his posture.

“Oh, he is, is he?” the handsome dark-haired agent said casually to defuse what his body language had just given up.

“Yes,” Wanda continued, still curious. “He came in a little over a half-hour ago with a woman named Dr. Moore. A friend of his perhaps?”

Napoleon could not miss the receptionist’s competitive antipathy as she pronounced the word “friend”. A considerable number of the female staff were head-over-heels in lust for the blond Russian, and outside competition was most unwelcome. For his part, Illya showed little interest in any of them, which only added to the attraction.

Napoleon smiled. “Definitely a friend, Wanda. Did Illya mention where he and Dr. Moore were headed?”

“I know Mr. Waverly was expecting them sometime this morning.”

“I’ll definitely have to catch up with them, then. Thanks.” He strode through the steel door and headed towards the elevator to Waverly’s office. He stopped in front of Lisa Rogers’ desk, situated in an alcove blocking the short hallway to the office door of Number One, Section One. “Have Illya and Dr. Moore come to see Mr. Waverly yet?”

The sultry brunette flashed her pale green eyes up at Napoleon. “They just arrived as a matter of fact. Why don’t you go in?”

“Thank you, Miss Rogers. I think I will.” He smiled, as he resettled his jacket onto his shoulders and straightened his tie. Then he turned to pass through the steel door that led to Mr. Waverly’s office.

The occupants looked over as he entered. “Join us Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly said, rising. In response, Illya stood as well.

“I heard that Illya was back in town and brought Dr. Moore with him.”

“Quite, Mr. Solo. Based on your report that she was instrumental in your rescue from Dr. Dabree, I felt it only proper to thank her personally.” The older man smiled. “So I took the liberty of inviting her to Headquarters when she drove Mr. Kuryakin back here to New York.”

Napoleon noticed an exchange of glances between his partner and Gretchen and surmised that the Old Man’s invitation was news as well to the blond agent. Characteristically, Illya had no comment, but merely concealed any surprise he may have had behind a bland expression. Solo was sure, however, that Illya was more than merely surprised; he could see the Russian’s fingertips rubbing together as they often did when a situation was uncomfortable or he was impatient. “It’s good to see you again, Dr. Moore.”

“Napoleon,” Gretchen said and smiled back at Solo graciously.

Solo, however, was really watching Illya's expression. Kuryakin was indeed uncomfortable, and Napoleon was reasonably certain it had begun the moment he entered the room. "You're looking better than the last time I saw you, Illya," he said evenly.

The blue eyes hardened momentarily; then the expression was quickly gone. "I imagine so," Illya said tonelessly and looked up at Waverly. "Sir, if you will excuse me, I have an appointment in Medical, which I should keep before they send all of Section Three up here to escort me. Perhaps Mr. Solo could take Dr. Moore downstairs to the cafeteria for some coffee until I'm finished."

"Actually, I have Miss Rogers attending to that very matter," Waverly said and, as if on cue, Lisa Rogers came through the door pushing a cart topped with a silver tea set and a silver tray of freshly baked scones on the second shelf. "I thought we could have tea here until you're finished with the medical personnel." The older man looked at his agent. "I doubt you will be long, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya eyed the tea set and scones; then looked back at Waverly. "No, sir. Not long."

"Run along then. Mr. Solo and I will keep your Dr. Moore entertained until you're finished."

The younger agent did as he was bidden. As the door closed, Napoleon and Mr. Waverly looked at each other. "Well, I must say, that was a first for Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said.

"I was about to say the same thing, sir," Napoleon said and turned his head in Gretchen's direction. "Illya has never voluntarily gone to Medical without extreme duress."

Gretchen stood up and purposefully went to the cart to pour a cup of tea.

"Is there something you'd like to say to me, Gretchen?" Solo said.

She poured cream and added sugar before she looked up, stirring her drink. "You know him better than I do, Napoleon." She went to sit on the sofa in the corner of Waverly's large office.

Mr. Waverly also poured himself a cup of tea. While doctoring it with cream and sugar he spoke to Solo. "It would appear that your work is not yet completed with regard to Mr. Kuryakin. And your report to me was merely a preliminary one."

"Ah, yes, sir, it was—is. Perhaps, I should forgo the tea and get started on the complete report before we go into this any further."

"An excellent idea, Mr. Solo. I have another matter I would like to discuss with Dr. Moore anyway."

Never before had Napoleon felt so dismissed by his superior. Now he was going back to his office to dredge up and put to paper the events he tried to bury during his mission to Irbos. A wave of sharp pain flashed across his forehead and settled to a dull ache behind his eyes while his stomach knotted uneasily. The next few hours were going to be as torturous as any he had ever experienced while in the field.

After a distasteful conversation with the UNCLE staff doctor, where he was given essentially the same prognosis as the doctor at Rhode Island Hospital, Illya soberly returned to his superior's

office. He found Gretchen chatting casually with Lisa Rogers in her office, the teacart transferred to a spot beside the secretary's desk.

He stood in the open doorway. "So, did Napoleon and Mr. Waverly both stand you up?"

"He had to tend to a rather urgent call from a field team," Lisa explained. "Would you like some tea, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"After the conversation I had with Medical, I could use a couple of those scones as well," Illya mused and pulled an empty chair from the corner of the room.

"Just two?" Gretchen teased. "C'mon, Illya, you're a veritable bottomless pit."

"And he doesn't gain an ounce," Lisa added with a touch of envy as she handed the agent a cup of tea. "Black, right?"

Kuryakin spotted a dish of a red jelled condiment. "Is that strawberry?"

"Yes, strawberry jam."

Illya spooned dollop into his tea and stirred it, a slight smile on his lips. He ventured a sip and the smile widened. "*Otlichno*,²" he whispered with a contented sigh.

"Mr. Waverly's idea," Lisa explained. "Actually I thought it was for the scones."

"He must have known what Medical was going to tell me." He looked down at Gretchen. "Three weeks, no heavy lifting," he said with annoyance.

"Imagine that," Gretchen replied with a grin.

"I *am* allowed to spend it in the lab, however."

"They had better allow him to spend it in the lab," Lisa explained. "Or Medical would have needed a bomb-diffusion unit to keep our Mr. Kuryakin from detonating." When Illya glared at her, she merely added in *sotto voce*, "He doesn't like doctors."

"I noticed."

Illya pulled two scones from the silver tray and turned towards the hallway.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Gretchen said as she followed him into the hall.

"I see no reason to stay and intrude on your foray into the secretarial pool's agent gossip."

"No, you're in a snit because you couldn't bully the UNCLE doctors into letting you back on active duty before you've healed. Do you need an excuse to send me back home that desperately?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

² excellent

“Well, it really doesn’t matter anyway. I have to leave tomorrow to meet with a group of scientists at your marine facility in Lewes, Delaware. It’s the real reason why Mr. Waverly wanted me to drive you to New York. He offered me a job.” She put her arms around Illya’s neck grinning broadly. “I’m going to work for UNCLE!” she exclaimed and she planted a kiss on the incredulous Russian agent’s cheek.

Napoleon rubbed his eyes with one hand and continued the massage around to the throbbing in the back of his neck. For nearly two hours, he tried to reduce the days spent in captivity under the tutelage of Dr. Dabree into a concise analysis. Each time he began, however, the remorse of his own mistakes, the helplessness he felt while his captor and his *partner* performed their horrific *pas de deux*, and the resulting animosity for that same partner clung to him like a drowning man.

Finally, he scribbled out a two-page narrative, more fiction than fact, and signed his name at the end. Waverly was going to be unhappy with the ambiguity of it, but Solo could not bring himself to write more than the skeletal facts of the event. He even left out Kuryakin’s insubordination of ordering Agent Witherspoon to bodily place him on the helicopter.

He took mild comfort in the knowledge that Illya would have an equally difficult task submitting a report up to the Old Man’s standards. In any case, Solo knew the next few days were not going to be easy ones for either of them. The best the Russian could hope for was that Medical would put him on the inactive roster and bar him from even working in his lab.

After suffering through the events of what he had informally dubbed “The Botched Vacation Affair”, he turned his attention to the mission he had just returned from. Thankfully, the words flowed effortlessly as he reported the facts of the satisfactorily completed affair. Waverly would have no problems with this one. He looked at the clock, surprised at how much time had passed while he labored over his unpleasant task. His stomach had been so tied in knots, that was well-past lunchtime and he had not been the least bit hungry. Pickings in the commissary would be meager at best.

He wondered if Lisa Rodgers might have made it a point to save him a scone or two. At the same time, he would be able to find out if Illya and his attractive marine biologist were still in the building. A quick phone call gave him the answers he had hoped for: yes, there were scones and no, Illya and Gretchen left some time ago. Relieved, Solo delivered his mission reports to the secretarial pool for typing and rode the elevator to the top floor to collect his pastries. Afterward, he headed to the commissary, counting on good luck to keep him off Waverly’s radar for a few more hours.

His luck ran out at precisely 4:00 in the afternoon with a summons via Miss Rogers to report to the Old man’s office immediately. There was a vague hope that order to report might be about another assignment, quickly dashed when Napoleon saw the expression on Mr. Waverly’s face.

Section One, Number One wasted no time on amenities. “Mr. Solo, this report on yours and Mr. Kuryakin’s dealings with Dr. Dabree is balderdash.”

“Well, I’m sure after you have Illya’s half—”

“I don’t expect Mr. Kuryakin’s report to be any more useful than the piece of rubbish you’ve provided me here. Sit down.”

Reluctantly, the CEA slipped into a seat a comfortable distance from his superior.

“Mr. Solo, you were supposed to urge Mr. Kuryakin to open up about his misgivings in The Gurnius Affair. It looks like you’ve joined him.”

Napoleon rubbed his temples between his thumb and index finger. “I’m afraid it may be worse than that, sir. The situation Dabree created only accentuated what The Gurnius Affair did to both of us.”

“I sensed the tension between the two of you the moment you entered my office this morning. And then, when Mr. Kuryakin made it a point to fulfill his obligation to Medical, it more than piqued my interest. I am turning this matter over to Dr. Pirelli.”

“Illya’s not going to give Pirelli anything useful.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m counting on you to cooperate with him. As of this moment, you are pulled from active duty and ordered to report tomorrow morning to Dr. Pirelli and his staff for psychological evaluation.”

“Sir, I am fine,” Napoleon protested.

“Mr. Solo, you are not fine. Even your report from the past two weeks’ mission has evidence of your current mental state. I want you and Mr. Kuryakin to work out the problems between the two of you before I send you out on the next mission. Dismissed.”

Solo stood, his clenched jaw the only thing keeping him from lashing back verbally at his superior. He walked from Waverly’s office with a normal gait, but it was not difficult for Lisa Rogers to see that the handsome agent was livid. A buzzer on her desk called her to her boss’ office.

“Well, Miss Rogers?”

“I’ll call Dr. Pirelli and have him clear his calendar for tomorrow. What about Mr. Kuryakin? He may not come in tomorrow.”

Waverly puffed on his pipe a moment. “Oh, I expect he’ll come in sometime in the afternoon. We’ll let him tinker around in the comfort of his lab for a couple of hours and I’ll speak to him about the same time tomorrow.”

“Illya’s going to be highly resistant.”

“Of course, he will be. Just as Mr. Solo was today. I know my agents, Miss Rogers. Mr. Kuryakin will comply.”

Lisa Rogers sighed. “I hope so. Otherwise, you’ll lose the best enforcement team UNCLE’s ever had.”

“You don’t need to remind me of that, Miss Rogers. Set up Mr. Solo’s appointment. The sooner we get started, the sooner this nasty business can be put behind us.”

Act II: “He’s a consummate liar and you’re an artist of misdirection. You’d make an excellent field team.”

Napoleon Solo opened the door to the anti-chamber leading to the office of UNCLE’s Head of Mental Health Department and Dr. Vincent Pirelli, MD, and looked around the room’s pleasant interior. The walls were painted a muted sage green and the carpeting was a medium gray shag, both colors designed to project a calming atmosphere to the occupants. *An interrogation chamber by any other name*, Solo thought and entered, closing the door behind him.

The CEA of U.N.C.L.E. North America was still fuming from Waverly’s unyielding position that he needed professional intervention. He kept thinking repeatedly that if he hadn’t been called back almost immediately after their escape from Dabree’s compound, and then sent on a two-week mission, he might have been able to work through his feelings. He and Illya would have had a chance to hash out their differences without outside manipulation.

“But, no,” he growled under his breath as he prowled the room, “the Old Man wants his top enforcement team out there slugging away at the bad guys. And to hell with what it might be doing to them.”

Napoleon was almost standing in front of the office door when it opened and Dr. Pirelli stood in the doorway. “Very punctual, Mr. Solo. We’re off to a good start.”

The hell we are, Napoleon thought as a frown began to form. “Let’s get this over with so I can get back to work.”

Dr. Pirelli took a step back and to the side to allow the field agent to enter. “I was thinking the same thing, but I will need your help to accomplish it.” He presented the hallway for Solo to precede him. “The room at the end of the hall, if you don’t mind, Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon passed him with a huff. “Spoken like a true interrogator.”

The room at the end of the hall had the look, feel and smell of an executive den, complete with wood paneled walls, masculine accouterments and over-stuffed leather furniture. “Would you like something to drink, Mr. Solo?” Dr. Pirelli asked as he walked to a well-stocked liquor cabinet.

“A little early in the morning for that, wouldn’t you say, doctor?”

“Well, you know the saying, ‘it must be five o’clock somewhere.’ Scotch, I believe is your straight liquor of choice, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I’m pretty particular about my scotch. Single malt and *no additives*,” Napoleon said, emphasizing his last two words.

“I understand your suspicions that the drink could be ‘doctored’, if you pardon the pun. I prefer not to use drugs if I can obtain your voluntary cooperation instead. Why don’t you sit down and make yourself comfortable?”

“There’s nothing you can offer me that will make me feel comfortable, doctor.”

“Again, I understand. Your profession dictates that you suppress most of your emotions in order to function in situations that would cause nearly anyone else to succumb to their instincts for self-preservation. Laudable, but eventually one must unleash those pent-up emotions or suffer the unpleasant consequences. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, I agree one hundred percent. And, if you’ll be so kind to recommend to the man upstairs that what I really need are just a couple of weeks—”

“Mr. Waverly seems to believe that it’s gone beyond that point.”

“*He’s* the one who pulled me away from my critically-wounded partner, back to New York for another mission!” Solo growled vehemently.

“Surely, Mr. Waverly would have, at least, given you several days to make certain Mr. Kuryakin was going to recover.”

“One doesn’t argue with the Old Man when his mind is made up,” Napoleon said severely. At the same time, he was fervently hoping the doctor was not observing him too closely. The actual truth was that he had not protested being pulled away; he was almost thankful for the excuse to put some distance between himself and his injured partner. He had been able to bury that bit of guilt while on the mission, but now it was back, glaring at him like the desert summer sun. It was the real reason he was angry, and trying to transfer the blame elsewhere for abandoning his partner was beginning to wreak havoc on his physical well-being as well.

Dr. Pirelli sat down behind his desk and wrote a few lines on a piece of paper.

“Is that my ‘get out of jail free’ card?” The CEA asked hopefully.

“Bravado may be a useful tool when THRUSH is about to interrogate you, but with me it’s an annoyance that I won’t put up with. You are lying to me, which I expected, but I believe you are lying to yourself as well. You also have a good home remedy against a hangover.

“I will be seeing Mr. Kuryakin tomorrow morning and will give Mr. Waverly my recommendations at that time. In the meantime, you might want to ask yourself if your pride is worth all this self-deception, self-denial and self-destruction. Appointment’s over; Mr. Solo, you can leave now.”

That afternoon at four o’clock, Illya Kuryakin sat in the same black leather chair in Waverly’s office as Napoleon had the day before.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Kuryakin?” Waverly said, casually puffing on his pipe. “The report I received from Medical states you can return to your normal duties in three weeks.”

“Yes, sir,” the blond-haired agent replied, his hands folded in his lap.

“I’m surprised you gave in so easily. I actually had to read the report twice to make sure it was you they were talking about.”

“I thought a few weeks in the lab would be a nice break from fieldwork.”

“I can understand your desire to unwind a bit. The last few missions *were* rather difficult.”

“Yes, sir, they were.”

“I’m sorry to have also deprived you of Dr. Moore’s company, but I think she will make a fine addition to our marine department.”

“I’m sure she will. Thank you for considering her. She was very excited when she left this morning.” When Waverly did not continue speaking, Illya looked at him questioningly. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes, Mr. Kuryakin, there is. I would like you to go to your office, compose and present to me a detailed report of what happened to you and Mr. Solo when Dr. Dabree captured the two of you. And, I want that report before you leave tonight.” Waverly watched as his stoic Russian agent grew more pale than he would have thought possible, having lost most of his color from his injuries two weeks earlier. “Is that going to be a problem for you?”

Illya sat silent, frantically trying to find an answer to his superior’s question without revealing the truth of how impossible that report was going to be to write. Finally, he managed to find both his voice and a solution. “What did Mr. Solo put in his report, if I may ask?”

“That’s the tack I thought you’d take,” Waverly said. “Mr. Solo found the report impossible to write and laid it at your doorstep. And you have just done the same.”

“What are you suggesting, sir?” Kuryakin ventured, certain he was not going to like the answer to his question.

“I want you here tomorrow morning, nine o’clock. Report to Dr. Pirelli for psychological evaluation.”

Illya stood abruptly. “There is nothing wrong with me. *Sir*,” he said, tersely, his voice clipped and tightly controlled.

“I beg to differ. You and Mr. Solo have some unfinished business to attend to. I have asked Dr. Pirelli to coordinate and mediate this process. If the two of you cannot resolve your differences, I *will end* your partnership; as much as it would hurt the organization to do so.”

Kuryakin tilted his head back, jutting out his jaw in an obviously defiant gesture. “Perhaps you should, sir.”

“Affectation doesn’t become you, Mr. Kuryakin. You’ve worked very hard to reach your station, and proven yourself many times over. Furthermore, you and Mr. Solo have been good for each other in many ways. I am having trouble understanding why both of you would willingly allow your association to wither away to nothing. Surely, it’s not something so unconscionable that you can’t come to some kind of understanding.”

Illya was silent.

“Very well. Tomorrow morning, nine o’clock. Dismissed.”

Kuryakin left his superior’s office, his mind a blur of anger, disbelief, and surprising to him, *fear*. Under Pirelli’s care, there would be no torture, humiliation, or threats to force vital UNCLE

information from his lips. Why then did he wish he was facing the worst of THRUSH instead of an UNCLE psychologist?

Like Napoleon twenty-four hours earlier, Illya entered the outer waiting room of Dr. Pirelli's Mental Health Division. The doctor, seated in a chair, thumbing through a magazine, looked up. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Kuryakin. I trust the information we offered was helpful in your portrayal of Colonel Nexor."

The Russian agent blinked once. He had not expected this. "It was extremely helpful, doctor, thank you."

"And what is it that brings you down to my department again? More research?"

Illya frowned. "Don't toy with me, Dr. Pirelli," he said, hostility touching the words. "You know Mr. Waverly ordered me here."

"Why do you suppose he did that?"

Kuryakin was determined not to play into the psychologist's hand. He clasped his hands behind his back and drew himself up to a military stance that would have pleased even the cruelest of his Soviet commanders.

Dr. Pirelli stood up, chuckling to himself. "You know, you Section Two boys really amuse me. You project this veneer of normalcy and fearlessness, but underneath you're nothing but a bunch of frightened children, cowering in the dark." He noted the blond agent's only external reaction as the blue eyes glared back at him. "How much vodka did you put away last night after you got your order to see me?"

A slight smile touched Illya's mouth. "Classified."

"I'm disappointed. I thought there was enough of the scientist in you to take the information you'd been given and be able to apply it to more than one set of circumstances."

"Then, you've been misinformed. I have excellent recall and analytical abilities."

"Good. Now use your 'excellent' recall and analytical abilities to tell me *exactly* why Mr. Waverly ordered you and Mr. Solo to my department under the threat of dissolving your partnership!"

Again, there was that unconscious straightening of the back as Kuryakin slipped behind the shield of ingrained military discipline. Dr. Pirelli had to admire what must have been a younger officer's method of coping against a rigid and cruel way of life. "I believe his words were that Mr. Solo and I have 'unfinished business' between us."

"Do you have unfinished business?"

"If we do, I don't see how it can be anyone else's concern but ours."

"You and Mr. Solo are quite a pair. He's a consummate liar and you're an artist of misdirection. You'd make an excellent field team."

"I dislike being patronized as well."

“All right Mr. Kuryakin. I’m going to let you and Mr. Solo claim Round One.”

“I have no desire to make this a contest, doctor. Mr. Solo and I are professionals. Any conflicts we may have will be dealt with as professionals. We don’t need you *or* Mr. Waverly dictating to us how we accomplish that. And you can tell the Old Man exactly what I said.”

“Don’t worry,” Dr. Pirelli replied. “I intend to give him a full report. There is one thing I’d like you to think about while you’re being professional and all that.”

“What?” Illya said impatiently.

“In the time we’ve been talking, you never once mentioned your partner by his first name. By the same token, neither did Mr. Solo. I was wondering if it was a conscious effort or not. You can go. I’ll be in touch.”

Illya went back to his shared office to find his desk laden with multiple piles of report folders needing review by Napoleon as Chief Enforcement Agent. Solo’s desk was relatively clear of paperwork, but it was evident that work was in progress. The clock on the wall read 10:00 am, leading Illya to the assumption that the desk’s owner was most likely on a midmorning coffee break.

Kuryakin glanced over the file folders littering his partner’s desk and his attention focused on a folder labeled: *Andreas Petros*³. He thought it odd, that a folder bearing the name of a Greek agent with whom he had worked years ago when posted to eastern Europe and under the guidance of the recently deceased Head UNCLE Northeast⁴ should find its way into Solo’s possession. Curious, picked up the folder, opened it and scanned its contents, which included a voucher for airfare from Los Angeles to New York and another to Greece.

The notes on the desk referred to a mission on the island of Irbos. So that was it, Illya concluded. It was the mission for which Napoleon had been called back to New York. Time must have been of the essence. Illya continued to look at the folder while memory replayed details of missions he and Andreas had worked. Then, his eye caught the date listed on the air vouchers and a frown began to form.

Andreas was on a flight from Los Angeles to New York a full forty-eight hours *after* Napoleon left Providence. Why then had Gretchen told him that Solo needed to be in New York immediately when the man he would be on the mission with was not going to show up until two days later? Illya was just beginning to run through all possible scenarios, when Napoleon appeared in the doorway.

“Here to help with mission reports?” the dark-haired agent said with forced casualness.

“I had business in another quarter. I see you had a mission with Andreas Petros. I know him rather well; we worked together a few years ago before I came to New York. How is he?”

“He’s well. Excellent agent. I suspect he’ll be the next CEA in the Northeast area.”

³ Solo’s co-worker in THE MAN FROM THRUSH AFFAIR

⁴ THE SUMMIT FIVE AFFAIR

“And it was fortunate you were able to get back to New York to meet him at the airport.” Kuryakin laid the file folder on Solo’s desk.

Napoleon came into the room. “You know, I was thinking; maybe we could persuade the Old Man to let us do a courier milk-run down to D.C. after which we could take in a few of the local sights. Maybe even go to a baseball game.”

The blond-haired agent looked up, the blue eyes coolly appraising the sincerity of the man in the doorway. “I’m afraid, I’ll have to decline. I have three weeks of sick time, which I hope to spend in Lewes, Delaware, where Gretchen is interviewing for the job Mr. Waverly offered her.”

“Illya, I’m trying to find a way that we can sit down and work through the bad feelings that have come between us.”

The voice was hard. “Is that a suggestion from Waverly or Dr. Pirelli?”

“You ought to know. You got the directive from the Old Man just as I did.”

“Napoleon, right now all I really want to do is what you did in Providence. It will give me time to decide if I should be grateful that you held yourself back long enough to find out if I was going to live through the second surgery. At least, you were able to ease your mind enough that you knew you wouldn’t need to miss a funeral.”

At first, Solo was taken aback at the scathing observation and wondered how Kuryakin had concluded that he had left earlier than he needed to. Then, he saw Petros’ file folder on his desk. Anger flared. “You arrogant son-of-a-bitch! I sat by your miserable carcass for three blasted days and you kicked me out of the room. Then, when I leave a little earlier than I have to for a mission, you essentially call me a heartless bastard.” He waved his hand in a dismissing gesture. “Take your damn sick leave. I’d rather put my fist through that Slavic-Gypsy face of yours than look at it. Go fuck your scientist.”

Illya stood stone still, the blue eyes staring back showed no emotion, or rather a myriad of emotions, too many to sort through. The Russian drew a slow deep breath. “Very well,” he said, almost tonelessly and turned to the door. “Be careful, Napoleon, because I won’t be there to pull your ass out of trouble.”

Napoleon watched the door close and with it, his anger dissipated, replaced by a deep heartache that was nearly a physical pain. Why couldn’t he stop the anger? Why did he feel like he needed to retaliate for every rebuff Illya flung his way? Why, even now as he asked himself these very questions, could he not swallow his pride and follow his partner with the olive branch?

“Why, Illya?” he whispered.

Act III: “Do svidaniya”

UNCLE Marine Science facility, Lewes, Delaware

“Dr. Moore, your credentials are excellent. Based on the studies you’ve done for the Park Service, and your experience with UNCLE, I think you’ll fit in quite well. The job is yours if you

want it.” Ross McHenry, the director of the UNCLE Marine Sciences facility stood up from behind his desk and extended his hand.

Gretchen stood as well and returned the handshake. “I’m really excited about working with your organization,” she said with a smile.

“Having seen the main headquarters in New York, I can’t promise anything that exciting, but we do some cutting edge research here. It’s necessary for us to try and anticipate where THRUSH might decide to turn their energies next. Maybe even get a jump on them.”

“Well, I don’t know about you,” Gretchen said, “but I find that exciting.”

“Good. On that note, I’d like to take you to dinner and we can talk ‘shop’.”

“That would be lovely, Dr. McHenry.”

“Please, call me Ross. Nearly everyone here has a Ph.D. and we all use first names.” The phone on Dr. McHenry’s desk rang. “A moment please.” He picked up the receiver. “This is Ross.” He listened for a moment and looked up. “Francine says there’s a man at the reception desk with a delivery for you.”

“For me?” Dr. Moore shook her head.

“Blond-haired man. He flashed an UNCLE ID.”

Gretchen’s mouth opened in surprise. “Illya—”

“Were you expecting him?”

“Well, no, but he has a way of showing up unexpectedly.”

“Wait a second. You said Illya? Illya Kuryakin, from Section Two in New York?”

“Yes, we met about five years ago in Baltimore.”

“I remember. THRUSH was poisoning the blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay. We labored a few long nights to solve that mystery, I’ll tell you. I’m surprised we didn’t offer you a job then.”

“I was still working on my Ph.D. Then I went to the National Park Service.”

Director McHenry smiled. “Uncle Sam instead of UNCLE.”

They both looked up at the knock on the door jamb. “I have a delivery for Dr. Gretchen Moore.”

“Illya!” Gretchen went to the door to give the smiling blond Russian a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop in see how you were getting along.” He nodded to the Director. “Dr. McHenry, it’s good to see you again. Gretchen will make a fine addition to your staff.”

“That seems to be the general consensus. If you’ll excuse us, Mr. Kuryakin, I was about to take our new staff member for some dinner.”

“Oh, Ross,” Gretchen said apologetically, “could I get a rain check on that? I have to close out my apartment in Cape May and find a place to rent here. Illya promised to help me move if I took the job.”

“Certainly, Gretchen. Do you think a week is sufficient time?”

The Director was being cordial, but Gretchen could sense the unspoken challenges being exchanged between her new employer and the Section Two agent. “Plenty of time,” she said and grasped Illya by the arm to exit the room. “Thanks, Ross.” She did not let go of his arm until they were outside the building. Then she faced him with her own challenge. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to help you move. Isn’t that what you just told your new boss?”

“You’re playing games with me. What happened with Napoleon?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

“I mean nothing that you need to be concerned about. End of discussion.”

Gretchen put her hands on her hips. “I think I’m finally beginning to read you, Illya. It’s not what you say; it’s what you leave out. You wouldn’t be here if things were fine between you and Napoleon. You’d be up in New York, working in your lab, and disregarding your doctor’s orders.”

“Am I to assume, then, that my presence here is not welcome?” He moved closer to her, as he held her eyes’ attention until he was close enough to brush her lips with his own. “Hmm?”

As he had intended, Gretchen responded, throwing her arms around his shoulders and pressing her body against his. He, in turn, encircled her waist and leaned into the kiss, which by now had grown quite passionate. When they finally disengaged, she laid her head against shoulder. “Damn you, Illya, how to you ever expect me to give you up when you kiss me like that?”

“You will, because after I’ve helped you move, I will be leaving; and your new boss will have no competition whatsoever. He is very much attracted to you, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I noticed.”

“And you will be following the wise advice of your friends.”

“But, what about your feelings, Illya?”

“You already know them. I’ve requested a temporary reassignment to our Northeast headquarters. There have been some recent changes in personnel and they need help reorganizing. I was posted there initially when I joined UNCLE so I am familiar with both the operations and the people.”

“And you’d be running away from Napoleon too.”

"I wouldn't put it in quite those terms. I prefer 'breathing space'."

"You're running away. And you don't run away from anything."

"There is such a thing as a tactical retreat which serves as time to regroup and reevaluate. This is very much one of those times."

"And what about your running away from me?"

"What you said before is correct. Our relationship is largely one of mutual lust. I cannot give you what you want, as much as I might be tempted to do so. You deserve more than that and I am happy for the possibilities now open to you."

Gretchen took a deep breath and stepped back from him. "Illya, please don't take this the wrong way, but I'd like you to leave now."

The blond agent smiled a sober smile, but there was no sadness in it. "I understand. And I will do as you ask." He closed the gap between them and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Thanks for the memories, Gretchen." Then he lifted her hand and kissed it as well. "*Do svidaniya,*" he said softly. "*Adieu.*"

Teary-eyed, she watched him walk away from her. There was no slumping of his shoulders or sorrow in his gait, as if he had just given her a "see you later" goodbye. It was in that moment, she knew her friends had been right all along. She turned back to the UNCLE facility, anxious with anticipation to see if Ross McHenry's offer for dinner might still be available.

"He did *what?!!*" Napoleon Solo exclaimed when Mr. Waverly told his CEA of Kuryakin's transfer request. "Why that goddamn little godless Commie prick!"

"Mr. Solo!" Waverly rebuked his agent for the thoughtless tirade. "Control yourself!"

Napoleon came back to himself and sighed heavily. "Sorry, sir."

"As you should be. Your outburst seems to add credence to the reasoning behind Mr. Kuryakin's request."

"I tried to offer him a chance to talk. He as good as spat in my face."

"On the contrary, Mr. Solo. He knows that now is not the time for the two of you to work out whatever seems to have been building over a period of time. I agree with Dr. Pirelli. I should not have pushed the two of you to clear the air as quickly as I did. And it's why I approved Mr. Kuryakin's request for a *temporary* transfer. In the meantime, you will rotate with other unpaired agents or go on assignment alone."

"Yes, sir," Napoleon replied, but he was angrily thinking that the split might actually be a blessing in disguise. He and Illya had become too intermeshed in each other's private lives. It had begun to affect the way they operated as a team; they were more concerned with each other's safety than with the mission. The "Botched Vacation Affair" had been a prime example of that.

The best way was to work alone or with another agent he barely knew. Sure, Illya knew his moves and most of the time they did not even need to speak to convey their messages to each other. But, he could work with other agents if he had to. If nothing else, UNCLE agents were adaptable.

Illya Kuryakin packed his sparse collection of suits and sport coat/trousers combinations with more care than he normally would have if his assignment had been a regular mission. He was not acquainted with the new head of UNCLE, Northeast, and felt it wise to make a good impression. Otherwise, he was ambivalent about the whole trip. He did not particularly want to leave UNCLE, New York, but currently, the situation between Napoleon and him made staying much less than attractive.

Had he not seen the Andreas Petros file on Solo's desk with the travel voucher, he would have looked on Napoleon's suggestion of a trip to D.C. more favorably. Knowing that his partner had "skipped out" intentionally, Illya was feeling far less inclined towards magnanimity. Additionally, Waverly's push to get them to resolve their differences irritated him as well. The Head of UNCLE North America, rarely made errors in judgment, but as far as Kuryakin was concerned, Waverly was meddling in a place he didn't belong.

Then there was Gretchen Moore. The conclusion of their relationship gave him little reason to stay as well. While he had no regrets, he had to admit the time he spent with her had been emotionally satisfying and sexually exhilarating; though he was more than aware that it had not been not so for her. He easily convinced himself she was better off without him, especially when he remembered how her new boss had taken more than a professional interest in her.

Illya closed the suitcase and latched the locks. Hoisting the heavy luggage from the bed, he made a mental tour of the apartment for items that needed attention before he left for his six-week or longer tour in Europe. The refrigerator was empty of perishables; his landlady had two months' worth of rent and would be collecting his sparse mail. He was ready to catch a cab to the airport for his departure two hours hence. Perhaps in two months, he and Napoleon would be ready to either settle their differences or would agree to go their separate professional ways.

UNCLE NE Headquarters, Berlin

"Welcome to back to Berlin, Mr. Kuryakin," the receptionist greeted as Illya entered by the agents' entrance. She handed him his ID badge.

"It's good to be back," the blond agent lied and slipped the yellow triangular badge onto his jacket pocket. "Would you inform *Herr* Buchmeister that I have arrived and am at his service?"

The pretty towheaded receptionist smiled. "He told me to tell you he is waiting for you in his office."

Ah, German efficiency, Illya thought and continued through the steel door to the heart of the first floor. The elevators were in the same part of the building as the ones in the New York office, so he did not need to keep his attention on where he was going. Instead, his mind was recalling the content of the new UNCLE Chief's dossier. Words spoke very little about the man himself, and Kuryakin did not know Ulrich Buchmeister personally. He did, however, have a strong suspicion the new Number One was going to be vastly different from the old.

Harry Beldon⁵ had been many things, not the least of which a double agent for THRUSH. It was a secret he had even managed to keep even from Waverly himself. Harry had also been Kuryakin's mentor, and the transplanted Russian had respected the man for all his flamboyancy and relaxed style of management. Beldon's betrayal of UNCLE struck Illya as a personal affront from which he still smarted. It was the main reason he hesitated before entering Buchmeister's office.

The man who sat at the twin of the large revolving table from which Alexander Waverly conducted business was the epitome of Aryan stock Hitler would have praised highly: sturdy frame, graying hair that once was blond, sparkling blue eyes in a classic peasant face. "Herr Kuryakin," he said standing.

"*Guten Abend, Herr Buchmeister,*" Illya responded formally. "*Ich hoffe die Arbeit doch nicht bei Ihnen überwältigen noch.*"⁶

"There is no need for you to speak German in my presence, Mr. Kuryakin. I'm quite fluent in English, as well as many other languages."

"I intended no disrespect, sir," Illya countered, somewhat taken aback.

"I also know of your relationship to my predecessor, but that was in the past and you can expect no special considerations from me. Do you understand, Mr. Kuryakin?"

The blond Russian suddenly had disquieting feeling about the man he was to work for over the next six to eight weeks. "Completely, sir."

"My secretary has a list of security arrangements I will require be implemented as soon as possible. She will brief you on any details."

"That's why I'm here, *Herr Buchmeister*. Will you want those security arrangements at your other offices as well?"

"I am *not* the extravagant blowhard your Harry Beldon was, Kuryakin. The Berlin office will be the only office, clear?" When Illya failed to acknowledge the question asked, Buchmeister glared back. "I said, is that clear?"

It was evident to Kuryakin that the NE Chief had some issues, if not with him personally, then with his tie to Harry Beldon. "Permission to speak plainly, sir," he said tonelessly.

Buchmeister looked at him critically as he tried to ascertain the exact nature of what his subordinate would say if permitted. "Very well, speak your mind."

"Sir, I am at somewhat of a loss to comprehend your apparent rancor towards me. While Harry Beldon, indeed, was my mentor and I, his protégé, I did not use that status to elicit special considerations from him. No one was more unprepared for or felt more betrayed by his treachery than I was. He taught me many things, but I never felt compelled to emulate him. I can understand your animosity under those terms. However, if your distrust stems from another source, I should like to be made aware of it, and appease your concerns, if possible."

⁵ THE SUMMIT FIVE AFFAIR

⁶ "I hope the work has not overwhelmed you yet." (formal)

Buchmeister frowned. "Harry Beldon is part of it."

"Which I have done my best to clarify and defuse."

"Why did you ask for this assignment, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Uncertain of what Buchmeister was alluding to, Illya chose the most innocuous reason. "I thought I could be of help, sir."

"I guess there is no easy way to say this, so I will just say it. I was a soldier in World War II, not necessarily because I believed in the Nazi cause, but because I believed in fighting for my country. And now we are torn apart; and the Communists rule the land where I was born."

Kuryakin shook his head incredulously. "And one of the first things Harry Beldon taught me was that as an UNCLE agent, I do not have the luxury of holding onto feuds of the past. Do Mr. Waverly and the other Section One chiefs know of your personal grudges?"

"You are over-stepping your place, Kuryakin."

"Perhaps, but before you put me in my so-called place, hear this: I was a child of the war. My own government killed my mother and grandparents. Your government killed nearly all of the family I had left. I don't agree with much of the current politics of my country. At least, there is UNCLE to give me what no government can—"

Illya slipped back into his subordinate role, and pulled his shoulders back. "I believe I have some security arrangements to see to. I will continue those duties until they are completed, or until I am called back to New York. So, if you will excuse me—sir."

Before Buchmeister could say another word, Kuryakin retreated to the door, which opened, then closed, leaving a rather perplexed Continental Chief to reflect on being dressed down by the only Russian in all of UNCLE. He wondered briefly if Waverly knew what he had, then he nodded perceptively. "*Ja, Alexander, Sie weiß, Sie haben immer gewusst.*"⁷

UNCLE Headquarters, New York ***Six weeks later***

"I hear proper protocol in Section II here in New York is to present yourself to the Chief of Enforcement immediately upon initial arrival into HQ."

Napoleon Solo looked up from studying one of the myriad of reports littering his desktop to the speaker who stood in the doorway of his office.

"Tony!" exclaimed Napoleon with a broad grin as he rose from his chair to greet the equally smiling man who now moved into the confines of the CEA's office, letting the pneumatic door close behind him. "Seeing your name on the transfer roster from Rome was a pleasant surprise," Solo added as he extended his hand to the other enforcement agent.

⁷ "Yes, Alexander, you know; you have always known."

“When my field partner for the past half-dozen years took a fatal Thrush bullet several months ago, I thought it time for a change of scenery,” commented Tony honestly as he accepted Solo’s hand in a hearty shake.

“I was sorry to hear about your partner,” commiserated Napoleon with real empathy. With a simple gesture he offered Tony a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“It’s been a difficult reality to deal with, I admit. But he went down fighting for what he believed in, what we all believe in,” Tony forwarded as he seated himself in a chair. “Guess if you have to die in the line of duty, at least that your death had some meaning does make it somewhat bearable for those you leave behind.”

Yes, Napoleon had to agree with that, though it was still a very harsh reality that too many of those in Section II had to face. Napoleon regained his own chair behind the desk as Tony spoke on.

“Fortunately, Arsene agreed with my request for a transfer, so here I am. And I’ll admit, though I’ve enjoyed my years working out of the Rome office, finishing out my career from the ‘top drawer’ as it were is definitely an appealing prospect.”

Tony Simonelli had been an enforcement agent in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement for the past 13 years, four of those spent in Section III in Geneva and the last nine in Section II in Rome. He had been in the same Survival School class as Solo and, though the two had not been close buddies, they had definitely been on friendly terms. Four years older than Napoleon, he was now just a few days short of a year away from retirement out of the field.

“How is Arsene?” Napoleon asked after Arsene Corio, the head of Section II in the Rome office. “Been at least a year since I last saw him.”

“He’s fine. Doing well in the position though, like most of the Northeast Section II lead agents, he’s a bit overwhelmed with administrative details at the moment.”

“Yes, that Beldon business... most disturbing.”

Tony couldn’t resist a little smirk. “You have a talent for polite understatement, Napoleon. After what that man let that burrowing termite Strothers do to you, I’m amazed smoke doesn’t come out of your ears every time his name is even mentioned.”

“We nailed his Thrush-speckled hide to the wall in the end; that’s the important thing.”

“So it is,” agreed Tony with a quick nod. “Which brings to mind the question of when do I get to meet that capable Russian cohort of yours? The partnership of Solo and Kuryakin has become quite legendary among all of us in Section II, you know.”

Napoleon shifted a bit in his chair: a most uncharacteristic action for the always composed and oh-so-nonchalant Solo. And, despite the fact he hadn’t had contact with Napoleon in years, it was something Simonelli could not help but notice.

“Illya’s been in Berlin for the past month or so, on loan to Northeast. He’s seeing to some of the security and personnel policy enhancements Mr. Waverly wants implemented in that office.”

“Wise idea to get that all put to rights before the new Continental Chief settles in,” Tony kept his statement general, figuring it better to make no further reference to Kuryakin. He sensed something was off, and he wasn’t in any position to inquire as to what.

“I hope you have some interesting assignments in mind for me, Napoleon,” Tony then tactfully took the conversation off in another direction. “I’m looking to end my field career in a blaze of glory,” he added with a sly wink.

Napoleon grinned in return. “Oh, I think I can oblige you in that, Tony; never fear.”

“Glad to hear it!” Tony responded enthusiastically. “I must be off to Medical for routine check-in upon transfer,” he then stated as he rose from his chair, Napoleon also rising from his at the visual cue. “I’m excited to get the chance to work out of North American headquarters, and I’m even pleased to be reporting directly to you, Napoleon. Must be something in the water.”

Napoleon laughed. “I insure it’s kept properly spiked with happy juice at all times.”

“So that’s the secret of your success, huh?”

“I won’t confirm that even under Thrush torture.”

Tony laughed lightly. “Good to see you again, Napoleon. Hopefully you’ll find me an asset to your section.”

The two shook hands once more and then Tony took his leave for his visit to Medical.

After Simonelli’s departure, Napoleon pondered about an opening assignment for Tony. He himself had just been given a mission in San Francisco. He was to fly out tomorrow for that one and Waverly had required he allot himself a partner for its duration.

Over the past few months Napoleon Solo had been partnering with agents other than Illya Kuryakin. First because of Illya’s needed recovery from his injury and then because... well, because. During that timeframe, however, Napoleon had managed to not repeat partnering with any particular agent. He told himself it was the right thing to do as CEA, to get to personally know the operational style of as many of his Section II enforcement agents as possible. Mr. Waverly hadn’t gainsaid his continuing flow of assorted partners, but the Old Man had his own suspicions as to Solo’s motives in moving from one field partner to another and it had little if anything to do with personally getting to know the field approach of the agents under his command.

Yet, with Illya in Berlin, it had become possible for Napoleon to partner with other agents without it raising eyebrows or promoting gossip within New York HQ. And Napoleon knew that Tony Simonelli was a damn good field agent who had risen to second in command in the Operations and Enforcement section of the Rome subsidiary office and Number 6 in the entirety of Northeast Section II. Additionally, Simonelli was extremely talented with explosives, just shy of Illya’s extraordinary level of expertise in that particular regard. And he was someone Napoleon liked and who respected Napoleon’s abilities as a leader, so there wouldn’t be any personality or authority conflicts.

Yes, the more he thought on it, the more Napoleon concluded Tony Simonelli would be the perfect partner for him during the San Francisco mission. Well, as perfect as could be managed at the moment anyhow.

The phone on Solo's desk rang for what seemed like the umpteenth time that day, so when he answered, his curt response was more severe than he intended. Since it was not prudent to growl at Mr. Waverly's secretary, he became immediately contrite. "Sorry, Miss Rogers, it seems like everybody wants a piece of me today. Does 'he' want me right now, or can I get a cup of coffee first?"

"Actually, Mr. Solo, 'he' was curious if you had selected a mission partner for San Francisco."

With a smile Lisa could almost see through the phone, Napoleon answered. "Yes, I was considering Tony Simonelli, a new transfer. I think the mission would be a good fit for him and a good way to get his feet wet in the New York Office. Besides, we'll have a lot to talk about on the flight. We graduated Survival School in the same class, you know."

"Actually, I did know, or should I say, Mr. Waverly knew."

"Not surprising."

"Have you told Mr. Simonelli yet?"

"I was just about to call him, why?"

"Mr. Waverly will handle that. He'd like you to stop down and see Dr. Pirelli instead."

"You have got to be kidding me, Lisa. See Pirelli today? Just before heading out on a mission? What does the Old Man have against me this week? I can't seem to get on his good side no matter what I do."

"Well, it won't help if you make a fuss again about seeing Dr. Pirelli."

"Can't I put it off until I get back? What difference will it make anyway?"

"And I was to remind you that you've already managed to put it off for the last three weeks. Just do it, Napoleon. It'll make you feel better."

"That's easy for you to say. They don't call them 'head-shrinkers' for nothing."

"I'll tell Dr. Pirelli you're on your way."

Solo scowled at the phone. "Miss Rogers, you're all heart." He hung up, certain he could hear her chuckling. What a way to start a mission! Disgusted, the handsome CEA pulled his array of paperwork into a stack and shoved it into his top desk drawer. He'd rather do ten stacks of mission reports than venture down into the mind-vultures' lair. Damn the Old Man, anyway. Things had been going just fine the last six weeks; now Pirelli was going to try and stir it all up again.

But not unless I let him, Napoleon decided with determination as he forced himself to push the correct button on the elevator to send him down to the medical floor. Yeah, he was going to

make the doctor work for what little he was going to get. He opened the door to the waiting room to find it, happily, empty and took a seat as close to the outside door as possible. And he waited.

Thirty minutes later, he was still waiting for Pirelli, and fuming over the wasted time he could have spent finishing his mission reports instead. He stood to leave and the inner door opened.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Solo. I hope I haven't inconvenienced you."

"As a matter of fact, doctor—" Solo began but the doctor interrupted.

"Good. I was looking over my notes from our last session. Follow me, please."

Napoleon could not stifle a smug grin as he formed a mental picture of Dr. Pirelli studying the practically nonexistent notes from six weeks ago. Confidently, he strode through the door, and to the plush study, where a highball glass waited for him, filled with ice cubes and a double shot of scotch.

"Single malt, no additives," Dr. Pirelli said, offering his patient the glass with an outstretched arm. "Except for the ice cubes, of course."

Solo smiled charmingly, arms crossed. "No, thank you."

"That's right. I remember your aversion to beverages you haven't poured yourself." He took a large sip of the scotch and set the glass back on the desk. "Help yourself, then, if you like. Any bottle, any glass. I assure you, the liquor is not tainted."

"That's fine. I'll just have some water from your sink over there." Napoleon walked across the room, pulled a paper cup from the holder and filled it from the long, crook-shaped faucet. Then he sat triumphantly down on the leather couch and drained the paper cup confidently.

"Delicious," he said grinning. "So what are we going to talk about? I have to tell you, I'm a little pressed for time thanks to your lengthy review of my case."

"I'm afraid that couldn't be helped. It took me that long to set up the dispensing device on the water spigot."

Napoleon crushed the paper cup in his hand and looked up, his expression suddenly wary. "What dispensing device?" he said, his voice hard, as he realized he had just been duped.

Dr. Pirelli reached out and took the paper cup from Napoleon's fist. "Now, if I told you that, it would soon cease to be a useful tool. How do you feel, Mr. Solo?"

"Fine," the UNCLE agent snarled.

"Good to know. In a couple of minutes, I'm going to start asking you some questions, and you're going to want to answer them freely and truthfully."

"You have no authority to do this to me," Napoleon said angrily.

"I think if you take the time to look it up, you'll find that I'm well within my authority; and, if that doesn't convince you, I can show you Mr. Waverly's authorization. I believe he's your boss, right?"

There was no help for it. He was stuck; he knew it and Pirelli knew it. “Get on with it,” he said in disgust.

“I understand you’re heading out for another mission tomorrow. Where are you going?”

“San Francisco.”

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it? Will you be going alone?”

“No, Mr. Waverly wants a second agent to go. Tony Simonelli will be going with me.”

“I thought Mr. Kuryakin was your partner. Why isn’t he going to San Francisco instead?”

Solo frowned. “You know damn well why. He’s in Berlin.”

“That seems to really bother you. Why?”

The frown deepened to a scowl. “You know, I tried to do what you and Waverly wanted me to do. I tried to hold out the olive branch, to see if we could talk out what wasn’t right between us. But what does the little bastard do? He goes to Waverly for a transfer to Northeast. He runs away—with Waverly’s blessing no less!”

“Maybe Mr. Kuryakin wasn’t ready to talk just then. Did you try to contact him since he’s been in Berlin?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Maybe I wasn’t ready to talk to *him*. *That* door can swing both ways.”

“Someone has to make the first move eventually.”

“Well, it’s his turn now. I already tried.”

“You sound very angry.”

“I am.”

“What’s the real reason you’re angry at your partner? You were angry at him before he left for Berlin.”

Solo looked up at the doctor, the hazel eyes blazing. “He fried my fucking brain twice in less than a month! Then he gave me some lame song-and-dance about doing it to save my life—and to top it off, he mutinies on me to go back *alone* and blow up Dabree’s compound!”

“For which he almost lost his life.”

“That was his own damn fault.”

“Is that how you felt when you found him?”

Napoleon sighed heavily and shook his head. "At first, I didn't know how bad it was; he fought me when I tried to turn him over. There was blood all over his side and on the ground. He kept mumbling something; I couldn't really tell what he was saying. But then he looked at me and said, 'You win'."

"Do you know what he meant?"

Solo scowled slightly. "He decided that he was going to die and he wanted to end our argument before he did," he said both anger and anguish heavy in his voice. "That's what really sticks in my craw; he just gave up. Goddamn Russian fatalism."

"But in conceding defeat, he admitted that you were right. Being right is very important to you, isn't it? You hate to lose."

"Yes, winning is important to me."

"What about Mr. Kuryakin?"

"I often have to cajole him to have a more positive perspective."

"Then I would say you and he are very different people, and still you're friends as well as partners."

"I'm not sure I want a permanent partner anymore."

"Why not?"

"You said it: friends. And I almost lost that friend."

"So that's why you've spent the last six weeks going on missions alone or with different partners." Dr. Pirelli went to his desk and picked up a small gas canister. "We've covered a lot of ground today, Mr. Solo. I'm going to spray a mist in your face, which will counter-act the truth drug I gave you. Your memory of this session will slip away like a dream, but you will be more amenable when I ask to see you again. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Napoleon answered easily. He breathed deeply as the mist hit his face and looked up at the doctor. "May I go now?" he asked caustically.

"You can go now, Mr. Solo. Good luck on the mission."

As winter approached in San Francisco in the year 1967, the "Summer of Love" was something buried beneath the human debris of homelessness, drug addiction, hunger and crime. "The Death of the Hippie" ceremony, a mock funeral to signal the official end to the great socio-experiment, had been staged some weeks before and the motto of "Bring the revolution to where you live!" was the new battle cry. However, some of the young revelers remained in the Haight-Ashbury section of city. Yet these societal loose ends now found themselves in a rather hostile environment, hopelessly entrenched within those previously mentioned facets of human debris. The city officials had never wanted them in their municipality and now exhibited little tolerance for the remaining "anti-community".

Napoleon Solo had been in San Francisco for the past week and he found the entire atmosphere more depressing than liberated. Too many strung-out, starving kids crowded together in makeshift housing arrangements barely keeping body and soul together for him to account this any type of beneficial Cultural Revolution. His own mission in the city had proven a straightforward and successful one. He and his temporary partner had cleared out a Thrush satrap and destroyed a lab producing a very dangerous type of hallucinogen the Thrushies had been testing on unwitting young people in the remnants of the Haight-Ashbury hippie society. As Napoleon walked the district, he was grateful he had done his bit to alleviate some of the heartbreak he saw around him. But these kids: they needed to find a better way to make their point, and they needed to go home to people that cared about them.

Solo was about to turn back in the direction of his own hotel a good ways from this particularly exploited area when she caught his eye. Though he only espied her from behind, he would recognize that pert little backside anywhere, not to mention the wispy mass of carrot-hued curls.

“Ginny?” he shouted toward the girl. “Virginia Naline?”

She turned in response to the full name and pale gray-green eyes lit with pure pleasure upon seeing who called it.

“Sir Brave and Besotting!” she shouted in return as she sped full-tilt toward him, finally throwing herself bodily into his arms.

Napoleon staggered back from the force of her embrace, but quickly regained his balance as he clasped his arms about her waist, accepting her fierce clinch for a long moment.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as he replaced the position of his arms with hands to facilitate sufficiently moving her body back so he could look her in the face.

“I came for the love-in and got left in the fall-out,” she commented with a negligent shrug.

“Now why did you go and do a silly thing like that, Carrot-top?” he asked her bluntly. “You had the hippie community lifestyle in Provincetown, along with a job that at least provided enough resources to afford you a suitable place to live.”

“But here supplied the wherewithal to bequeath me a dynamic place to ‘be’, my sagely champion.”

“Assuming your state of ‘being’ includes a desire to starve or get mugged or raped or worse.”

Ginny smiled indulgently at him. “You’re like honey spread on wheat bread. You know that, oh dark prince?”

“I’m sensible,” countered Napoleon.

“Uh-huh. Like I said: honey on wheat bread, temptingly sweet overlaying the utterly wholesome.”

Napoleon laughed lightly. “That’s probably the first time in my life I’ve ever been described as wholesome.”

“My eyes have been opened, white-knightly one. Thus do I see beyond the mundane nearsightedness that generally prevails on this plane of existence.”

“Aw Ginny, don’t tell me you’ve gone that route? No drug can open your eyes, honey. All it can do is possibly shut them permanently. Believe me: I know.”

Ginny gazed at him steadily for a moment, her manner suddenly serious. “Somehow I do believe you know.”

“Good. Now that we’ve established how knowing a man I am,” returned Napoleon, “let me see to it you have a decent meal in your stomach before I pack you up and send you back where you belong.”

“What makes you think I haven’t had a decent meal, hunny-bunny?”

“When?” challenged Napoleon.

“Day before yesterday,” admitted Ginny.

Napoleon sighed once in vexation and then grasped Ginny proprietarily by the elbow. “Come on, Carrot-top: we’ve got a lunch date.”

“The potent haze of my femininity at last engulfs the most chivalrous of knights!” exclaimed the delighted Ginny. “I beg you, Sir Lancelot, spare not my tired virtue while intently cramming my empty gut!”

Napoleon only chuckled in response.

The maître d’ at the restaurant located in his hotel where Napoleon escorted Ginny to lunch was less than pleased by the appearance of the hippie girl who arrived in tow with Mr. Solo. A discreet twenty in hand convinced him to overlook her slatternly dress of faded blue jeans and tie-dyed tee as he seated the pair pointedly at the back of the dining room.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Solo, but this is really the best I can do under the circumstances,” he apologized somewhat stiffly.

“It has a clear view to the main entrance, so this will do fine,” conceded Napoleon. He knew when not to push his luck.

“Most obliging of you, sir,” the head waiter acknowledged with a slight bow.

With a snap of his fingers to signal forward a server who handed the two patrons menus and then himself departed, the maitre d’ briskly returned to his station near the entry.

Ginny giggled.

“Something funny?” asked Napoleon.

“He’s probably thinking I’m your exploratory mine into the counter-culture, if you get my drift.”

“I get the drift, and yes, that is most probably what he is thinking,” Napoleon agreed.

“I promise not to rumble if you set a foot – or whatever body part best suits the operation – into a shaft,” pressed Ginny.

“Honey, I’m buying you lunch and then a bus ticket home. And that’s all. Understood?”

Ginny sighed. “Look, Sir Lancelot: you don’t even have a clue in what direction to steer that trusty charger of yours to bring me back to the castle of my forbears.”

“So you’ll tell me.”

“Maybe I won’t. I’m not a child, you know. Or some kind of teenage runaway. I’m a grown woman.”

“Who tends to make poor life choices.”

“But they’re *my* choices to make. After all, it is *my* life.”

At that point the server returned to take their orders. Solo ordered for them both: a fresh minestrone soup, grilled steak and mushroom sandwiches on sourdough bread, and homemade lemonade.

After the waiter had left with their written orders in hand, Ginny remarked a bit frustratedly, “And shouldn’t I have choices about what to eat for lunch either?”

Napoleon grinned a bit sheepishly. “You question my choices?”

“Well, I’ll clean-breast to hanging a steady hook-and-dot on your languid leaning with lounge-y lust beside that redheaded Lady Macbeth in P-town.”

“Oh her,” responded Napoleon uncomfortably.

“Where did the emerald-eyed banshee spirit you off to anyhow? I did push all the tilt-head and raise-eyebrows buttons and couldn’t tag any such inmate anywhere in the local medical haunts.”

Napoleon considered how to reply and finally leaned forward across the table, hands clasped together on the cloth, as his hazel eyes earnestly met hers. “Look Ginny: I’m in a rather dangerous line of work and, for your own safety, it’s best you know as little as possible about any of it.”

Ginny’s gray-green eyes gazed just as earnestly into his for a long moment before she asked a question posed more in the manner of a statement. “She snatched you, didn’t she? I mean literally snatched, as in kidnapped bodily for nefarious purposes; not snagged hormonally for fun-and-games.”

“Yes, she snatched me, as you put it,” conceded Napoleon with a bit of vexation in his voice as he returned his hands to his side of the table and concentrated on the motions necessary for taking a sip from his water glass.

“And I palmed-up with the nitwit’s helping hand as it were.”

“Don’t blame yourself there, Carrot-top. Any ‘nitwitting’ that went down was purely on my part. I didn’t see through her disguise and honestly I should have.”

“She was in disguise? Might solve a bit of puzzlement then because I swear I saw her a couple times here in San Fran, but that gal was a halo-head with earth vision.”

“A halo-head with earth vision?”

“You know: a platinum blonde with brown eyes.”

“You sure, Ginny?” pursued Solo warily.

“Well, I wouldn’t grasp the Bible on it,” Ginny conceded. “Wasn’t like a face-to-face confront or anything. Only saw her in a human press. She was with some ‘zarro-looking old cronk. Something about that one gave me nerve quakes, but I figured – if Red-bottled-Blonde was a nurse like she made noise back when you hit the floor – the cronk could well be a private twisted-head patient. So I sure wasn’t going to instigate friendly chit-whatever-happened-to-chat with R-b-B under those circumstances.”

Ginny watched in befuddlement as Napoleon grasped the small floral centerpiece from the middle of the table and drew it over to him. Then he tugged a pen from his inside jacket pocket. She espied some kind of strap peeking out from under his shirt collar as he took that action.

Napoleon pulled off the pointed end of the seeming ballpoint, flipped it to what was a narrow gridded tube and replaced that into the barrel. Finally he extended downward a small antenna from what would normally be the clicker of instrument and gave that assemblage a short clockwise twist. Hunched in his seat so he was hidden from view behind the re-positioned floral arrangement, he addressed the reconfigured pen.

“Open Channel D.”

“Channel D open,” came a female voice from the pen.

“Napoleon Solo in San Francisco. Please connect me directly to Mr. Waverly in New York.”

“Greetings, Napoleon!” a different female voice enthusiastically hailed him through the pen. “Enjoying the sunny weather in California?”

“The weather here has turned unexpectedly stormy, Wanda.”

“How so, Mr. Solo?” a slightly British-accented male voice now spoke through the silver tube. “I understood your mission was a complete success.”

“It was, sir,” Napoleon relayed. “But I’ve just gotten a possible lead on the whereabouts of Dr. Agnes Dabree.”

“Indeed, Mr. Solo?”

“Yes sir, and I’d like your permission to check it out.”

“By all means, Mr. Solo. I imagine yours and Mr. Simonelli’s return to New York headquarters can be delayed for a time reasonable to investigate this lead; say four or five days.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Keep me apprised of your progress, Mr. Solo. Waverly out.”

Solo then reassembled the pen back into... well, a pen, and moved the flowers back to the center of the table as Ginny gawked.

“You’re a spy! A real this-is-vodka-not-water spy!”

Napoleon was saved the necessity of an immediate response as the server arrived with their food and drinks. Ginny fidgeted while the fare was laid out on the table before them. She wanted the damn waiter gone so she could continue this conversation with Napoleon. At last the server, sniffing once at Ginny’s apparent lack of good manners with all that bodily squirming, finished his task and left the vicinity of the table.

“You *are* a spy, aren’t you?” Ginny demanded to be told.

“I told you, Ginny; it’s better for you to know as little as possible. Now eat up because I want you then to take me to where you saw Nurse ...uh...” Napoleon didn’t think it wise to mention Nurse Flostone by name.

“Nurse Ratched and twisted-head cronk?”

Napoleon smirked. “Yes.”

“At your service, Mr. Bond,” Ginny teasingly acquiesced.

“Don’t, Ginny,” pleaded Solo with a slight shake of his head. “I’d rather you just kept me in the guise of Sir Lancelot.”

Ginny tilted her head at him. “That won’t be hard,” she agreed to the precaution. “After all, you are a knight-errant like Lancelot, you are the handsome hunk he was said to be, you have the charm with ladies he surely had to captivate Guinevere, and Lancelot was distinctive and French while you do have that distinctive French first name.”

At that sprightly reasoning Napoleon could not help but laugh.

Napoleon took the precaution of contacting Tony via communicator and asking him to meet up with him and Ginny at a street location near Buena Vista Park that she provided.

“You saw her coming out of the park?” asked Tony, seeking to confirm the information Ginny had already provided the two agents.

Ginny nodded. “The duo of flashes I beaded an eye on her, it was an out-of-the-throng materialization from stilted nature here. Initial instant it was just sort of a ‘can’t I badge her’ head-swing, but for the ultimate stretch I craned my neck for a trustier peep.”

Tony turned to Napoleon with a grin. “Hope you understood all of that because I’m not positive I did.”

“I’m getting the hang of her jibber-jabber,” Napoleon assured his temporary partner with a small chuckle. “And both times the earth-eyed halo-head was accompanied by the same older woman?” he addressed the question to Ginny.

“Yes, same twisted-head cronk who gave me nerve quakes,” supplied Ginny. “And do register, my fine cavalier, that I make the score as neither a jibber nor a jabber. Straight from that under-the-wool holster of yours, I am just not into gliding on the waves or perforating pulp.”

“Yes, really Napoleon, you should know better that to assume folks like to sail as much as you do or that they will stick a fork as eagerly into a steak as that Russian partner of yours,” teased Tony.

“I stand corrected,” Napoleon mock apologized to Ginny after giving the grinning Simonelli a good-natured if somewhat disapproving squint.

“I don’t see how this lead gives us much to go on,” Tony returned to the seriousness of the business at hand.

“I think it might be a good idea to stake out the park for a day or two,” suggested Napoleon. “See if the pair shows up here again. That could ultimately lead us to wherever the ‘twisted-head cronk’ has currently set up shop.”

“Setting up a surveillance of the park couldn’t hurt,” agreed Tony.

“Did you see the pair at any particular time of day, Carrot-top?” Napoleon sought out a bit more detail.

“Around sundown, both times,” Ginny provided that detail.

“I’ll take first sentinel duty, Napoleon,” volunteered Tony. “Just kind of wander the park and see what I can see come sunset.”

Napoleon nodded his acquiescence to that plan. “Meanwhile,” he forwarded as he proprietarily took hold of Ginny’s elbow once more, “I’ll see about getting our eagle-eyed scout back to her home troop.”

Ginny determinedly moved her elbow out of Napoleon’s grasp. “Lend an ear, Sir Lancelot: While I lustily relish all the chivalrous gallantry, exiting this particular plot of earth right now is not an existing vision in my crystal ball.”

“Look Carrot-top, I know this all seems exciting but—”

“Excitement isn’t at the top of my personal agenda right now, hunny-bunny. Well, at least not that kind of excitement,” she clarified with a flirtatious wink at Napoleon. “I have a friend who is less than in ace condition. Making it solo just isn’t promising for him right now, and it’s just not in my soul to toss him aside like surplus gear.”

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Tony curiously.

“Beyond my ken,” admitted Ginny. “He was all fit and studly a couple of dozen sunspins ago. Came across him in the park then and tried to chitchat per our usual, and he just stood static as a wooden Indian and was just as non-conversational. When I guided, he went with the flow, so I took him to my nesting spot. But he’s stayed in wooden Indian masquerade ever since. He’ll eat when I shovel it into his mouth and perch wherever I steer, yet he just stares and stares and stares.” Ginger shivered. “Really bad trip I guess.”

Napoleon's gaze met that of Tony.

"Could be the results of that Thrush hallucinogen we got off the streets," suggested Tony.

"Could be, but the effects of that drug made the victims chaotic, put them in an uncontrolled feral state. It did not make any of them inertly passive and silent," Napoleon spoke his doubts aloud. "I have a gut feeling, and I learned a long time ago to always trust my gut."

Tony nodded. "You going to investigate?"

"Yes. You keep to the plan, Tony, and sit watchdog at the park here. I'll go with Ginny to check out her friend with the wooden Indian complex."

"Will do, Napoleon. I'll give you a bang on the pipe if anything remotely bird-like flaps by."

Ginny's current "nesting spot" was a small room in an abandoned building that was markedly dilapidated yet surprisingly clean. Solo surmised the squatters residing there had given the place a good scrub-down upon first moving in, but – with its peeling paint, cracked windows and warped doors – it still presented a rather forlorn and derelict appearance. However, Napoleon also surmised that the "free rent" was what had recommended the place to the hippie kids inhabiting it with such communal equanimity. There was no electricity, the running water was provided by an outside garden hose snaked into the tiny window of the single shared bathroom, and apparently the group cooked on an old and somewhat rusted barbecue grill located in the "backyard", a weed-overgrown vacant lot.

There was nothing in Ginny's personal space within this collective environment that could honestly be labeled as furnishings. A sleeping bag was rolled up for the day in one corner of the bare room and an open suitcase revealed a small cache of folded clothing. On the windowsill a chipped plate held the stub of a fat candle and a book of matches, the apparent source of lighting during the nighttime hours. And against the wall opposite the window lay several old sofa seat cushions, a couple showing tears in the fabric that allowed the inner stuffing to peek out. Upon one of these tattered pillows sat Ginny's friend, his legs splayed out fully in front of him, his vacant gaze staring straight ahead, focusing at nothing in particular.

"Hey Romney," Ginny addressed the man as she squatted down on her haunches to be more on level with him, "I bought someone back who wanted to meet you."

Following Ginny's lead, Napoleon too squatted on his haunches near the man seated on the scruffy cushions. "Nice to meet you, Romney. My name is Napoleon."

Without altering his forward stare, Romney reached out his hands and clasped them around Napoleon's neck, squeezing hard.

"Romney, no!" shouted out Ginny as she attempted to loosen the man's grip on Napoleon.

Napoleon moved his own hands over Romney's and with surprising quickness pulled the other man's fingers from around his throat.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Romney," verbally stressed Napoleon as he laid the man's hands decisively in his lap.

Romney started to lace and unlace the fingers of his hands where they rested on his thighs, his gaze never wavering from its straight-ahead stare.

“And you said he’s been like this for a little more than three weeks?” questioned Napoleon of Ginny.

Ginny nodded. “Couple of the guys here help me with him. You know with the necessaries,” she added with a slight blush. “But my crystal ball is now consistently blinking the revelation that I have to discern a more fixed elucidation regarding all this.”

Solo stood and again Ginny watched as he took out his pen and reconfigured it as he had done in the restaurant. “Open Channel D.”

“Channel D open. How goes it, Napoleon?” spoke a female (naturally) acquaintance from the small San Francisco HQ who immediately recognized Solo’s voice.

“Things are adding up, Annie, but I require some assistance with a side-bracket in the equation.”

“What do you need?” asked the gal readily.

“A medical team to pick up a guy here who I suspect has had his brain operated on none too successfully by Dr. Agnes Dabree.”

“Ouch!” responded the San Fran operative.

“To put it mildly.”

“Give me the address, Napoleon,” Annie spoke now with all efficiency. “I’ll take it from there.”

Napoleon provided the needed information, telling Annie to ask the hippies in residence for Ginny Naline when they arrived at the abandoned building.

“I’ll squeak to the mice it’s safe not to scatter when the white coats breach the hidey-hole,” declared Ginny as she left the room briefly to speak with the others in her commune.

Napoleon didn’t even get a chance to disassemble his communicator when it commenced its distinctive two-tone wail.

“Solo here,” he responded.

“Napoleon, I spotted Dabree’s blond medical assistant,” Tony said straight-to-the-point.

“Nurse Flostone?” Napoleon asked for definite clarification.

“Yes, from the pictures I’ve seen on file of her, it’s the Thrush bombshell herself. Tell me, Napoleon: how do you always manage personal contact with these enemy femme fatales as part of your assignments?”

Napoleon smiled ruefully. “I would say just luck but honestly, Tony, personal contact with the majority of them is a lot less desirable than it initially appears.”

“Do tell, Mr. Casanova. Hold on a second, Napoleon.”

Ginny came back into the room as Napoleon was obligingly waiting for Tony's next communiqué. Solo tapped a finger to his lips, indicating for Ginny to keep quiet.

"Napoleon, I think I may have been spotted," Tony stated in a sotto voce tone. "I've been trailing her through a lot of side streets and back alleys not unexpectedly, but she's started to repeat the circuit now."

"Not good. Keep your head down, Tony, and the homing signal on your communicator on. I'm on my way to your location." With that Solo slapped the antenna of his own communicator back into its closed position, but left the rest of the device in transmitting mode as he thrust it into his inside jacket pocket.

"You are going after your friend?" asked Ginny

Solo nodded. "He could be in real trouble and in need of backup."

"How should I engage in the meanwhile?"

"Wait for the med pickup for Romney," pronounced Napoleon without hesitation. "I'll meet up with you later, Carrot-top."

"Where?" she demanded to be told.

"Here. I'll come back here to get you and put you on that bus."

"All right," agreed Ginny, though she had plans of her own when she met back up with Napoleon and those did not involve being shipped off alone on any bus. However, she wisely kept those plans to herself for the moment.

"Good girl," placated Solo with a winning smile. He leaned down and placed a quick peck on her forehead, but Ginny reached up and took his face in her hands and guided his mouth down to hers. She then locked her lips with his in a very passionate kiss.

"Until later then, Napoleon," she assured him with a frank tone of promise.

"Yes, well, there *is* always later, isn't there?" agreed Napoleon with a hint of amusement.

Arriving at Buena Vista Park, Solo took his open communicator from his inside jacket pocket and focused on the frequency and sound level of the beeps emanating from it. The signal eventually led him to a dead-end alley. He saw no one in the immediate vicinity and that put him on his guard. Ducking low, he moved forward cautiously toward the closed-end of the street, his nerves shrieking at him the whole time about how dangerous and possibly foolhardy this course of action could prove to be. But Tony had to be under cover here somewhere as the beeping from his communicator, homing in on the beacon from Tony's similar instrument, became increasingly insistent.

The distinctive cough of a silencer-equipped gun sent Napoleon diving behind a garbage dumpster where to his dismay he saw Tony's communicator pen lying open on the ground.

"We have who we believe you are looking for, Mr. Solo," Flo's voice emanated from the open end of the alley.

Napoleon peered around the dumpster to see an obviously hurt and barely conscious Simonelli pushed out through a door at the side of the alley. Behind that half-closed protective barrier a distinctive Thrush rifle pointed at the U.N.C.L.E. agent as he swayed unsteadily on his knees. Simonelli's hands were bound behind him and the lower half of his white shirt was bright red with blood.

"Unfortunately he was injured in our little confrontation, but he is alive for the moment. And he can stay that way if you surrender yourself, Mr. Solo."

Solo aimed carefully so to avoid Tony and pinged a shot off the door, which was apparently metal rather than wood. "And if I don't?" he quipped back after making his point with that bullet.

From a building window several stories above the back of the alley, two tear-gas canisters were tossed down near where Solo was crouched behind the dumpster, releasing their contents upon impact. Blinking through tear-glazed eyes, Solo was taken completely by surprise as three men wearing protective masks emerged from within the dumpster and bodily dropped down on him. Napoleon's Special was knocked from his hand as he was roughly pinned to the ground by the Thrush. He fought their hold, but they were three against one and he really had no chance.

"Then we just take you by force," Flo unnecessarily elucidated as she emerged from behind the door.

Once the fumes of the gas cleared, Dabree's alluring henchwoman sauntered toward and then around the dumpster and stared down at the still struggling Solo where he was being bodily held by the three men. Bending seductively over his forcibly prone form, she baited, "I do hope we have time for a bit of fun, Napoleon, before I must bid you forever and ever adieu." She then pushed a switch on a brooch she wore at the center of her low-cut bodice and a splash of some identified spray hit Napoleon in the face, leaving him disoriented as he desperately endeavored to cling to at least a vestige of consciousness.

"Bring them," Flo ordered and one of the goons went to the door, opened it and retrieved a large wheeled cart from inside.

The stuporous Simonelli was grabbed by a couple of muscle and tossed into the cart. Then it was wheeled over behind the dumpster and the dazed and barely conscious Napoleon, once his hands had been securely bound behind his back, was lifted and unceremoniously deposited inside as well.

Closing the lid, the Thrush pushed the cart, with its bright green lettering declaring it the property of "Tolianart Plant Nursery", before him as he followed behind Nurse Flostone.

The room in which the two U.N.C.L.E. agents found themselves, once they returned to full awareness, was uniquely barren. The walls, floor and ceiling were all made of concrete. There were no windows, though a series of recessed strip lights running around the perimeter of the ceiling provided surprisingly intense light. The hum of an air system of some kind was audibly discernible, while visually discernible were the metal ducts that apparently were part and parcel of that system. A small octagonal sink mounted under and outwardly piped to a wall-hung water tank was tucked in one corner of the room. In the opposite corner near ceiling height just the screen of an imbedded TV monitor was visible.

There were two cots in the room on which the two men currently lay, but Solo surmised those had been brought in especially for their imprisonment. Heavy iron frames supported the thin mattresses on those small beds, but there were no bedclothes of any kind. And as well there were no toilet facilities as would generally be found in cells built for the long-term containment of prisoners. There was a large metal pail near the cot closest to the wall – that on which Tony was stretched out – likely intended for slops, that probable use distinctly unappealing to Solo.

“Gut hit?” Napoleon turned toward his cell-mate and asked for confirmation.

Tony nodded shortly, obviously in pain. “Glancing rather than dead-on at least.”

“Let me take a look,” forwarded Solo as he rose up a bit unsteadily off his own cot and made his way over to the other where Tony had partially raised his body to a somewhat hunched position.

Neither man remembered much about how they had gotten down here or where here might be. Solo had a vague recollection of stumbling down a set of steps into what he assumed was some kind of basement, but his senses had been so hazy from whatever Flo had sprayed into his face, he couldn’t even be sure of that much. He was surprised that neither his nor Tony’s hands were any longer tied behind their backs, but then both men had been stripped to their underwear and perhaps it had been just too difficult for the Thrush goons to manage that while their prisoners’ hands were bound behind them. There were manacles both at the head and foot of each of the bed frames, but their captors hadn’t employed them... at least as of yet.

Napoleon had to admit he was still more than a little woozy and his stomach was less than placid. Still he managed to lift Tony’s bloodstained tee-shirt and examine the gunshot wound on the other man’s abdomen.

“Still pretty bad, Tony,” admitted Napoleon. “And you’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“Likely to lose more too.”

“Lie down and let me see what I can do.”

Pulling his own tee-shirt off over his head, Solo walked a bit unsteadily to the sink. He tore a swath from his undershirt and wet that under the stream from the spigot after turning on the tap. Then he returned to kneel at the side of the cot where Tony had once more laid down flat and proceeded to swipe with the moistened piece of cotton fabric at the bloodied flap of flesh on the other man’s torso.

Tony winced.

“Sorry,” apologized Solo as he purposefully attempted then to lighten his touch. His hands weren’t fully cooperating with him yet, another side effect of the unknown spray.

“It’s just the wet cloth is cold,” lied the other agent through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, sorry about that too.”

Once he got the wound as clean as he thought possible under current conditions, Solo wrapped the larger portion of his torn-apart undershirt tightly around Simonelli’s lower stomach, shifting the other man gently from one side to the other to do so. Napoleon hoped the bandage would

successfully staunch the slow but steadily continuing stream of blood, but frankly doubted it would be truly sufficient for the purpose. Tony was in definite need of real medical attention: the sooner, the better.

“Well, well, well, Mr. Solo. Ministering with tender care to your new partner?” came the voice of Dr. Agnes Dabree.

Both men set their eyes on the monitor that had activated at some point and now showed the distinctly unwelcome visage of the “good” doctor.

“I am glad to see,” she continued, “that your bad experience with your previous partner has not essentially changed your compassionate nature.”

“Shut your mouth, Dabree,” pronounced Solo tersely.

“A bit testy, aren’t we? I suppose that is to be expected under the circumstances. However, I have good humor enough for both of us at the moment. You see, though Mr. Kuryakin did make a point that – even letting you escape as he bargained – I would certainly be free to recapture you in the future, I don’t think he could ever have imagined how prophetic that sly statement would prove to be.”

“I told you to shut up!” Napoleon declared emphatically through clenched teeth as he rose up off his knees and stood ‘confronting’ the image in the monitor. His fingers were clenched tight into the palms of his hands as his arms hung stiffly at his sides, and he was all but visibly vibrating with anger.

“Steady on, Napoleon,” counseled Tony, who was alarmed by the emotional reaction this Thrush was producing in the usually laid-back Solo.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Solo? Don’t like me bringing up the subject of Mr. Kuryakin? I will agree he is an irritating fellow. Still, I was pleased he had no qualms about bartering with me: your life for the price of the partnership between you two. I must admit I was intrigued as it wasn’t a deal that is generally brokered, is it?”

“You’re a lying cretin, Dabree!”

“Language, Mr. Solo,” tutted Dabree. “I know you have better manners than that.

“I suppose you should be flattered that your continued life did mean something to Mr. Kuryakin, though apparently your continued partnership and friendship did not.”

“Napoleon, she’s baiting you. Don’t let her get the rise she wants,” Tony inserted a cooler head into the extraordinary war of words going on between the other agent and the image on the monitor.

“I know Illya haggled with you to save my life,” admitted Napoleon almost with disdain. “You told him you would use your brain machine on me if he didn’t comply with your sadistic desire to voyeuristically watch him torture me.”

“It was Mr. Kuryakin who seemed sadistic there, Mr. Solo. After all, he did enjoy himself, didn’t he?”

The sharp emotional thrust Napoleon had taken to the heart when Illya had first confessed after The Gurnius Affair that he had uncomfortably found he somehow enjoyed torturing his partner was visibly exposed in the agonized look in the hazel eyes. Wound up too tightly to remain still, Napoleon began to pace back-and-forth in the limited area between the two cots.

“He didn’t enjoy you using him like that!”

“That isn’t what I meant, Mr. Solo, and well you know it.”

“No, I don’t know it!” hedged the frustrated Napoleon. “But I do know only too well that you are a vicious, crazed lunatic. A twisted-head cronk, as a friend of mine aptly described you.”

“But it’s your partner – or rather ex-partner – who really riles you, isn’t it, Mr. Solo? You attack me with your words, all the time most fervently desiring to assault Mr. Kuryakin in a much more... visceral way.”

“Bullshit!” Napoleon let loose with the uncharacteristic vulgarity, making Tony all too aware of how out of control the other man truly was.

“He haggled – as you phrase it – for your escape,” Dabree pressed her advantage, “asking only he be allowed to aid in that. Then he would, he promised – a promise I was always wise enough to know was a ruse – let me ‘recapture’ him. I anticipated his duplicity, seeing it clearly from the beginning as the ploy it was to achieve his own escape. I was ready for his attempt to cheat me of my fair share of the deal. However, there was an unexpected wrench thrown into the mechanics of my plan. For you still did come back for him in the end, didn’t you? Despite everything. Such an open heart, Mr. Solo: It’s no wonder he could pierce it thoroughly with the sharp Siberian ice that runs so steadily through his Soviet veins.”

“Damn you, Dabree! Damn you to hell! You are too foul to even be allowed to breathe the same air as the rest of humanity!”

Shaking with rage, hurt, and confusion, Napoleon needed to channel all that emotion someplace. Grabbing the thankfully yet empty metal slop pail, he flung it like a missile toward the monitor. The glass screen shattered on impact, the image mercifully removed.

A squad of Thrush guards, six in all, rushed into the room. Four of them physically subdued the violently scuffling Solo, while two others kept rifles aimed at Simonelli’s head and heart to prevent him from trying to aid his fellow agent. Both men were forced roughly down flat on the cots and their wrists and ankles manacled to the frames of the beds.

Solo was cursing up a blue streak. Tony had never seen the man react so... wildly, without an ounce of self-control. Whatever had happened with him and Kuryakin and Dabree, it was something that had deeply affected Napoleon. And Tony had the distinct feeling that Dabree had more than known such was the case, and was currently in her hidey-hole literally crowing about having “deconstructed” not only the Solo/Kuryakin partnership but the North American U.N.C.L.E. CEA’s ultimate weapon of composure under duress as well.

Ginny Naline glumly re-entered her barren room in the dilapidated building that housed the communal group with which she currently shared living arrangements. Despite all the others in that old house, she felt uniquely alone. The U.N.C.L.E. med team had arrived and taken Romney in hand a good many hours ago. She had then continued to solitarily wait for the return

of her handsome “Sir Lancelot”. But it was long after midnight now and he hadn’t come back. That worried Ginny for she had no doubt whatsoever he would have kept his word to her had he been so able.

Last time she had unwittingly left Napoleon to his enemies. She didn’t intend to repeat that mistake this time. As the saying went: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” Yet she had no idea where Solo might actually be, not even a physical hint as before with regard to who might have spirited him away.

She had stayed hours upon hours in her room... waiting. And then she had gone out late to wander Buena Vista Park, seeking any possible clue and finding none. In all honesty, she wasn’t even sure what she was looking for.

Now back in her “nesting spot”, she plopped down upon the old battered sofa cushions on the floor and pondered what to do next. Should she contact the police? But what could she say to them? “Hey, there is this really nice spy who I believe is missing and in trouble.” That would go over well, especially from one of the hippie community here in Haight-Ashbury that local law enforcement considered a nuisance. They would probably conclude she was “high” and shoo her off.

Yet she wasn’t willing to let this just blow past her as she had the last time. She would figure out something. She had to.

She crawled off the cushions toward her sleeping bag and halfheartedly unrolled it. She decided upon catching a few hours rest and then searching the park again at first light. Maybe she might be able to discern something in daylight she hadn’t been able to in the dark of night. She didn’t like that this plan provided only a tenuous hope, but that was better than no hope at all.

With no window to provide any hint whether it was day or night, Tony Simonelli could only surmise at how much time had passed since the guards had cuffed him and Napoleon Solo to their respective beds. Yet he knew without doubt that passage of time was significant. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, and he hurt. Oh God, how he hurt.

The guards had not returned, nor had Dabree herself or her assistant Nurse Flostone made any physical appearance in the cell. Napoleon had been basically silent since the guards’ departure except to ask every hour of so how Tony was feeling. Tony kept his tone as light as he could when he replied to that inevitable question, but he knew he was in real trouble physically and in his mind’s eye he saw the shadow of death hovering all too near him.

He didn’t want to think about that, so he decided he would get Napoleon to talk. In truth it was all either of them could do at the moment anyway.

“You going to tell me what happened?” he initiated the conversation.

“You were here,” responded Solo acerbically.

“I don’t mean today... or maybe yesterday now... can’t be sure of that. I mean whatever happened before... with your partner.”

Napoleon was silent for a good two minutes before he noted, “You heard what she said.”

“Since when should I start believing a Thrush’s version of anything?”

“She wasn’t lying.”

“Maybe not. But she wasn’t exactly putting the facts in proper perspective either.”

“Is there a proper perspective from which to view the mental image of your partner enjoying torturing you?”

Tony shifted his weight a bit, trying to get into a more comfortable position.

“You hurting?” asked Napoleon anxiously.

“God, Napoleon, I was shot in the stomach. Of course I’m hurting. That’s to be expected. What I didn’t expect was you losing control the way you did with Dabree.”

“Sorry,” Napoleon offered no more than a one-word apology without any further explanation.

Tony bit his lip, partly in pain and partly in consternation. Damn! he was the one with the gut perforated by a hunk of lead and yet it was Solo who needed comforting. How in the hell did things always work out other than the norm for U.N.C.L.E. agents?

“So you believed Dabree when she intimated that Illya enjoyed torturing you?” Tony pressed Napoleon on this particular point.

“I didn’t have to believe her; I only have to believe what Illya himself told me.”

“And he admitted to enjoying torturing you?”

“Yes, at least the first time. I didn’t ask him particularly about this last time. It didn’t seem... prudent somehow after his previous admission.”

“It happened more than once?” questioned Tony in some disbelief.

“Yes,” Solo again offered only a one-word answer.

Tony ruminated on this for a bit and then began, “Look Napoleon, I don’t know the details—”

“No, you don’t,” agreed the other man rather tersely.

“Still,” pressed Simonelli, “you *that* certain he wasn’t just... you know, acting a necessary part?”

“Oh, he was acting a part all right,” spat out Solo rather acidly. “And apparently some aspects of that part appealed to him much more than he expected. A fact for which he was most heartily contrite, but which was reality nonetheless.”

Simonelli suppressed a groan and shuddered as a particularly sharp pain stabbed through his injured stomach.

“Can I ask,” Tony subsequently queried in a somewhat shaky voice, “was it a difficult part for him to play?”

Noting the shakiness of the other man's tone, Napoleon stated bluntly, "Let's forget about all that. How are you doing, Tony? Really?"

"I prefer to concentrate on things other than my own rather abysmal condition at the moment, Napoleon, so answer my question: Was it a difficult part for your partner to play?"

Napoleon's eyes focused on Tony's profile on the cot some ten or twelve feet to his right. The man was obviously in agony from that belly gash and it was Solo's fault they were both now manacled to the beds. Thus it was also Solo's fault that he could do nothing more to ease Simonelli's suffering than keep the man's mind occupied elsewhere. Under the circumstances that the subject matter of the conversation between them was emotionally painful for Napoleon was a minor inconvenience for him to bear in recompense for his previous explosion of temper that had brought the Thrush guards so harshly down on them.

"Yes, it was a very difficult part for him to play," he conceded to Tony. "He had to take on the identity of a Nazi torturer."

"Dear God! A Russian having to do that?"

"Ukrainian technically. I have even considered the possibility his bewildering relish for torturing me was just the result of Communist propaganda bred into him bubbling up unbidden from the depths of his subconscious," Napoleon spoke with obvious bitterness. Yet whether that bitterness stemmed in the main from the prospect that Illya might be secretly infected with such sentiments, or more from an inner distaste for any form of government that might employ such tactics, probably even Napoleon couldn't himself determine. "You know: a suggestion ingrained since childhood on how a good Soviet should treat enemy Americans."

"Considering what U.N.C.L.E. asked the guy to pretend to be, don't you think you should cut him some slack?"

Napoleon fidgeted. "I was perfectly willing to cut him some slack. I told him it was okay after that first time."

"You told him it was okay, but actually was it? Inside I mean?"

With a mighty sigh Solo confessed, "I'm not sure. I honestly thought so, but then it all came back to the fore with Dabree insisting he... repeat the performance, as it were. And beyond that he... Well, as Dabree said: perhaps he thought our partnership a small price to pay for escape."

"Or for your life."

"That sounds all noble and self-sacrificing, Tony, but it isn't that simple."

Simonelli's breath hitched audibly as he valiantly fought through another wave of pain. Napoleon eyed him with increased concern.

"Nothing is ever simple, Napoleon," Tony wheezed out. "*Not even death,*" he thought solemnly to himself. "Christ," he verbally assailed Solo, "you know *that* surely after all these years with U.N.C.L.E.?"

“What’s between Illya and me has always been simple,” stated Napoleon with more than a bit of defensiveness in his tone. “Trust: as simple as can be.”

“Let me ask you a hypothetical question,” Tony posed after several minutes of quiet where he collected his thoughts as well as his mental resilience over the unrelenting pain.

Solo laughed a short and rather uneasy laugh. “Why not? Hypothesis of a maybe is better than trepidation of a will-be.”

“If a situation arose where of necessity you had to place yourself blindly and utterly in the power of one person, no explanations as to why or how or discussions as to possible alternatives, who would that person be?”

“Illya Kuryakin,” Napoleon pronounced softly without as much as a moment of hesitation.

“Then I think maybe you are going through the phases of adjusting to the permanent loss of something that might yet be recovered whole and well, if rather battered by the vagaries of life. Especially our kind of life.”

“Explain that please,” asked a somewhat befuddled Solo.

“Look Napoleon,” expounded Tony as he purposely concentrated on his own uneven breathing rather than the insistent throbbing of his tightly bound yet still gore-dribbling abdomen, “when my partner was killed, after the initial shock wore off, I found myself surprisingly angry.

“Angry at Julio for somehow not dodging that bullet;” he recounted, for the first time since his transfer to New York mentioning his dead partner by name, “angry at myself for not being there to shield him from the shot; angry at U.N.C.L.E. for not getting backup to us sooner; angry at Thrush for being the bastards they predictably are. Hell, I was even angry at my confiscated communicator for not somehow magically equipping itself to send out a homing signal.

“Yet only when the anger had faded did I allow myself to fully mourn and accept the permanent loss of Julio.

“Now it just seems to me that maybe you have been going through those same phases of loss, starting with the shock about what happened that allowed you – in a completely non-registering way – to tell Illya it was all fine. Yet how could it be without you both consciously coming to terms with any of it? And now the anger has crept in to replace the shock.”

“But there is no loss to mourn, Tony.”

“Isn’t there?”

Napoleon stated quite emphatically, “Illya is *not* dead.”

“No, he isn’t, but it seems as though you are anticipating that the partnership will be.”

“I... I don’t want that.”

“Then stop the mourning and start the healing.”

Solo was silent for a long time before murmuring quietly, “Maybe I’m not ready.”

“And there is always later?” baited Tony, unknowingly using the very words Napoleon had playfully spoken to Ginny. “But there isn’t, Napoleon. That’s the hardest part of living beyond someone or something important to you: finding out that later isn’t always there.”

Solo didn’t have a ready response to that. He was no stranger to loss, yet somehow this seemed different. And perhaps Tony had a point. Perhaps what was happening was that he had begun to mourn the loss of his partnership – hell, of his friendship – with Illya. There was no one closer to him than the Russian. The man was like a brother, more than a brother. He didn’t know why or how they had become so close: they were such different personalities. But there was something very real and right and internally reinforcing between them. He couldn’t deny that, even now.

“You should try and get some rest, Tony,” was the only comment Solo made at the moment though.

“Try is likely to be the operative word,” acknowledged Simonelli with a small snort of discomfort. He knew the subject was now closed between him and Solo and he would get the man to open up no more than he had. And perhaps that was even a good thing because right at this moment both he and the other agent needed to focus on a way out of their current predicament. Napoleon would have to himself deal with any situation beyond that most urgent one in the proverbial (and ever uncertain) realm of ‘later’.

Dejectedly Ginny took a seat on a bench. She had been searching the park for hours today, hoping against hope that daylight would reveal something night-darkness couldn’t. But she was no closer to finding any clue that might help her in locating Napoleon. She was tired and scared, not only for him but for herself as well. What if his enemies had seen her with him? What if they figured out she was the one who told him about seeing Lady Macbeth and the old witch around Buena Vista Park? What if they were looking to abscond with her now too? Or simply bump her off? Honestly, who in this city would care about the disappearance or murder of just another of those homeless hippies?

Taking a shaky breath Ginny turned to look around once more. Her eyes for some reason gravitated toward an old derelict seated on a bench not far from the one on which she sat. At first she was unsure why her gaze centered on the bum, but then her peripheral vision caught again what it must have the moment before: the brilliant setting sun glinting off a slim silver tube in the old guy’s hand. He was turning it round and round, examining it from every angle, his face set in concentration.

“Excuse me,” Ginny interrupted the bum’s train of thought, causing him to start physically as he glanced up at the young woman who now stood before him. “Can I ask where you got that?”

“I didn’t steal it!” he protested emphatically as he clutched the object close to his chest.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” placated Ginny, herself a bit nervous since for all she knew this derelict could actually be one of ‘them’ in disguise. “It’s just rather pretty, so I wondered where maybe I might get one of my own.”

The bum grinned, showing a full set of much yellowed teeth. “Is pretty, ain’t it?” He flipped the pen – that Ginny noted had its cylindrical grid piece set into the point tip at the moment – slightly toward her. “It ain’t for sale nowhere I know of though.”

"It isn't?"

The bum shook his head decisively, "I found this 'un."

"Where?"

"It's mine!" the vagrant burst out in sudden agitation. "I found it by a dumpster in an alley, so somebody threwed it out. Finders' is keepers', and I intend on keepin' it," he furthered as he once more clutched the communicator protectively against his chest. "I ain't owned nothin' so pretty for ever so long, though it does make funny noises that woke me up afore-times this mornin'," he added with a little sigh.

"What kind of noises?" inquired Ginny.

"Like a kind of two-tone siren or sumthin'."

"Oh?"

The man nodded solemnly. "Done it a quite a few times now. Been trying to figger out how to shut that off. It's annoyin'."

"Maybe I can help," Ginny offered. "I'm good with gadgets," she lied smoothly.

The derelict gazed at her speculatively for a long moment. "You ain't gonna run off with it, is ya?"

Ginny solemnly shook her head. "Cross my heart and hope to die," she pledged as she made the prerequisite gesture of x'ing with her finger over the left side of her chest. "*Or rather hope not to die,*" her mind silently appended its own determination as she sat down beside the old guy on the bench.

The bum stared at her a minute or so longer and then decided with childish ease that he could trust her and handed her the pen.

Running on her memory of the two times she had seen Solo activate the instrument, Ginny carefully slid down the antenna from the bottom of the communicator and turned it slowly.

"Hey, don't break it!" cautioned the derelict.

"No, I won't," promised Ginny. She drew another shaky breath and closed her eyes for a second or two, reaching back in her mind for what Solo had said to get a response from the device after setting it up. "Open Channel D?" she spoke in a questioning manner into the grid-top.

"Channel D open," responded a female voice Ginny had no way of knowing from where.

The bum's eyes all but popped out of his head. "I'll be damned!"

"Who is this?" inquired the voice emanating from the pen.

"Listen, I don't know who you are either, lady, so I'll just tell you I'm a friend of Napoleon Solo's."

“What kind of friend?” prompted the unknown female suspiciously.

“The kind that doesn’t want him bumped off, or me either for that matter.”

“Oh?” was the only response that garnered.

“I’m in San Francisco and I think Sir Lancelot – I mean Napoleon – has been snatched again for nefarious purposes, if your get my drift.”

“By who?”

“How should I know?” Ginny replied in obvious frustration. “Don’t you spy types keep track of who in Hades you’re cavorting with? I think I need to speak with someone with more occupied headspace than your ‘for rent’ brain takes in.”

“I’m afraid—”

“Waverly,” Ginny blurted out as the name of the man Napoleon had asked for in his first ‘pen conversation’ came back to her. “I want to speak with Mr. Waverly in New York.”

“Mr. Waverly is a very busy man.”

“And I’m an itinerant nobody who is probably tossing the crumbs of her existence to a flock of migrating birds by even chirping to you about Napoleon being pulled out of the hand and into the bush! So let me talk to Mr. Waverly!”

“That’s telling the uppity bitch,” put in the bum with a toothy grin. “We itinerant nobodies deserve respect too!” he added as he pumped his fist high in the air.

“Let me see what I can do,” spoke the female haughtily, “miss,” she added the polite address with obvious reluctance.

“Do that,” Ginny countered just as haughtily, “miss.”

Ginny had no way of knowing her casual comment about “tossing the crumbs of her existence to a flock of migrating birds” is what actually led to the San Francisco operative deciding to put the communiqué through to New York HQ. She suspected that was code indicating information regarding a Thrush operation of which she was herself just not of a level to be privy. In New York, the communications folks forwarded the pertinent data to Alexander Waverly who considered it more than possible that Mr. Solo was making use of an innocent to get a message to U.N.C.L.E. Thus he took over the call.

“Waverly here,” spoke the British-accented male voice Ginny audibly recognized from Solo’s transmission at the restaurant a few days ago. “And you are, miss?”

“My name is Ginny – actually Virginia Naline,” she explained hastily. “I was the bell that tolled for Napoleon about an off-tone clacker sounding in the cluster of Lady Macbeth and the twisted-head cronk.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, Lady Macbeth: the redhead turned blonde – or vice versa – who dropped the dark prince like Sleeping Beauty in P-town and then absconded with all his comatose gorgeousness.”

“You mean Nurse Flostone?” asked Waverly after a long pause during which he toted two and two together to come up with what he hoped was four.

“She claimed nurse-hood, yes,” admitted Ginny.

“So you are Mr. Solo’s source for the sighting in San Francisco of her and her Thrush superior, Dr. Agnes Dabree?”

Ginny thought for a moment. “Yes, that was the name my Sir Brave and Besotting threw out over the airwaves while I honed my ears on your tête-à-tête once upon a time.”

“And you are contacting us now because?”

“His striking self has been stolen again I think.”

“Mr. Solo’s?”

“Yes. And I’m all hyped up that he’ll be impaled on walls of thorns or something equally as appalling. And maybe that wall will reach out to pierce my own trifling – yet still one-and-only – self. And how do you squeal to the cops about a mislaid spy? And what do you do to shelve the mislaying from becoming a perpetual vanishing or a hundred-year sleep?”

“Calm down, young woman, and tell me everything that happened slowly and distinctly. And please do try to make proper use of the English language in that telling.”

“Geeze, Mr. Grumpy,” muttered the bum seated beside Ginny.

Despite her own high level of anxiety, Ginny could not help but smirk as the bum’s overheard comment received a definitely grumpy question from Waverly of “And who is that with you?”

“The man who unearthed the pen,” she informed him.

“You mean a communicator?” Waverly pressed for complete accuracy.

“Whatever is this silver tube-a-ma-bob on which I’m currently talking to you.”

“All right, Miss Naline, I’ll have agents from our San Francisco office locate you by communicator signal while you tell me what you know. And have the man who found our device stay with you as our operatives will need to talk with him as well.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow in the derelict’s direction, silently inquiring if he would acquiesce to the request-cum-order.

“I’ll stay if Mr. Grumpy’s ‘operatives’ arrive with a bottle of the good stuff in hand,” announced the bum as he crossed his arms firmly over his chest.

“You heard the man,” Ginny acknowledged to Waverly.

“And what, pray tell, does this... umh... gentleman consider ‘the good stuff’?”

“Jim Beam,” the bum leaned over and shouted into the transmitter. “And don’t be tryin’ to pawn me off with no Old Crow. I want the real Kentucky black blend.”

“You heard the man again,” Ginny all but giggled into the microphone.

“Indeed,” conceded Waverly. “I will personally inform the agents in question to arrive with a bottle of Jim Beam Black Label whiskey in hand.”

“Bourbon. It’s Kentucky *bourbon*, Mr. English-grumpy-man,” corrected the derelict.

“A bottle of Jim Beam Black Label Kentucky *bourbon*,” returned Waverly with pointed emphasis to match that of the vagrant.

“Good show, ol’ bean!” the bum leaned into the communicator once more. “Or however you Brits say YESSSSSSSSSS.”

“With that settled, could we get back to you relating your information, Miss Naline?” Waverly pressed.

Obligingly a secretly relieved Ginny began her tale. This was all out of her hands now. These people would find Napoleon. They would save the dark prince from the machinations of the wild-eyed witch and her blond familiar. She simply wouldn’t permit herself at this moment of gradual easing from mental disquiet to think otherwise.

UNCLE Headquarters, New York

It was not Lisa Roger’s habit to spend her lunch hour in the commissary with other members of the secretarial and administrative staff. As Waverly’s personal secretary, she was on call as long as Mr. Waverly was in the building, which was most of the time. She also did not have the temperament to engage in office gossip, for in many instances, she had the real information on the Section Two agents that the rest of the women were only speculating about.

However, now she had worrisome information needing dissemination to the right person from exactly the correct channels. New York’s top field team, now estranged, needed to be stimulated into reconciling; and as if by design, a situation had arisen that might do just that. Napoleon Solo was missing and Illya Kuryakin needed to know it. It needed the proper courier, one whom the suspicious Russian would not suspect anything but the truth.

Heather McNabb sat at a corner table, a book in front of her and a half-eaten sandwich pushed off to the side. Perfect: Heather was one of Napoleon’s steadier female companions and Illya respected her analytical abilities. She was also not a hysteric. Lisa walked over to the table and spoke softly. “Hello, Miss McNabb. Mind if I sit down for a moment?”

Heather looked up rather abruptly, startled. “Oh, Miss Rogers. Sure,” she said cautiously. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

The two women were not friends, but they had a mutual respect for the other’s job within UNCLE as well as a lack of desire to be in the other’s position. Lisa loved being close to the seat of power, with all its perks and responsibilities. Heather liked the ability to have a social life. The green-eyed brunette smiled and sat adjacent to the auburn-tressed beauty. “Mr. Waverly asked me to pass along some information he’d like to see it reach the proper channels.”

“Something official?” Heather asked curiously, thought she suspected that was not the case. If it was, Lisa or Mr. Waverly himself would be doing it.

“You’ll understand when you see the message.” Lisa slipped a folded piece of paper across the table, which Heather stuck into the pages of her book like a bookmark. “As soon as possible. And keep it to yourself.”

“Absolutely, Miss Rogers. I’ll get to it right away.” Heather closed her book, picked up her glass of iced tea and sauntered from the room as if nothing was amiss.

Five minutes later, Lisa Rogers did the same.

Heather went to her console and set the communications channel to D. She pulled the slip of paper from her book and scanned its contents. For a moment, she was stunned, both at the message and the manner in which it had come to her. While the rumors had been circulating for the last three months about the turmoil in the Solo/Kuryakin partnership, with an upswing in speculation for the last six weeks, Heather had remained confident, knowing both men involved.

Solo is missing: just three words, but she wondered how true the statement actually was. She knew Kuryakin would drop everything and be on the next plane. But if he returned to find out that he’d been duped, things would be much worse. But it also wasn’t Mr. Waverly’s style to play games like this to achieve his purposes. Heather decided the message had to be genuine, and to call in the partner, the situation had to be serious as well.

Berlin was five hours⁸ later than New York. She would probably be catching Illya at dinnertime, but she felt confident that she wouldn’t be interrupting him. Heather opened Channel D and placed the call.

Almost immediately, the softly accented voice answered as he always did: “Kuryakin here.”

“Hello, Mr. Kuryakin,” Heather began in preface. How does one tell someone else their partner is missing? “How are things in Berlin?”

There was a moment of silence; then Illya said in puzzlement, “Heather?”

“Of course it’s me,” Heather replied. “Have you been away so long you’ve forgotten the sound of my voice?”

There was another agonizing silence. “What’s wrong?” Kuryakin said urgently.

There was no other way to say it. “Napoleon is missing.” Again, the conversation hung in dead air. Was he struggling for control? “Mr. Kuryakin?”

“Where?” One word, sharp and succinct.

“San Francisco.”

⁸ Germany did not convert to Daylight Savings Time in 1967: www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/

This time, there was no hesitation. “I’ll be on the next overseas flight. Please contact the San Francisco office for transportation from the airport and I want a full briefing on my arrival. Put Waverly’s name on it if you have to.”

“Right away, Mr. Kuryakin.” A breath. “Illya—?”

The answer was softly reassuring, but firm. “I’ll find him, Heather. Kuryakin, out.”

Dr. Dabree’s Bunker, somewhere in San Francisco

Time seemed at a standstill for Napoleon Solo. He couldn’t even accurately count the number of hours... or more likely days... he and Tony Simonelli had been left shackled and untended here in this barren concrete bunker. Thirst was becoming a real issue, and he knew this particular trial had to be even worse for Tony as the other man had lost so much blood.

Napoleon’s stomach grumbled at its emptiness, and he was patently uncomfortable not only from the nearly stationary position the manacles enforced upon his body but from the feel and smell of his own waste. He had tried to loosen the shackles by pulling and jerking on them as much as he could, but he hadn’t had any luck. His wrists and ankles were now scraped and sore from those myriad attempts, and he had to admit he was finding it difficult to summon the physical energy to keep trying this tack for possible escape.

Tony meanwhile lapsed in-and-out of consciousness. When the man was awake, Napoleon tried to keep him focused by talking about everything and anything. Whatever subject popped into his head, no matter how ludicrous, was fair game. The only thing that wasn’t such fair game, that wasn’t a subject broached again, was any further discussion regarding Illya Kuryakin.

Solo was losing his voice now though, and he didn’t know how much longer he would be able to utilize this strategy of continual chatter to keep Simonelli lucid and mentally connected to what was happening around him. And when he absolutely couldn’t anymore, would Tony just slip away from the world through a lonely tunnel of nightmares and confusion?

There had to be a way out. The optimist in Napoleon simply refused to believe the end of this desperate situation was etched in stone. He would find some way out of this, for both himself and Tony.

The door to the room opened and Napoleon for a moment thought he might be hallucinating the occurrence. But then the voice of Agnes Dabree cut through his brief befuddlement.

“It smells like an open latrine in here!”

The doctor was flanked by her ever-loyal assistant Nurse Flostone and four very burly Thrush musclemen.

“Sorry, my friend and I weren’t expecting company,” spoke Solo with as much of his usual jaunty manner as possible, “and you know how bachelors can be.”

Waving her hand in front of her nose, Dabree mused, “Did you know this room was once used as an isolation unit for plants with exotic diseases? To keep the infection from spreading to the greenhouse above. That is why there is a separate air circulation unit, a fact for which I am

eternally grateful as it has kept the rest of my compound free from the stench of ripening U.N.C.L.E. agents.”

Napoleon did register the fact he and Simonelli was seemingly imprisoned in or under a greenhouse, but he didn't see how that knowledge did him any particular good under current circumstances.

“The gratitude runs both ways,” Napoleon bantered. “Tony and I consider ourselves extremely fortunate the separate circulation system has kept the two of us from having to share air fouled by fetid Thrush breath.”

“Still as arrogant as ever, aren't you, Mr. Solo?” Dabree squinted at her adversary in open displeasure. “There is as well, you know, a separate water tank for this room. The water is minimally irradiated to prevent cross-contamination between various diseased plant species, but is quite safe enough to drink. Oh I forget,” she then gleefully baited him, “neither you nor your partner have access to that liquid resource at the moment.”

Napoleon unconsciously wet his dry lips with his tongue, that tongue having but little moisture to share. Refreshing, revitalizing, life-giving water: so close and yet so out of reach. This was torture of the cruelest sort. “*Of the Thrush sort,*” Solo mentally reminded himself.

“I hear tell irradiation is bad for the insides anyway,” Solo retreated behind the cover of blasé verbal repartee.

“While dehydration can at least guarantee your body stays svelte if not strong,” retorted Dabree, “or even alive.”

“But I have not come here to indulge in such trifling topics of conversation, Mr. Solo, stimulating as they might be,” the doctor then changed the tenor of her voice.

“No?”

“No. You see, it has come to my assiduous attention that my current residence in this fair city has come to your organization's annoying attention.”

“Napoleon, hear that?” rasped out Tony, roused to a more coherent state by Dabree's words. “They'll come for us now.”

“Are you as much an optimist as Mr. Solo?” Dabree questioned Simonelli. “My sources confirm your people haven't a clue about my setup here. Still, I think it far more prudent to vacate these premises as who knows what inkling any careless member of my staff might unwittingly provide the enemy.”

“And what about us?” demanded Napoleon.

Dabree shrugged. “I could just shoot you both and put you out of your misery, I suppose.”

“But that isn't the Thrush way,” Napoleon anticipated her decision.

“No, it isn't. Not for a man like you, Mr. Solo, who has confounded Thrush's plans at every turn for far too many years. And you have cost me much personally as well: my trusted bodyguard

David, my useful colleague Dr. Elmont, and the first fully functional prototype of my brain machine. Not to mention the pain of my long recovery from the fall in that elevator shaft of which you were the cause. Why then should I grant you the mercy of an easy death? I want my pound of flesh, Mr. Solo, and this time I will have it as there is no ever-loyal Mr. Kuryakin to interfere.”

“How fortunate for you,” countered Napoleon.

“I did, in this case, make my own good fortune, Mr. Solo,” insisted Dabree, “when I accepted Mr. Kuryakin’s bargain that led to the breakdown of your partnership with him. However, as much as I would like to extend that good fortune to doing all myself with regard to killing you, I freely admit I don’t have the time to dally at present. Thus your blasted organization has insured my revenge will be less personally gratifying, but I swear it will be no less intensely satisfying for that. You see, I’ve decided on the easiest and yet the most callous of fates for you and your new partner. I am simply going to leave you both to your own devices here.”

“You stink, lady!” Tony responded as vehemently as he could at present.

“On the contrary... Mr. Simonelli is it? On the contrary,” Dabree repeated confidently, “it is you who currently stink. The two of you reek to high heaven and I can no longer stomach the odor. So I will leave the details of all final dealings with you in the capable hands of my most talented Flo,” Dabree indicated with a nod of her head the statuesque blond beauty next to her. “*Per il Diavolo con te*⁹, Mr. Solo, for I trust we will never meet again on this earth.”

With that Dabree strolled out of the room, once more waving her hand in front of her nose.

“Hey, she knows you speak Italian,” commented Tony somewhat incongruously as his mind was currently flicking in-and-out of comprehending the direness of their situation.

“Yeah, she has come to know way too much about me,” conceded Solo with unconcealed discomfit.

Flo came and knelt beside Napoleon’s cot, pushing back his errant forelock with a lingering hand. “You really are rather unpleasantly redolent at the moment, Napoleon.”

“I wasn’t given the opportunity to freshen up before your arrival.”

Flo smiled almost gently at him. “Please believe me when I say I am sorry for what I have to do now. But I am Thrush, you understand, and you are U.N.C.L.E., and thus must be dealt with accordingly.”

“Whatever,” Napoleon casually dismissed her apology. “My grandfather always told me it was ungentlemanly to show impatience with a woman. So just get on with it before all this waiting results in my being unable to keep my irritation in polite check.”

Flo nodded to the four Thrush guards and they came toward the cots, two toward Tony’s and two toward Napoleon’s. One man from the each pair removed a narrow metal implement from his belt. At first Napoleon had no idea what it was, but then he saw and understood.

⁹ To the Devil with you

“No!” he shouted.

“I’m sorry, Napoleon, but as I said, it’s the way it has to be,” Flo almost cooed. “We are well aware how resourceful you are, and we just can’t take the risk of you somehow managing to get yourself free of the cuffs. The guard will be soldering the lock mechanism inside each of the manacles. It will hurt, I grant you, but I did think it a much less damaging option than a welder’s torch.”

“Napoleon!” Tony cried out as one of the pair of Thrush at his side held his left leg firm to the mattress while the other inserted the hot iron into the clasp of the manacle attaching him by that ankle to the bed-frame. “Oh God, help me!”

“Tony, don’t struggle!” called out Napoleon, thoroughly aware of his own helplessness. “Don’t move! It will burn less if they don’t catch much of your exposed skin with the iron!”

“Sound advice, my lone conqueror,” agreed Flo, harkening back to the initial sexual teasing that had passed between them in Provincetown. She continued petting Solo’s hair with one hand as the long fingernails of her other hand brushed lightly back-and-forth across the width of Napoleon’s bare chest.

“I’m not ‘your lone conqueror’ or anything else with regard to you!” denied Napoleon hotly. “You were able to trick me back in Provincetown because I was unrealistically imagining there could be a brief span of complete cease-and-desist from the complicated cloak-and-dagger of my life. But I don’t have any such impractical delusions at the moment. Thus I would much prefer,” his anger flared further at the continued disturbingly caressing motions of her fingers upon his chest and through his hair, “you keep your hands to yourself!”

Under other circumstances he might have made an attempt to somehow capitalize on her obvious physical fascination with him. But not here and not now. Not here where he could hear Tony’s agonized sobs as the Thrush guard worked on soldering shut his other ankle manacle. Not now as he was left to wonder what was delaying his own descent into a similar valley of physical torment.

“I’ll forgive your cavalier disregard of my honest regret, Napoleon,” Flo spoke on, “but I am a nurse by profession still. And you I don’t want to suffer needlessly.” That said the blonde leaned in close and kissed him on the forehead, choosing just that moment to press the activating mechanism on the brooch pinned at the décolletage of her blouse. The spray that Napoleon recalled from his previous experience hit him full in the face, stunning him and stealing from him the breadth of complete consciousness.

Flo nodded to one of the pair of Thrushmen that currently stood at the foot Napoleon’s cot. “Now,” she ordered him. “Do it now.”

The men set quickly to work welding shut the locking device on each of Solo’s manacles as the other pair of Thrush were yet finishing up with regard to those of Simonelli. Napoleon only whimpered as the white heat of the soldering iron made contact the inner metal of the cuffs, scorching the already raw flesh of each of his ankles and then each of his wrists. He was floating somewhere between reality and night-terrors, physically feeling the pain though somehow mentally disconnected from it. And all he could do was lie there and hang on to reason as best he could through that disorientation and the pain and the echo of Tony’s half-suppressed screams.

They'd been seeking Agnes Dabree and whatever place she might be holding Napoleon Solo and Tony Simonelli for nearly a week now with no luck. Agents Schuster and Richardson had enough experience with Thrush to seriously doubt either of the captured men was still alive. But then again, they also were both fully aware of the phenomenon known as "Solo's Luck". So perhaps there was still a chance Napoleon and Tony could yet be recovered breathing intact, but honestly they were running out of ideas as to where to look.

They had of course spoken with the derelict, who had shown them where he had found the communicator. That area had also provided the only other concrete hint of Solo and Simonelli's actual encounter with a squad of Thrush: the presence on the pavement of some spatters of blood that were matched to Simonelli's type. Beyond that there was nothing to go on. Endless searches of buildings and streets in the vicinity had uncovered no further traces.

Schuster and Richardson had also chatted with Ginny Naline quiet extensively. She told them everything she remembered of her interactions with Solo and with Simonelli, but she really had very little substantive to offer. She did know that, when Tony had last contacted Napoleon by communicator, he had spoken of probably being spotted by Flostone, who he had been stalking. She recalled Tony saying the woman had begun to repeat a circuit of traversing through various side streets and back alleys, perhaps trying to shake the tail. It was this particular recollection that resulted in the two agents concentrating their search more heavily around Buena Vista Park than inside it.

They canvassed the park itself of course, but it seemed too public a place for an armed kidnapping and too open for trying to conceal any unwilling captives. Ginny spoke about seeing "R-b-B and twisted-head cronk" several times coming out of the park and thus the agents didn't ignore the venue altogether in their hunt for the Thrushes. Yet still it was a very busy free recreational area, and Ginny hadn't been able to get in touch with U.N.C.L.E. until Napoleon had been out of contact with her for some twenty-four hours. Thus any signs of Thrush activity in the park – if there ever had been any at all, as the two women could just as likely been cutting through the exposed environment to throw off suspicion as to the true location of their operation – were long since vanished under the constant flow of human traffic.

Ginny herself was, for the time being, lodged within an U.N.C.L.E. safe house, as the organization could not be certain Thrush did not know of her exchanges with Solo. The old bum had been given his prized bottle of Jim Beam Kentucky Black Label bourbon and entrusted into the care of a community homeless shelter that had some unexpected support ties to U.N.C.L.E. However, at this precise moment in time neither Richardson nor Schuster could predict how much longer the search-and-rescue mission for the two New York agents would be allowed to continue. At some point even Waverly would have to concede there was no hope.

"How do you think Waverly will react to having to give up on finding Solo?" asked Richardson of his more experienced colleague.

"Outwardly, he'll just comment what a fine agent Napoleon Solo was and what a loss his passing was to the entire organization," surmised Schuster. "Inwardly? Bit tougher to gauge. He makes no qualms about spouting the 'all enforcement agents are expendable' mantra, but Solo is North American Chief of Enforcement and his right-hand."

"And likely successor to his chair in the organization, if all the rumors are to be believed."

“Not rumors really,” Schuster acknowledged. “He’s definitely been grooming Solo for that future position for a few years now.”

Richardson was silent for a moment. “What about Kuryakin? How do you think he’ll react?”

Schuster shook his head. “Hard to say. The man is something of an enigma.”

“But he works well teamed with Solo. Their agenting styles mesh together like the perfectly-fitted cogs of an ultra-efficient machine.”

Schuster nodded. “And the two have formed a tight bond of friendship as well, no question. I honestly don’t know what U.N.C.L.E. might expect from the Russian if Solo dies, but I *do* know I wouldn’t want to be Agnes Dabree or her lapdog Flostone if he ever gets his hands on them afterwards.”

Now it was Richardson who nodded his agreement. “Or us if he thinks we didn’t make an all-out effort to find his partner.”

Schuster couldn’t suppress a shudder at that particular thought.

“How much longer U.N.C.L.E. going to keep that pretty little hippie in protective custody?” Richardson then moved on to a related but definitely more palatable subject.

“I hear tell they are going to spirit her out of the safe house tonight. The bigwigs think she’s now clear from possible Thrush curiosity.”

Richardson nodded again. “Hope she winds up okay. She is rather nice, in a spunky and unconventional sort of way. Sweet-looker too,” he added the last with a sly wink at his partner.

Schuster chuckled. “One of Napoleon Solo’s conquests, so what did you expect?”

Richardson too chuckled at that. Everyone knew of Solo’s reputation with the ladies and how he usually wound up with an attractive bit of feminine pulchritude on his arm – and in his bed – at the end of every mission.

The two men shared the in-joke for a minute or two longer before Richardson went serious once more and gave a hearty sigh. “I only met him a couple of times, but I liked the guy: Solo, I mean.”

“So did I, so did I,” agreed Schuster, neither man even consciously realizing how their present words encompassed the past tense with regard to the North American CEA. Subconsciously it seemed they both understood even the legendary ‘Solo’s Luck’ could not elude Thrush-stacked odds forever.

San Francisco International Airport Baggage claim—6 a.m.

Illya Kuryakin was in an impatient mood. He’d been eighteen hours in flight or in airports, waiting to complete a connection. He was uncomfortable from sleeping in his clothes, and the airline food had left him wanting. To top it off, his transportation was late, so he was vacillating on the decision to either wait where he was expected to be, or go upstairs to the main concourse for some breakfast.

Hunger won out and Illya carried his suitcase to the staircase to the second floor. He had just applied his fork to a hot Western omelet, when the communicator in his jacket pocket began to warble. Quickly, he silenced the noise to keep attention away from himself and clandestinely manipulated the silver pen to open the connection. He had no qualms about reminding them of their tardiness and suggested they join him upstairs for coffee.

While Kuryakin ate, the two agents briefed him on the current information about his partner. By the time he was finishing the last of his coffee, he knew that Solo and another agent named Simonelli had stayed in San Francisco after helping clean out THRUSH's satrap on intelligence that Dr. Dabree had surfaced again in that city.

The mention of Dr. Dabree set Kuryakin's stomach into a wave of nausea that threatened to relieve him of his breakfast. He took a deep breath and scowled. *And that's when he went missing*, he thought with disgust. Memories of her compound months ago added a sour taste to the back of his throat, and he fought to quell the negative emotions. With Dabree, he knew time was of the essence, for the sake of the two men trapped in her maniacal snare.

"How many men do you have looking for Dabree's laboratory?" he asked in a tone that implied that it had better be a substantial number.

Despite Kuryakin's reputation for acerbity, the older agent was undaunted. "We can't spare more than a couple of agents, Mr. Kuryakin, and these guys have been scouring the target area for several days without turning up a clue."

As much as he wanted to tear into the two agents for their seeming lack of dedication, Illya realized that the orders for the search had come from higher up in the chain of command. "Then, it would seem that a pair of fresh eyes might be in order. If you would, drop me off in the target area, and inform your agents. My suitcase will appreciate a ride to headquarters."

"Don't you even want to check in at a hotel and freshen up first?"

"Amenities mean very little right now to Mr. Solo and Mr. Simonelli. If we don't find them soon, it won't matter if I've had a good night's sleep and a hot shower, or no." He stood. "It's time to go."

Napoleon Solo had been transitioning in-and-out of consciousness for he knew not how long. His brain remained a bit muzzy even when he managed to keep himself awake for any length of time. His wrists and ankles throbbed and stung, his body was too hot, and thirst tormented him mercilessly. He didn't even care that he was hungry anymore; it was the thirst that was driving him nearly insane. His throat was so parched, it felt almost scalded. His tongue clung uncomfortably to the roof of his mouth and repositioning it was a painful process. Talking was beyond his current ability and even the steady flow of air in-and-out of his nose made his gullet ache.

Rousing enough to recollect his current situation, Napoleon listened intently for the breathing of the man he knew to be in this room with him: Agent Tony Simonelli. The sound came to his ears mixed with little whimpers and barely audible moans. "Tony," he tried to speak in an attempt to attract the other man's attention, but even that single word came out only as a labored croak.

Napoleon closed his mouth and then his eyes. He was too weak to even try anymore. He wanted to just sink back into the oblivion of unconsciousness. Yet an inner voice – a voice that

sounded to his befuddled mind eerily like that of the righteous grandfather who had been his childhood guardian – was unequivocally protesting this acceptance of defeat.

“You have to get to Tony,” that voice commanded him.

“Why? I can’t do anything for him,” he demanded wordlessly of the voice in his head.

“You can be there for him,” insisted the voice.

“When he dies,” he mentally supplemented that persistent voice.

“Would you rather he dies alone?”

“In the end we all die alone,” his brain further rationalized his inaction.

“Listen to yourself, Napoleon! Since when did you become a quitter?”

“I’m tired, so tired…”

“No excuses! You made a choice to become an enforcement agent for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. In fact you are the North American Chief of Enforcement within that noble organization. And Tony Simonelli is one of the men committed to your charge in that position. You have a responsibility!”

“I can’t. I can’t. I hurt and my strength is all but completely sapped.”

“Physical strength maybe, but what about the potency of your spirit? Your force of will?”

“Those are fading too.”

“I am truly amazed at your self-centeredness, Napoleon! Tony Simonelli is much worse off than you are. He is hurting much more intensely than you. And you would just leave him to suffer alone? What would Mr. Waverly think?”

“He would be disappointed,” Napoleon frankly let his mind admit.

“Then don’t disappoint him, Agent Solo!”

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, but I can’t do this. I just can’t.”

“Illya would be ashamed of you!”

Hazel-brown eyes flew fully open.

“Do you want to die knowing the man you hold dearer than a brother, the man with whom you share a connection of the soul, would be ashamed of your self-absorption in these last hours?”

“No,” whispered Napoleon aloud through tightly gritted teeth.

“Then get to Tony! Now!” came the no-nonsense order from the internal voice.

Napoleon bit his bottom lip, cracking open its dried skin enough to draw to the surface a few beads of blood, blood he lapped up with a tongue that seemed much too large for his mouth. He assessed the logistics of the situation: the distance between the two cots and his current limited range of movement.

“So how do I do that?” he murmured in a husky and barely audible rasp. But the inner voice was now silent. “*Figures,*” he thought frustratedly.

He glanced about once more. Well, he couldn’t get up and walk to Tony’s bedside, but maybe... He considered the possibilities. He rocked slowly from side-to-side on the cot. There was a small screech of metal. Hmm... possibly collapsible legs. Not unlikely as these seemed like temporary setups. Though the frame was solid iron and definitely sturdy, if the legs were foldable then maybe... He rocked back-and-forth more vigorously and was rewarded with another small metal screech. It might work, *if* (and that was a big if) he could work up enough force to tip the bed.

He would need every ounce of energy he yet possessed to overturn the cot. He didn’t want to wind up with the bed right-side-up on folded legs as that would avail him nothing. He had to get the cot turned completely over so that his own body was against the floor and then... Then what? He couldn’t exactly crawl with his limbs firmly secured to the headrest and footboard as they were. But there was a bit of give that would allow him to use his elbows and knees to some effect. Not crawl, but shimmy sideways on his stomach by means of drawing along his elbows and knees to the small distance they could flex. Maybe... It was all a maybe... But at the moment maybe was all he had.

He took a deep breath, his eyes watering as the forced air all but charred its way down his parched throat. “*Now or never,*” he told himself firmly. “*You won’t have the strength left to try again later.*”

So he rocked his body as violently as he could from side-to-side, praying for adequate muscle and the mercy of a miracle. It took him about ten minutes of steady and exhausting motion before one of the bottom legs gave way. As he leaned his body mass as much as he could to that side, the cot teetered for instant on one top leg before crashing over onto the concrete floor.

Napoleon managed to keep his face from making full-on contact with the concrete by turning his head to the side before impact but, if he had ached before, now his entire body was seared by pain. His wrists and ankles were truly excruciating, the rough landing scraping the metal of the cuffs relentlessly across the burned flesh. His knees and elbows, that he had used to cushion his fall to some small extent, were dully throbbing. The ear that had hit the floor was bleeding. The cheek on that same side of his face was at the very least deeply bruised but had thankfully gone completely numb.

“*I’m coming, Tony,*” he mentally promised as he began to inch his way sideways toward Tony’s cot, using the limited range of his elbows and knees to slid unevenly across the floor on his stomach. His progress was agonizingly slow and the weight of the heavy metal bed-frame, under which his body labored to move, made him pant for breath. At least the concrete beneath him was smooth and cold, offering his overheated torso minimal relief, while the soiled mattress of the cot protected his back from the hardness of the iron bed-frame.

Time lost all meaning for him. The only thing on which he allowed himself to concentrate was one minuscule sideways slither at a time, never letting himself subside in this motion long

enough to give in to his exhaustion. At last, after what could have been an hour or ten, he was lying on the floor near Tony's cot.

"Tony," he whispered, but he knew the man on the bed above could not hear him as he could summon no volume at all from his moisture-deprived vocal cords. And Tony couldn't see him here either, and thus the other man likely wouldn't even realize how close at hand he was. Napoleon pondered the problem and then decided on the only course of action.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he silently apologized in advance as he painstakingly maneuvered to a position where one of his manacled hands could grasp the foldable front leg of Tony's cot. Then he took another deep breath, letting the air burn through the dry membranes of his nose and fill his lungs, and pushed as hard as he could.

Solo's luck was with him as the bed on which Tony lay tilted onto its side, the downed portion facing Napoleon with the raised portion wedged snugly against the wall. The mattress at the head of Tony's cot scooted a bit askew, a portion of it resting on the floor.

"Tony?" whispered out Napoleon through rasping breaths caused by his recent exertions.

Tony's eyes fluttered open. He looked dazed at first, but then his gaze cleared as he centered his vision on Solo's face so close to his own.

"Hey Napoleon," he croaked. "*Vuoi... condividere... il mio... materasso?*"¹⁰ he managed to get out between painful swallows that forestalled the mischievousness he wanted to express in his vocal tone.

"Quite the continental invitation," Napoleon whispered with gruffness in his own tone that yet didn't fully obscure the underlying smirk behind the words. Then he gave the other man one of his most radiant smiles as he carefully raised his head just enough to let the exposed portion of Tony's mattress slip under the side of his banged-up head.

Illya stepped onto the curb along Haight St. at Buena Vista Park, found an unused phone booth and pulled out his communicator. "Open Channel A, Agent Kuryakin to Agent Schuster." Almost immediately his pen answered back and the agents set a location for a rendezvous.

Fifteen minutes later, Kuryakin met the team responsible for finding his partner. They passed on what little information they had and answered the Russian agent's questions. Schuster added: "We even checked out a greenhouse on the far side of the park on a rather flimsy report about a spaced-out hippie Mr. Solo rescued and sent to medical for observation. The guy suddenly freaks and becomes violent when a nurse brought him a potted plant from home. They had to sedate the guy into oblivion before he stopped screaming."

"What was at the greenhouse?" Illya asked thoughtfully.

"Just what you'd expect: plants. It used to be a research facility years ago, but the government grant ran out and the project folded. From the outside, it looked like somebody got permission to start a small business in it. The name of the place is the Tolianart Plant Nursery."

"Did you have the name of the business checked out?"

¹⁰ Want to share my mattress?

“Yeah, research found that no business under that name had ever applied for permits to operate or had ever been registered with the city. We concluded that somebody was squatting.”

“Were you actually inside this greenhouse?” Illya continued, looking to Richardson for the answer.

“Of course, we were, Mr. Kuryakin. We went through there a couple of days ago with a fine tooth comb. We couldn’t find anything suspicious.”

“Then you won’t mind if I check it out for myself.”

Schuster sighed heavily. “It’s your time to waste. We’ve been all over this area; there’s nothing.”

“But this is the area where Mr. Solo and Mr. Simonelli were last seen. That itinerant found a communicator near here and supposedly Dabree has been seen coming and going out of this park. You have to be overlooking something.”

“Now wait just a minute, Mr. Kuryakin. We may not be high level agents like you and Mr. Solo, but we know how to do our jobs.”

“I’m not saying you don’t. However, when one has been staring at a perplexing problem for a long time, it is easy to overlook the obvious solution. I would like to add a set of fresh eyes to the investigation. I also have no problems doing this on my own if you need a break from the monotony. Now, which way is the greenhouse?”

Richardson pointed and after Kuryakin walked away from them, he looked down at the shorter, older agent. “Did you hear him? A break from the monotony? I’ve got a feeling we’ve just been insulted.”

Schuster shook his head with a sigh. “Yeah, and I think he was holding back on us, just to be polite. I hope he finds something or we’re going to wish THRUSH had captured us instead of his partner. “

Illya Kuryakin found the greenhouse with little trouble. He approached cautiously; alert for any unexpected activity in and around the glass structure, but aside from the normal summer insect populations, the place seemed deserted. The door was, surprisingly, unlocked and the inside was just as one would expect from a greenhouse: humid, earthy-smelling and full of green foliage. Kuryakin thought it a bit odd that the plants were well-watered, yet the grounds spoke of abandonment.

He perused the entire floor plan of the building, finding nothing more suspicious than the lack of occupancy. It was, however, enough of a mystery to warrant a second visit later to see if anything had changed. He left the building as he found it, and began a systematic reconnaissance of the park back to where he and the San Francisco agents had parted company. He found them on a bench, engaged in an extensive banquet of Chinese carryout and shop-talk. He was nearly on top of them before they acknowledged his presence.

“Want some lunch?” Richardson asked, holding up a pair of chopsticks.

“I hope you realize that I could have taken you both out before either of you was aware of my presence,” Illya admonished.

“And you East Coast guys are wrapped as tight as a drumhead,” Schuster replied. “We both saw you coming and recognized you from two hundred yards away. Nothing at the greenhouse, was there?”

Kuryakin accepted the chopsticks and a white carton of lo mein. “Nothing specific, except that someone has a nice crop of marijuana.” He sat on the end of the bench and lifted a wad of noodles to his mouth.

Richardson grinned. “Maybe they’re catering to the hippie convention. You know, ‘tune in; turn on; drop out’?”

Illya looked at him with a mixture of patience and annoyance which made the younger agent try to escape into his lunch. “Perhaps. Tell me, did the plants inside the greenhouse look well-tended when you were there?”

Schuster nodded. “Sure, just what you’d expect.”

“But you never saw anyone around to tend the plants.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t anyone.”

“It seems odd that a venture like that wouldn’t have someone around, especially with the doors to the greenhouse unlocked. I would think someone would want to protect their investment.”

“Maybe they got wind of a police bust and scattered.”

Illya took another bite of his lo mein and sat chewing, considering the puzzle of the unattended greenhouse full of thriving marijuana plants. Something niggled at him, but he couldn’t bring the concern into focus. Meanwhile, he keenly felt the worry of a missing partner probably facing life-threatening danger.

“Tony,” Napoleon rasped painfully through the rough, swollen membranes of his throat and his cracked and bleeding lips. The man beside him had not made a coherent sound for a long time, but lay wheezing in labored breaths. “Tony! Hey, talk to me, man!” Solo croaked as loud as his condition permitted.

There was a small whimpering moan. “Julio—I’m—not going—to make—it. I need—” Tony said in a forced whisper.

“You *need* to hang on, buddy—” Napoleon interrupted, “and it’s not Julio; it’s Napoleon. Try to hang on just a little longer, Tony—”

“Nap—?” The name ended in a groan that was heart wrenching. “Can’t—please—”

As much as he hurt, Solo knew Tony was considerably worse off. “Yes, Tony, whatever you want—”

“My con—fes—sion—hear—”

Solo was taken aback. “Tony, I can’t; I’m not a priest. Good God, far from it—”

“Don’t want—to die—without—clear—”

“Okay—okay, but I can’t give you absolution—”

“Don’t—matter—jus—hear—”

Tears would have tracked down Napoleon’s face if he had been able to produce them. “I will—
Tell me, my friend—”

There was a sigh, and Tony began to speak, his voice strengthened by the ingrained ritual:
“Forgive me, my Lord, Jesus Christ and Holy Mary, Mother of God,—it has been six months—
since my last confession—”

In utter sorrow, Napoleon lay with his head nearly touching Tony’s, while the dying man poured out his soul in penance: anger for his partner’s death, the hate he had carried for so long towards those who had killed him, anger at his partner for dying, the lives he had taken, his own selfishness in seeking pleasure at the expense of others. While it seemed to Napoleon to go on almost interminably, Tony’s voice faltered after a very short time. Without thinking, Napoleon answered: “May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life, *Amen—Be at Peace, my friend.*” Then, he lifted his head to look at Tony. “Try to hold on a little while longer.”

Tony’s eyes were closed, but opened at the sound of Napoleon’s voice. “Thank you—” he whispered. “It’s—all right—now.”

“Stay with me—” Napoleon urged, but saw that Tony had relaxed and now looked back at him with the contentment of knowing that all was well. “Tony—” And while Solo stared helplessly back at the older agent, the light in the eyes of UNCLE agent Anthony Simonelli slowly dimmed and went out. Then almost unconsciously, Napoleon began to murmur through the pain of his own parched lips:

“God our Father, Your power brings us to birth, Your providence guides our lives, and by Your command we return to dust. Lord, those who die still live in Your presence, their lives change but do not end. I pray in hope for this man, my brother in arms, and for all the dead known to You alone. In company with Christ, Who died and now lives, may they rejoice in Your kingdom, where all our tears are wiped away. Unite us together again in one family, to sing Your praise forever and ever. Amen—”¹¹

“I’m sorry your end wasn’t what you hoped it would be. Goodbye, Tony—” He finished the oratory with a moan, and then unconsciousness claimed him.

Subsequent spot checks on the so-called Toliantart Plant Nursery turned up no attending personnel, However, it appeared that a large number of the plants had been harvested of their leaves, suggesting that at least one person had visited the greenhouse on probably more than one occasion. Illya decided a twenty-four hour stake-out of the greenhouse would most likely yield someone who could be questioned. Schuster and Richardson, having been stuck with canvassing the area for more days than they wished to count, were less than enthusiastic with both the idea and the person suggesting it.

¹¹ Catholic Prayer for the Dead

Kuryakin was not one to trade “war stories”, but took the opportunity to enlighten his fellow agents about the virtues of tenacity; recalling the time he trailed cats in the Soho district of London for nearly a week before uncovering a substantial clue, but one that ultimately foiled THRUSH’s plan to obtain a device that reversed aging.¹² Then, he announced that the stake-out would proceed, with or without their help, but if it was without, he would make a notation in his report of their decisions. He couldn’t help but chuckle to himself hearing their grumbling as they left to check out a car, but when they were out of earshot, he sighed heavily and allowed the weight of his worry to dominate his body language.

The stake-out proved as fruitful as Illya hoped. At five o’clock in the morning, a tall, scrawny young man with long hair tied back in a careless ponytail, got out of a beat-up Corvair and under the dim light of dawn, trotted to the greenhouse. Kuryakin sent Schuster and Richardson after the hippie, while he checked out the car. Fifteen minutes later, the two UNCLE agents returned, a squirming man between them.

Illya scrutinized the emaciated young man who was in dire need of not only a decent meal, but a bath as well. “You seem to have found yourself a lucrative little business, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know nuthin’ about nuthin’,” the hippie replied, nervously. “An’ you can’t make me talk, either.”

Illya attempted to explain. “It’s all right; I’m not interested in your marijuana. We’re not from the police. I was hoping you could tell me if you’ve seen any of the people in the pictures I have, Mr.—?”

“Ain’ got nuthin’t’say.”

Schuster and Richardson watched in fascination as Kuryakin skillfully drew out the hippie. “You look like you haven’t eaten for a while. Would you like something to eat?” Illya smiled when the expression on the man’s face suddenly showed less worry and more interest.

“Wha’d’y’ got?”

“Mr. Richardson,” Illya said. “Get one of the sandwiches in the car, if you would please. And a can of soft drink.” He continued to look into the eyes of the hippie. “How long have you been growing your plants, my friend?”

The hippie engulfed two sandwiches and a can of cola before he would answer. “Month or so.”

“You have quite the green thumb. Where did you obtain the plants?”

The hippie looked around warily as if being watched. “Somebody gave me seeds. Told me t’plant’em in th’greenhouse, and take care’a’de place.”

“And your payment was to be the sale of the marijuana, correct?” But the young man began to tremble in fear and would have run away if Illya hadn’t caught him by the arm. “What’s wrong?”

“No, don’ tell her ‘bout th’plants! I don’ know wha’ happen to them! She’ll do t’ me wha’ she did t’ Romney!”

¹² “THE BRIDGE OF LIONS AFFAIR”

“Romney? Is he one of your friends?” But the hippie was too terrified to answer and continued to fight his way out of Illya’s grasp. The Russian agent reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a photo and showed it to the nearly hysterical man. “Is this the person who did the terrible thing to Romney?”

The hippie cried out in panic and broke Illya’s hold, only to be caught again by Richardson. As the younger UNCLE agent clung to the hysterical man, Illya flipped the picture for the other men to see. The subject of the photo was Dr. Agnes Dabree. The two SF agents looked at each other, then at their senior agent “What are your orders, Mr. Kuryakin?” Schuster asked respectfully.

“I want both of you to escort our friend back to our car.” Kuryakin reached into his inside jacket pocket and handed Richardson a small capsule. Recognizing it as a fast acting knock-out tablet, the agent nodded in understanding. “After he’s comfortable, I want a call for some back-up. We don’t know what we’re up against, so we’ll need a medical team standing by as well. I’m going to see if I can find a hidden entrance in the greenhouse. Follow me when you’re finished.”

“We’ll be right behind you, Mr. Kuryakin.” Richardson said.

The two SF agents pulled the terrified hippie with them while Illya made a beeline for the greenhouse. He pulled the door open, his gun drawn and went inside. It was quiet and dim, but this time the UNCLE agent wasn’t the least bit interested in the plants, but at the flooring which consisted of an earth floor with a walkway of narrow pallets for drainage and so the occupants would not have to walk in mud. But the walkway could also hide a trap door to a lower level. He bent down and began pulling up the floor pallets and tossing them on top of the plant beds, heedless of the potential street value of the marijuana plants he was destroying.

Schuster and Richardson joined him ten minutes later, but by then Illya had the flooring torn up and had started to examine the bare earth.

“Mr. Kuryakin!” Richardson called and when the agent looked up, a shovel started arcing towards him. He caught it and gave the other agent silent thanks. Kuryakin began to tap and scrape the earthen walkways.

As he approached the far end of the greenhouse, he suddenly straightened. “Do you smell that?”

The SF agents came to the same corner. “Smells like a dead animal’s in the dirt somewhere,” Richardson said.

“The odor emanates from right here,” Kuryakin said with conviction. He positioned the shovel into the dirt as if to dig a hole, set his foot on the blade and pushed. There was a scratch of metal about five inches down, spurring the Russian agent to quickly clear the area revealing the metal hatch of a trap door.

Schuster reached for the handle and pulled up on the door only to back away suddenly with the other two agents as gases from below wafted up into the greenhouse.

“Oh, God! Something’s definitely dead down there—” Richardson choked.

Kuryakin had descended half his height before the SF agents could move or speak. Schuster found his voice first. “Mr. Kuryakin, what do you think you’re doing?”

“The source of that odor isn’t going to come to us. Find a way to deal with it and follow me.” He finished his descent and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to cover his nose and mouth. He did not wait for the other agents to follow him.

Schuster and Richardson followed their lead agent but at a much slower pace. It was difficult to climb down a ladder one-handed. When they finally caught up with Kuryakin, he was pushing a magnetite strip into the lock of a windowless steel door. He ignited the strip with the detonator in his watch, waiting for the moment when it was extinguished to act.

Kuryakin kicked in the door and bolted into the room, though the smell turned his stomach and he could almost taste the putrefaction. First in his line of sight was a cot laying on its side and, partially obscured from his view, an overturned cot next to it. The source of the smell, the very dead body of a man, lay on the floor, manacled by the wrists and ankles to the head-and-footboards of the sideways upended cot.

Illya rushed to the foot end of the cot, fearing the worst. The flesh was bloated from decomposition gases, and the exposed skin marbled with discoloration. The dead eyes were open and clouded over. Curiously, there was a near absence of insect larvae.

“Good God,” Richardson sputtered from behind.

“It’s not Napoleon,” Illya announced, his voice thick with relief, but he was also confused. *Napoleon had to be here—*

“There’s something under the overturned cot,” agent Schuster said urgently.

With strength that could only have only come from a massive jolt of adrenaline, the small blond Russian righted the overturned cot to reveal a dark-haired man manacled to the frame in the same manner as his dead compatriot. The wax-colored skin on the face of the motionless man face hung loosely on the skull, sunken deeply into the eye sockets. The pale lips were cracked with dried blood in the crevasses and parched mucosa peeling in white flecks of flesh.

“Napoleon—” Kuryakin whispered desperately, as he reached to place his fingers on the pulse point at the jawline. Now oblivious to the stench, he laid his ear to Napoleon’s chest for confirmation of what his fingers were telling him. “He’s alive—” he sighed heavily with relief. “Pulse is fast and thready.” He laid his hands on either side of the nearly unrecognizable face. “And he’s burning up.” A moment later, the command mode of the senior agent was back and he began to bark orders. “Get these manacles off, Richardson. Schuster, get the medical team in here. Tell them we have one dead, and one critical. And they need to bring some ice, or there will be two for the morgue.”

As soon as the two other agents set to work on their tasks, Kuryakin removed his jacket and holster, pulled off his black turtleneck shirt and went to the sink on the opposite side of the room. He turned the spigot to full open, almost gasping a sigh of relief when cold water poured into the sink. He soaked his shirt in the cold water and brought it back to where Napoleon lay. Gently, he squeezed the cold water onto Solo’s feverish skin. A trickle of water found its way past the cracked lips and the body reacted to the sudden influx of moisture. Hands now unfettered grabbed at the wet cloth to guide it to his mouth.

“No, stop, Napoleon—!” Illya cried, as he caught his friend’s wrists. The reaction to the second-degree burns there sent the critical agent into a frenzy of delirious, croaking cries of anguish.

Kuryakin acted without thinking. He threw his arms around Napoleon’s flailing torso and pulled his friend into a snug embrace, hoping that the ‘swaddling’ would calm Solo’s hysteria. The tactic seemed to work as the writhing body slowly quieted. “You’re safe, Napoleon,” Illya whispered. “It’s going to be all right—I’m here—”

By the time the medical team arrived, Kuryakin had Napoleon resting quietly, and was pressing his cool, water-soaked shirt gently against the hot face. For a moment, the onlookers could only stand and stare while the legendary cold-blooded Russian agent, oblivious to their stares, tenderly ministered to his partner. The blue eyes looked up, immediately re-animating the rest of the rescue team.

Illya stood up and slowly approached the dead agent, shuttering inwardly at the thought of being trapped with a decaying corpse. Suddenly, the smell, the release of emotions over finding his partner, and the realization that Napoleon was still critical and might not survive overwhelmed him and he bounded out the door to the outside. As the medical team carried Napoleon to their waiting van, they could see the legendary cold-blooded Russian leaning, doubled-over, against the far corner of the greenhouse, retching.

Kuryakin straightened as the rear doors to the van closed. “Hold that van!” he called hoarsely. “I’m coming with you.” He jogged over to the van, realizing only then that he had no shirt or jacket on.

“We have an extra pair of scrubs in the back,” the one medic said helpfully. “You’re probably going to want to ride back there with Mr. Solo anyway.”

Illya looked up, his blue eyes appreciative. “Try and stop me,” he said softly as he reached for the handle to open the door.

The room was identical to every other UNCLE infirmary room he had ever been in while recovering from his own injuries or like now, keeping watch over his partner, waiting for a positive sign. Illya sighed wearily; glad to finally be off his feet. The doctors labored a long time stabilizing Solo, and while Kuryakin had not been allowed to oversee their work alongside them, the staff knew not to try coaxing him away from the windowed doors separating him from his partner. The blond Russian sat in a chair provided for him, firmly ensconced bedside, his hand on the bed by Napoleon’s bandaged wrist, the index and middle fingers resting lightly on the pulse point at the base of the thumb, cautious of the burns nearby.

Early in his partnership with Solo, this simple gesture from a man who normally shunned physical contact with anyone raised a few eyebrows and spawned rumors that the word partnership had more than one meaning between these two. After all, Russians were an unknown quantity to most Americans and Napoleon was known for his healthy libido. To the rumors, Solo merely laughed at his co-workers’ silly speculation, or occasionally added a glib comment of his own regarding his partner. Illya just didn’t care what other people thought of him as long as they realized, though Russian by birth, he was first and foremost an UNCLE agent by philosophy.

Times like these, when there was little to do but sit and wait, sorely tested his patience. With all his being, he wanted nothing more than to employ the vast resources of UNCLE to hunt down

Agnes Dabree and her compatriot Flostone and then exact the justice they so richly deserved. Instead he sat by his partner's side, taking what assurance he could from the pulse under his fingertips.

For the next three days, he sat in the same chair, in the same spot, his silent vigil interrupted only by Napoleon's moans and cries from pain, delirium or haunting dreams as his partner traveled the unsure paths towards consciousness. The doctors had given Illya no guarantees; the unknown length or severity of the high fever could have been detrimental. The only hope Illya could draw on was the consistency of *Solo's luck*, which he supposed was as good as anything else.

Illya had dozed off, his chin resting on his shoulder, when movement from the bed jolted him awake. He sat upright in his chair. "Napoleon?" he breathed, as he leaned forward. A pair of brown eyes regarded him silently, but Kuryakin could see the horror Solo had experienced in that cell reflected in their depths. "It's all right, you're safe," he reassured Napoleon softly.

The cracked lips moved. "You look terrible," the dark-haired agent rasped roughly.

Illya had to smile in spite of himself. "You haven't had a chance to look into a mirror, my friend."

Napoleon closed his eyes and shuttered at the memory of the last thing his eyes had seen before he lost consciousness. "Tony—" he murmured.

Kuryakin sighed heavily in empathy. "We've brought him home. I'm sorry, Napoleon."

"It was Dabree—"

A cold needle of anxiety cut through Illya's middle. "I know," he said with uneasiness, "but now's not the time for you to be thinking or talking about this. There'll be plenty of time to deal with her later when you've recovered."

Solo was not to be deterred, even by the pain of his raw throat. "She told me—what you did—the bargain you made with her."

Illya was not prepared to rehash past events with a man, who three days earlier, nearly died and now, could barely talk. He stood abruptly. "I'm going to get the doctor to give you something to help you sleep."

"Don't want to sleep. I want to know why—you and Dabree—you let her kill—*US*."

"Napoleon, that was never my intention. And this isn't the time to talk about this."

"So, why don't—you just—go then—" Napoleon choked as words tumbled from his lips, "—run away—just like—you did before— *That's why Tony died—because you—weren't there—!*"

"You don't know what you're saying," Kuryakin said quietly, but his voice strained with the effort of keeping his own temper under control. It certainly wouldn't help Solo's condition if he became accusatory as well. "You're still being affected by what happened to you and agent Simonelli."

"I want," he croaked, "—want you to leave—"

The blond agent nodded. “Yes, I think I should. I am undoubtedly upsetting you, though I don’t fully understand why. I can come back tomorrow, if you wish, but I won’t sit here to argue with you.”

“No more—to say—then.” Solo glowered at him. “Just—go away. Don’t want to—see you anymore—” He shut his eyes, turning his head away. He did not see the brief expression of wounded disbelief in the blue eyes that looked back at him before Kuryakin turned away himself and hastened to the door.

Illya paused at the door and turned back towards the man in the bed. “Very well, Napoleon. What you want can be arranged. It so happens that I’ve been offered a CEA position working out of the Berlin office. Perhaps, I should consider the proposal more seriously. Have a speedy recovery.” The door opened and Illya disappeared behind it.

The door closed silently. “I win—” Napoleon whispered but at the same time, an aching pang of remorse caused him to wonder what demon had put those words into his mouth.

Act IV: “My greatest strength and my greatest weakness.”

Illya, fuming from his encounter with Napoleon, punched the call button for the elevator to the upper floors of the San Francisco headquarters. He had a mind to check out of his hotel room and catch the next plane back to New York, but it reminded him too much of what he had berated Solo for and sounded too much like the running away Napoleon had accused him of doing.

While the elevator carried him to above-ground level two and the agents’ floor, he tried to talk himself into the reasonable explanation for his partner’s behavior; that Napoleon was reacting to his injuries, to the memory of days spent with a corpse, and his near-death by dehydration. Solo had been lucky to survive; the doctors agreed that another eight hours would have been his death. His condition warranted a slow rehydration to keep fragile tissue cells from rupturing from the influx of fluids, and it was not known if he would survive the lengthier process. It was entirely possible Napoleon was not fully rational yet.

With heavy sigh, Kuryakin found himself yielding to his gut feelings. Solo had certainly sounded rational enough. And, the Russian thought with irritation, in very much the same manner of stubborn disregard as when the roles had been reversed. The partnership seemed to be dying, just as he had said it should weeks ago on the *Pursang*. Yet Napoleon had had him convinced that the feelings he experienced while masquerading as Nexor had just been part of the charade.

Then Dabree got hold of both of them. Kuryakin shuttered inwardly in remembrance and wished again he had just applied the correct amount of torque to her ghoulish-looking head and snapped her neck before he blew up her compound. At least then, some good would have come out of the whole affair and the maniacal scientist would not have been alive to take Napoleon and Simonelli.

By the time he exited the elevators on level two, he knew what he wanted to do, though it was hardly a meaningful use of time. He turned around and went back into the elevator to the main floor, and the agents’ entrance. It was a fair walk to his hotel, but he knew there would be plenty of opportunity to procure a bottle of a decent brand of vodka. He wouldn’t get drunk enough to

completely dampen the dismal feelings rolling around inside of him, but he would be able to count on a reasonably undisturbed sleep.

The next morning, Illya stood quietly in the hallway outside Napoleon's hospital room, listening while the doctor examined his patient. The doctor stepped out into the hall and shut the door.

"I wish I could give you a positive answer to your question, Mr. Kuryakin," he began. "Mr. Solo is making excellent progress physically, but he had a very restless night. There were a lot of bad dreams, during which he seemed to be reliving the time he spent in the cell with the dead agent."

"Did he say anything?"

"He said the name Tony quite often."

"Yes, that's the name of the dead agent he was confined with."

"And he said your name as well; in much the same tone of voice. You know, distressful."

Kuryakin nodded understandingly, but in truth, in their present state of estrangement, he couldn't fathom why Napoleon would be distressful over anything connected with him. "Is he awake now?"

"Dozing, but I'm sure you would have little trouble waking him. Go right on in."

Illya gave the doctor a microscopic smile and opened the door quietly, slipping inside the room like a breeze. He stood at the foot of the bed and gazed at the gaunt and pasty-looking face of the man whose life he had saved and who had saved his life more times than either of them could remember. They had long ago even ceased verbal gratitude except for the most desperate of situations for there had been no need; it was simply accepted as what one did for one's partner.

And what did one do for a partnership that seemed to be in the throes of death? Illya wondered. At the time, he was doing his best to save Napoleon at the price of their partnership, he could rationalize that it was well worth the price. Now that he was standing amid the ashes of what he had done, there was only the hollowness of loss.

I don't even have a sense that I want to fight for something that might be better off left to die on its own, he thought. How can one care for something enough to drop everything to assure its safety, and yet have such negative feelings for that same something? And right now, I can't even bring myself to call that something by name—as if naming it would confirm its finality—

His attention snapped back from internal reflection to his surroundings when he heard movement on the bed in front of him. Napoleon stared back at him, his brown eyes contrasting sharply with his pallor.

"What are you doing here?" the words sounded less raspy than they had the day before, but the tone was flat.

Assuming that any answer was better than none, Illya said softly, "I came to see how you were feeling."

“Well, you can probably tell that by what I look like.”

Why did he feel that Napoleon was, even in his wretched condition, throwing the gauntlet at his feet, daring him to pick it up? Illya lowered his gaze. “I don’t know what to say to you that won’t escalate the animosity between us.”

“Are you really thinking about taking the CEA Northeast position in Berlin?”

“Is it something I should be considering?”

“It’s a hell of a promotion. Why shouldn’t you consider it?”

A pause. “Perhaps I will.”

“Look, Illya,” Solo said, “don’t turn it down on my account. God knows, you’re more than qualified and your GRU buddies will be green with envy.”

Kuryakin looked at Solo, his face a mask. Inside, however, he was a myriad of churning emotions. *How did you ever get the idea I was trying to one-up the GRU, Napoleon? Didn’t you hear me when I said I was not ashamed of where I came from?* “Then, I suppose I should be reporting back to New York. Unless there is something you need.” *Like a friend—*

“I’ll be fine here.”

The phrase spoke volumes to the Russian. He was being dismissed, told to leave. *I don’t need you—* Illya straightened his posture and lifted his chin infinitesimally. “Then perhaps I shall see you upon your arrival if I do not leave for Berlin beforehand. In any event, I wish you a quick recovery and my condolences on the loss of your friend, Tony Simonelli.” He retreated to the door before Solo had an opportunity to stop him; that is if Napoleon had a mind to do so.

Illya Kuryakin was on an eastbound flight to New York that very night, his traveling companion a steady supply of vodka martinis delivered by a pair of stewardesses who provided without comment on the reason for or the quantity of his alcohol consumption. He took a small measure of satisfaction that he walked off the plane steadier than anyone else, including the pilots.

A message at reception then next morning when he reported in made Illya regret his hasty retreat from San Francisco. *Report to Dr. Pirelli as soon as possible.* Berlin was becoming more attractive with each passing encounter with the New York UNCLE personnel.

“Welcome back, Mr. Kuryakin,” Dr. Pirelli greeted as the blond agent closed the door behind him. “I trust all is well at the Headquarters for UNCLE Northeast.” The doctor could not help but notice the slight frown on his visitor’s face.

“UNCLE Northeast is operational and secure,” Kuryakin replied shortly.

“How is Mr. Solo?”

The frown deepened almost infinitesimally. “On the mend.”

“I understand it was touch-and-go for a while.”

“You’ve obviously read the report.”

“That’s right.”

“Why am I here then? I can’t offer any more information than you already know.”

“Let’s call it a progress report. After all, it’s been almost two months since your last visit.”

“I’m aware of that. What is your point?”

Dr. Pirelli stood. “Let’s go back in the back and get more comfortable. Have a drink perhaps.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“Of course you would prefer not to, but my invitation was not a request.”

“I really don’t have anything to say, doctor.”

“So you already told me.”

Illya scrutinized the psychiatrist with narrowed eyes.

“Look, Mr. Kuryakin, we can dance around this all day, but the point is you will be coming with me, and you will provide the information I ask for. And I don’t have to tell you where this directive comes from.”

The Russian agent took a deep breath. “Very well, but I should warn you, truth drugs make me sick to my stomach.” He strode past the doctor and reached for the doorknob.

“What makes you think I’m going to give you a truth drug?”

Illya looked over his shoulder. “Will you get what you want from me without one?”

Pirelli stood beside Kuryakin. “That’s up to you. This isn’t an interrogation; I’m here to help you.”

“And Waverly wants his illustrious field team back. What will he do, if your efforts fail to accomplish that?”

“He can’t force two men to work together who shouldn’t be together; not if he doesn’t want to lose those agents completely.”

Illya pulled open the door. “I’d like to be there when you tell him that. After you, Dr. Pirelli.” He followed the doctor back the hallway to the room furnished as a den. “Is this for real?” he commented from the doorway.

“A little too extravagant for you? And you’ve been in the West how long?”

Illya went inside and stood at the overstuffed leather couch, shaking his head. “Evidently not long enough. This looks more like something Mr. Solo would be comfortable with.”

“I have another room, more austere, if you prefer.”

His answer was a *what-do-you-think-?* expression.

“As you wish, Mr. Kuryakin. Follow me.” The pair went to the next doorway and the doctor opened the door. The furniture was the same style found all over Headquarters, complete with couch, desk and several upholstered chairs. “My office.”

“Ah, this is more like it,” Illya said, sarcasm evident in his voice. “Clinical, but trying very hard not to be.” He preceded the doctor into the room, sat down on the couch and looked up at his adversary. “Let the fatuity begin.”

Dr. Pirelli went to his desk and picked up a file folder. “I have to admit, Mr. Kuryakin, you’re good. You say a lot, and yet you say almost nothing. Little wonder why you’re one of Mr. Waverly’s top agents.” The doctor walked slowly towards the couch, folder in hand.

“My skills serve me well. And I don’t respond to flattery.”

“Oh, come on now, we all want to hear that we’ve done a good job, performed at least to expectations.” He grinned down at his patient. “Got the bad guys,” he added with a gesture.

“No, it’s not flattery,” Illya said with sudden realization. “You’re trying to distract me from something else.” He stood up. “I think this session is over.”

Pirelli sighed heavily. “You guys in Section Two always make my job more difficult than it needs to be. But I do understand you.” He extended his hand for Kuryakin to shake. “No hard feelings.”

Illya looked down at the hand. “And that’s a very clumsy attempt, doctor. What do you have in your hand?”

“Just a file folder, Mr. Kuryakin,” he said as he lifted the manila file in the other hand.

Before Kuryakin could react, a fine white puff of gas discharged from the folder and engulfed his face. “*Chto - ? Chert voz’ mi!*¹³” he sputtered, hands waving, as he tried to disperse the cloud from around his head.

“Calm down, Illya,” the doctor said quietly. “The gas will have no side effects, but you won’t be able to resist doing what I ask of you. I want you to sit down now and relax.”

The blond agent lowered his arms and haltingly sank down on the couch while Dr. Pirelli pulled a chair over to sit facing him. The doctor was somewhat puzzled to see a hint of trepidation in the blue eyes that looked back at him. “Before we start, let me put your mind at ease. You won’t be made to do anything you truly don’t want to do. Do you believe what I’m telling you?”

There was a moment’s hesitation. “No,” he said simply.

“Why is that?” Pirelli asked softly.

“I am suspicious of everything I don’t have verifiable knowledge of.”

The doctor sat back in his seat. “Did UNCLE teach you that?”

¹³ What the—? Dammit!

“My life experiences taught me.”

“I’ll bet they did.” Pirelli did not know Kuryakin’s life story, but what little he did know more than convinced him that his patient was truthful in his answer.

“Did you enjoy your work with the new Head of Section One, Northeast?”

A look of disappointment formed on the Russian’s face. “Not what I was expecting.”

“Really? I thought some time in your old Headquarters would have been nostalgic at the very least.”

“Buchmeister wanted to keep Berlin as his main office and downgrade the others. Quite different from the way Harry Beldon ran Northeast.”

“How was that?”

“Harry had offices all over Europe. He was never in one office for any great length of time. I just assumed it would be the same with Buchmeister.”

“I understand you were Beldon’s protégé in your earlier days.”

“He was my mentor. He seemed to understand the—difficulties—I was having, being Soviet and, therefore, distrusted. He made my assimilation a little easier.”

“Discovering that he was a THRUSH double agent must have been a blow to you.”

Illya shook his head dejectedly. “I don’t understand how I failed to suspect something.”

“He fooled a great many people, including Mr. Waverly himself. You have no cause to blame yourself. Tell me more about the trip to Northeast.”

“I was looking forward to spending some time in all of Harry’s former offices.”

“But it turned out to be just Berlin. Not fond of the place, are you?”

“I despise Berlin. It’s a constant reminder of the animosity between my country and the rest of the world, among other things—”

Though Pirelli was curious about “other things”, he was certain they had little to do with the situation he was trying to rectify. “Did you think much about your partner while you were in Berlin?”

“It was difficult not to. We’ve worked together a long time.”

“Why didn’t you try to contact him?”

“It was his place to initiate contact.”

“Why?”

Illya hesitated so long that Dr. Pirelli thought he was going to have to prod him again. "Protocol," the Russian said softly.

He thinks he's the one who's been wronged, the doctor thought. Time to change the subject. "Let's talk about Mr. Solo's rescue. Who told you he was in trouble?"

"Heather McNabb, but I had a disquieting sense before that there was something not right."

"So it didn't take much convincing to bring you back to look for him."

"I would have come if they had ordered me to stay away."

"Why?"

"My partner was in trouble and needed me," was the succinct reply, spoken with absolute conviction.

"What did you find when you went looking?"

Illya grimaced and shifted his weight uncomfortably. "The situation was gruesome," he began with revulsion. "They had been left there to starve to death. The agent with Napoleon had been shot, and was dead. Judging from the smell and the condition of the body, the time of death must have been at least three days earlier. Napoleon was unconscious, in critical condition."

"What were your thoughts when you saw Mr. Solo like that?"

"That I had to get him out of there."

"It was more than that, I'm sure," Pirelli pressured gently.

"I was afraid we were too late—that Napoleon was dead," Kuryakin said with distress.

"That possibility weighs very heavily on you," the doctor concluded, satisfied when the blond head nodded slowly. "One might even say that it's a genuine fear for you, isn't it?" Again, a nod. "Without more digging, I'll venture a guess that, in your life, you've lost a fair number of people you cared about."

"Too many," the blond agent murmured, his head bowed.

"And look where you are: in a profession where life expectancy is measured in missions. Well, we won't look too deeply into that." Pirelli sat forward in his chair. "Let's move to a different situation. Mr. Solo told me that you admitted to a certain pleasure when you had to torture him under the guise of Colonel Nexor. Tell me about that."

Illya lifted his head, a look of deep regret weighing heavily on his features. "I don't know why I should have had those feelings."

"Tell me what you felt."

"Satisfaction."

"Were you deriving that satisfaction from inflicting pain on Mr. Solo?"

“No.”

“Where did this sense of satisfaction come from?”

“The deception was going so well. They all believed I was Nexor; Gurnius was grinning like a fool. I was in control of the situation.”

“But you were torturing your partner.”

“I would have done anything to trade places with him,” Illya objected. “What I had to do tore into my soul.”

“What about at Dabree’s compound?”

“It was worse.”

“Why?”

“Napoleon didn’t believe me when I told him why I had to do it. Dabree was going to use her brain-kill machine on him if I didn’t. I was trying to save his life.”

“I think Mr. Solo might be trying to cover his guilt for acting on his desire to push UNCLE aside in his mind for a few days, which then led him to capture and revealing where you were.”

“He knows we can never push aside who we are.”

“Do you blame him for trying to?”

“No, I’ve often wanted to do the same.”

“Do you blame him for revealing where you were?”

“No. There was no way he could have resisted Dabree’s truth serum.”

“I want to know about the anger you feel towards your partner.”

The blond UNCLE agent sighed heavily, as he again tried to resist answering.

“Tell me, Mr. Kuryakin,” Dr. Pirelli urged. “There’s no getting past this unless you admit to yourself how you feel.”

“I’m angry at his lack of faith, the belittling sarcasm, and his offhanded defiance even when he knows I’m right. I’m angry at myself for being angry. I know Napoleon can be like this; I’ve accepted that and more from him. There is no one who has ever been closer to me in my life; no one I’ve ever allowed to become this close. And I feel conflicted with myself, too.”

“I’m going to help you and Mr. Solo mend your relationship.” *If I can just figure out exactly how to do that*, Dr. Pirelli thought. It was apparent to him that The Gurnius Affair and Dr. Dabree had merely brought to the surface and amplified feelings that had been there throughout their partnership. “I’m going to spray a light mist against your face which will counteract the gas, and you’ll be free to go. What we’ve talked about here will slip from your conscious memory like a

dream, but you will be more receptive to the idea of talking when I ask to see you again. Do you understand, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“I understand,” Kuryakin answered agreeably, then flinched slightly as the aerosol touched his face. He blinked a few times and looked up at the doctor. “What were we talking about?”

Dr. Pirelli stood up. “I believe it was your stubbornness. In any case you’re free to go.”

Illya stood quickly before the doctor changed his mind. “I’d like to say it was a pleasure, doctor—” He shrugged.

“It was no barrel of laughs for me either. Keep in mind, we’re not done here.”

“We may very well be done, doctor. I’m on my way up to Mr. Waverly’s office to discuss my permanent transfer to the Berlin office as Chief Enforcement Officer, Northeast.”

Pirelli looked at him in amazement. “Berlin? When did you decide that?”

“Why should it matter to you if I decide to accept a promotion?”

The doctor quickly composed himself. “You just surprised me. I was under the impression you were satisfied with your current position.”

“Situations change. Perhaps it’s time to move on. Until next time, if there is one.” The blond Russian was out the door so quickly, Pirelli could have easily been convinced he had run out as fast as he could.

“The CEA Northeast position working out of Berlin,” Waverly said puffing on his pipe. “Yes, Ulrich informed me that he offered it to you. He was impressed with your stalwartness. Your *Unerschütterlichkeit*¹⁴, he called it.”

Kuryakin lowered his head so his boss would not see his smugly satisfied expression. “I have first-hand experience in the workings of the German mind, sir. Herr Buchmeister believed he understood me because of his experience with the Soviets. We ‘understand’ each other now.”

“And you feel you would be more of an asset to the Berlin office than here in New York.”

Illya looked up and directly into the older man’s face. “At the risk of sounding pompous, sir, I would be an asset anywhere I am posted.”

“That’s not what I asked, though you are correct in your own assessment.”

“Determining where I can be of most use would seem to be a matter for you and Herr Buchmeister.”

“And I told Ulrich that the decision is on hold for the moment until other matters are settled.”

Illya looked at Waverly with narrowed eyes. “What other matters are you referring to, sir?”

¹⁴ unflappability

“You know very well what matters, Mr. Kuryakin. In the meantime, I have a two-to-four week mission that has your qualifications written all over it, but you may need some time to prepare. How’s your Arabic and Hebrew?”

“A little rusty, but I should be able to polish it in a day or two with some help. What’s the mission?”

“You’ll be spending the next four weeks in the Middle East gathering information for the United Nations on Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem. Most importantly, we need to make sure THRUSH isn’t interfering in the situation, and that the information the UN is asking for is what is truly happening in the region.”

“I thought we didn’t get involved with squabbles between nations, sir.”

“The United Nations Security Council is considering a resolution on the matter. What they need is reliable and unbiased information to make a knowledgeable decision. Secretary-General Thant contacted me directly with the request. It is his opinion that UNCLE with its reputation for neutrality is the only organization that can handle an assignment like this. I’m sure you’re aware how volatile this situation is with countries like the United States and the Soviet Union feeling pressure from their allies to act.”

“If the UN can provide me with some native speakers to help me brush up on the languages, I can leave in a day or two.”

Waverly nodded. “Excellent. We’ll discuss the other matter on your return.”

Kuryakin left his superior’s office somewhat dissatisfied about “the other matter”. He was sure he was being manipulated, given a period of time to consider all the ramifications. He didn’t want to think about leaving New York, leaving the few friends he had, and the partner who didn’t want to be a partner anymore. Was it possible that Waverly had seen the deception in the department of his number two agent? Or had Dr. Pirelli somehow deduced that Berlin was not a place the Russian would choose to go?

Illya went to his office and shut the door. It occurred to him that while he had full recall of and entering and leaving Dr. Pirelli’s office, he couldn’t seem to remember much about the time in between. What was even more confusing was that he knew he should be concerned about it, but he honestly felt no apprehension. Besides: what was done was done and it seemed to have no consequence either way. He had more important things to occupy his time right now.

Four weeks later.

Dr. Pirelli greeted Napoleon as he entered the waiting room. “Good to see you, Mr. Solo. Have you been released by medical?”

The CEA nodded slowly. “Yesterday.”

“Excellent. Why don’t you follow me and we’ll get started?”

Silently, Napoleon followed Dr. Pirelli to the plush study and sat down on the couch. “Before we start, I want to extend my condolences for Agent Simonelli. I understand you and he went back to your Survival School days.”

“Thanks. We weren’t that close, but he was a good agent. I’ll miss him.”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment. Do you want to talk about him?”

Solo shifted his weight in a gesture that belied his answer. “No.”

“Something about his death bothers you and your body language says you do want to talk about it.”

There was a long pause before Napoleon began, as if he needed to fight against himself to put the experience into words. “I watched Tony die right there in front of me, and I couldn’t do anything to help him. He’d just transferred from Rome; had a little over a year before forty, and he wanted his last year to be a great one. What a waste,” he sighed, his voice almost breaking. There was another sigh, longer and deeper.

“Being in the cell with him after he died must have been horrific as well.”

Solo shook his head and his hands curled into fists. “I’ve been around death nearly my whole adult life. The smells of blood and decay are nothing new.”

“But this wasn’t the body of an enemy.”

“No. And what made it worse, sometimes I could swear it was Illya laying there, staring at me. Dead—”

“Hallucinations from acute dehydration. It wasn’t Mr. Kuryakin.”

“I know, but it could have been.”

“It could have just as easily turned out very differently as well. Agent Simonelli was not Mr. Kuryakin.”

Napoleon nodded, agreeing. “No, their methods weren’t at all alike.”

“I’m sure that you’re aware that Mr. Kuryakin was largely responsible for finding you.”

Solo snorted a harsh laugh. “Yeah, the Old Man made sure I knew that.”

“Especially after you woke up and told Mr. Kuryakin to leave you alone,” Dr. Pirelli finished. “He sat by your side for over three days until you regained consciousness.”

“Well, you know, doc, maybe I wanted him to feel the way I did when he kicked me out of his hospital room after he was wounded.”

“Listen to yourself, Napoleon. You’re sounding like a vindictive child; returning tit-for-tat.”

Solo sat forward, his head in his hands. “I know. God, I know. It’s just that I’ve been so damned *pissed* at him since he laid that bit on me about feeling pleasure while he was pretending to be Nexor. Even though he was completely self-debasing while he was telling me. I even felt irritated that he had this grand vacation planned for himself and I was left to my own devices.”

“You felt a little abandoned.”

Napoleon looked up. “Yeah. Stupid, huh? Especially since I’m usually the one walking off with the girl, bidding *him* adieu. I wonder, sometimes, why he puts up with me.” Then he chuckled. “Well, maybe I do know why.”

“Enlighten me.”

“A long time ago, near the beginning of our partnership, he said something that’s stayed with me. He said, ‘You are *zadushevny* to me, my greatest strength and my greatest weakness.’¹⁵ When I found out what that word meant, I almost cried.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means ‘one behind the soul’. Closer than a brother; closer than just about anything else. I feel the same way about him.”

“Aren’t you still allowed to be angry at him? Families quarrel, after all.”

“Not like this. All I seem to want to do, even when I just think about him, is put my fist through his face.”

Dr. Pirelli folded his arms. “I think you both have been misinterpreting your anger for something else; and it’s largely because when we become adults we express two completely different emotions the same way. When we are children, and are hurt emotionally, we cry; but when we are hurt as adults, we express it as anger. Everything you and Mr. Kuryakin have been telling me; and yes, Mr. Kuryakin has been talking; everything points to emotional pain. Neither of you betrayed the other, but you’ve hurt each other emotionally.”

“So what do we do about it?”

Dr. Pirelli smiled. “I believe you may already have the solution, Mr. Solo. I should have seen it before.”

Napoleon looked up at the doctor questioningly. “You mean a physical fight?”

“Why not? I seem to recall a number of your agent partners spar regularly. You and Mr. Kuryakin do not.”

“Well, we manage to get into enough fist-fights as part of the job.”

“Perhaps you should consider it. You’re different people, you and your partner. There’s bound to be friction; and if there isn’t, one of you is swallowing your displeasure. That can only be maintained so long. I’m going to talk to Mr. Waverly about arranging a ‘clear-the-air’ match between you two as soon as Mr. Kuryakin gets back from his mission. In the meantime, make some mental notes about why you’re going to put your fist into your friend’s face.” Dr. Pirelli extended his hand. “I’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

Napoleon stood to accept the hand, but he was not at all sure beating his ‘behind the soul’ friend into a bloody pulp was going to solve any problem.

¹⁵ From my story “A RUSSIAN’S HEART AND SOUL”

The first item Illya found waiting for him upon his return from the Middle East was a note on his desk ordering him to Dr. Pirelli's office. He'd been pleased with the overall success of his mission and in a good mood until opening that small folded sheet of paper. Irritated, he phoned down to the psychiatrist's office to arrange a time, only to be doubly irritated when told he was expected immediately.

He shrugged his jacket back onto his shoulders and headed to the elevator, ready to confront the doctor with a full-blown Russian snit. Again he found the object of his discontent in the waiting room, casually reading a magazine.

Pirelli looked up at the blond agent and the exaggerated severe expression. "Mr. Kuryakin, would you like me to tell you why Section Two agents avoid my department like the plague?"

The Russian scowled even more. "I know why. We despise being treated like laboratory rats."

"Well, you certainly have that bit of Party-Line crap down pat." Dr. Pirelli stood in front of the deadly UNCLE agent, a man who had taken more lives than he could count, a man who bravely walked into hell if necessity required it. "Come on, you know the drill."

Kuryakin followed the taller man to his office and sat on the couch. Pirelli pulled his desk chair across the room to sit opposite.

"No, Mr. Kuryakin, you hate us because we try to make you think about the things you'd rather bury deep inside of you. The resulting detritus piles up and eats away at the noble men you are. Why do you think Section Two agents are required to leave the field at forty? Do you honestly have yourself deluded enough to believe that it's strictly physical?"

"Think about the intelligence agents in your own county; what happens to them when the things they've had to do throughout their careers can no longer be eased by a regular, liberal soaking in vodka?"

Though the doctor was speaking, Illya seemed to hear Napoleon's voice from months ago, urging him to excise the scarred-over wounds from his past and allow the caring of friendship to heal them finally. Well, he had, and look where it got them both. "The dead feel nothing," he replied evenly.

"Is that the future you see for yourself?"

"Of course. We all die eventually. It is the way of things. And for an UNCLE agent, it tends to come sooner rather than later."

"Is that the hope of UNCLE agents? Is that what *you* hope for?"

"When one considers that upon leaving the field, the contract for my services between UNCLE and *Sovetskiy Soyuz* will be completed. My only choices then are to return or defect, neither of which I want to do and both of which will probably end in my eventual death as a traitor to my country. I would much rather my death wore a more meaningful distinction."

"Okay, Mr. Kuryakin, so between now and your inevitable, but meaningful death, wouldn't you rather that your life also wore a meaningful distinction?"

“My life is my work.”

“But you kill people for a living; there is little nobility to be found there.”

“There is nobility in the cause for which I fight and for which I have sworn to give my life, if necessary. I did not have that when my cause was the welfare of the Soviet Union.”

“Why?”

“UNCLE is dedicated to the preservation of world peace. No single country can claim that as their ultimate goal.”

“Is your work for UNCLE the only thing that gives your life meaningful distinction? What about your relationships? Friendships, for example?”

“Relationships are exploitable weaknesses.”

“How?”

Illya sat forward on the couch, his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, head bowed. “I can’t do this.”

“What can’t you do, Illya?” The doctor said softly.

The head came up and the blue eyes looked directly at the doctor. “So, it’s first names now, is it?”

“I thought it might help. Keep going, you have my interest.”

“I know you want me to talk about Napoleon, about our partnership, how I feel. There are some things that can’t be put into words and some that shouldn’t be.”

“So, it’s first names now, is it?” Dr. Pirelli said with a smile.

A small frown touched the corners of Kuryakin’s mouth. “Don’t be impertinent.”

“Sorry. How about if I give you a word then? *Zadushevny*. Did I pronounce it correctly?”

The Russian nodded slowly. “Napoleon’s been here before me, I see.”

“Mr. Solo said the word means ‘one behind the soul’. That’s a rich metaphor.”

Illya shrugged. “We Russians have our moments.”

“I’d be humbled to the core if someone used that word to describe what they meant to me.”

“And you would be humbled, doctor, in more ways than one.” The blond agent stood up from the couch and began to pace. “In this business, friendship often carries a high price. The things we sometimes must do. The things we can never do. Behind the soul is a dangerous place to be.”

“How so?”

“The mission is paramount. Do I sacrifice a friend for the sake of the mission? And if I do, how do I live with that betrayal of trust? Better to have no friends and grieve less.”

“Humans are gregarious creatures; they need to form relationships.”

“In Soviet Intelligence, we are told to form no friendships; that your friends will ultimately betray you.”

“Which probably explains why the rate of alcoholism in the Soviet Union is so high. How much more have you been drinking since you and Mr. Solo parted ways?”

Illya’s expression said: *How did you know?*

“Like it or not, friendship with your partner satisfies needs in you that you don’t even fully realize. He is probably the only person who has seen you at your absolute worst, and at your absolute best, just as you have seen him. Who else can you trust to keep your darkest moments from driving you insane? Who else would share in your most glorious moments without jealousy?”

Kuryakin sat again and shook his head.

“I know about what happened at Dr. Dabree’s compound. And I read the case file on the Gurnius Affair.”

“Then you know it’s not a matter of me trusting Napoleon. How does one share dark moments when they chip away at trust already shaken to its foundation?”

“Are you so sure the foundation has been irreparably damaged?”

Illya stood up and began to pace once more. “This is pointless. We are both at a place where all we want to do when we see each other is beat the hell out of the other.”

“That’s what your partner said. In a way, it makes sense. I’ve seen partners spar in the gym, and they sometimes really inflict some damage. But, I’ve noticed too that those who do go one-on-one like that on occasion tend to spend less time in my office than those who don’t. The fisticuffs seem to clear the air of conflicts between the partners that they can’t express in words. Sort of applied testosterone.”

“Napoleon is far angrier than I am.”

The doctor smiled. “No, he’s not. You just hide it better, even from yourself. The GRU taught you well.” The doctor laid his hand on the blond agent’s shoulder. “I already have Waverly’s sanction on this, and the gym has agreed to keep out the spectators, except for two Section Three agents to prevent you two from killing each other. It’s time to clear the air.”

Illya looked up from the bench where he sat tying the laces of a pair of well-worn sneakers.

“Barefoot, Mr. Kuryakin,” Dr. Pirelli said, observing that the blond-haired man’s eyes were focused instead, over his left shoulder at Napoleon behind him. “You’ll be on the mat.”

Kuryakin shrugged slightly and his gaze returned to his feet. “No problem,” he said softly as his pulled off the tattered cloth shoes. He stood up and followed the other two men after they passed; noting Solo’s stare had never wavered from him, either.

The gym was devoid of occupants, save the manager of the gym and two men from Section Three, all similarly attired. Dr. Pirelli walked across the mat and addressed the manager. “Thanks for arranging this, Roger.”

The sturdily built man nodded. “Glad to do it, doctor. This has been long overdue.”

“*Holy Christ!*” Napoleon declared with irritation. “Is there *anyone* in this HQ who doesn’t know our business?”

Pirelli looked up at Napoleon. “I think there’s a secretary who just started last week who doesn’t know a thing.” He smiled at Napoleon’s grimace. “The price of notoriety. When Solo and Kuryakin, who spend a lot of time in each other’s company, suddenly are seen anywhere but in each other’s company, it’s a topic of speculative conversation.”

Illya walked past Napoleon and turned to face his partner. “Enough talking. Let’s get this over with.”

“You’re on,” Pirelli said. He and Roger, the gym manager, moved off the mat to leave an unencumbered space for the sparring.

Illya stood opposite Napoleon, his posture relaxed. “Who’s going to start this?”

Solo shook his head. “I guess we can flip a coin.” He brushed his hand along his hip where a pocket would have been if he had not been wearing sweatpants, and gestured to the gym manager. “Toss me a quarter, Roger.” The gym manager flicked a coin in Napoleon’s direction and the agent caught it.

“Is that one of your double-headed coins?” Illya asked sternly.

Napoleon snorted a harsh laugh. “Good God, Illya, you’re an untrusting son-of-a-bitch. Come and see for yourself.” He held the coin up for the Russian to see.

Illya took several steps forward and Solo showed him both sides of the coin. “Satisfied?”

Kuryakin tilted his head forward in a very slight affirmative gesture.

Napoleon prepared to flip the coin into the air. “Call it.”

The instant the coin left the CEA’s fingers, Illya dropped to a crouch, arced his right leg towards Solo and called out “Heads!” The taller agent’s feet were swept out from under him, and Napoleon’s hip hit the mat with slap and a grunt. The blond agent stood over him. “*That’s* for lying to me *and* to yourself when you said it didn’t matter,” he said, his voice low in his throat, deep, almost ominous sounding.

Solo looked up from the mat at the suddenly, very Slavic-looking blond-haired man. He expected to see belligerence, but the expression was bland. He smiled; making certain Illya saw

his anger as stood up slowly. "Clever. That was very clever. I think I understand the rules now." He approached, but Kuryakin made no effort to retreat.

He threw a punch at his adversary's head, and when Illya moved to block it, he countered with a swift fist in the stomach. The Russian doubled over with an audible moan, fell to his knees, then caught himself with one hand, cradling his middle with the other. "*That's* for frying my brain twice in less than a month!" he spat down at the panting figure.

With nearly blinding speed, Illya reached up, grabbed Napoleon's tee-shirt with both hands and pulled/half-flung him down on the mat. "*That's* for throttling me when I was trying to save your life!" the blond agent growled back, still panting from the pain of the stomach punch.

Solo tackled Kuryakin from their mutual-crouched position, and then pulled himself up onto one elbow. "*That's* for giving me signs Cochise couldn't read!"

Illya drove the heel of his hand upwards, clipping Napoleon's jaw, forcing the teeth to cut into the tongue. While Solo gingerly explored his bleeding tongue, Kuryakin slithered to his feet a respectful distance from his partner. "*That's* for being so dense that you couldn't translate 'quiet game' into Italian."

Napoleon looked up at the blond Russian. "*Guioco piano*¹⁶," he said thoughtfully, then frowned. "Chess." He stood up slowly. "Pulled that one out of your ass, didn't you?"

"It was supposed to save your pompous ass," Illya retorted bitterly, but then just stood watching as the other man weighed it in his mind.

Finally Solo nodded slowly. "Okay, I'll give you that one." He held out his hand. Kuryakin looked at the hand with narrowed eyes for a moment, and then stepped forward to accept the handshake. Instead, he got a fist on the jaw that dimmed his consciousness for a moment until the jar of his backside hitting the mat restored it somewhat. Through a buzzing in his head, he heard, "*That's* for insubordination when you ordered Witherspoon to put me on the chopper."

Illya held his jaw, manipulating it, until his mind cleared enough for him to stand once again. Then he feigned more fuzziness than he actually felt. "I wouldn't have to be insubordinate if you'd get it through your thick skull that while I may not have your devious charm, I *can* talk my way out of a difficult situation." The ploy worked for Napoleon took a step towards him. In one explosive burst of movement, Illya sucker punched Solo below the sternum.

With a long moan, the CEA crumpled to the mat, instinctively curling around his own midsection. Illya waited until his partner's breathing evened out before he bent over. "Did that hurt?" he asked mockingly.

Solo opened one eye. "Yes, goddammit, that hurt."

The lips that so seldom smiled enough to show any teeth broke into a broad grin. "Good," he said, purposely accentuating his Russian intonation. "*That's* for pulling rank on me as if I were some greenstick agent. I was GRU before you knew what UNCLE was."

Napoleon struggled to his knees. "I never pull rank on you."

¹⁶ In reference to THE GUIOCO PIANO AFFAIR

Illya watched with a small frown as Solo pulled himself to his feet. “The hell you don’t,” he said, and crossed his arms.

“I’m used to giving orders. I’m responsible on a daily basis for all of Section II in New York and ultimately for all of Operations and Enforcement in North America. Do you really think I ‘lord’ that over you?”

There was a slight shrug. “Only constantly.”

In a half-hearted, open-armed gesture of apology, Napoleon strode forward. “Well, gee, Illya. I’m sorry. I had no idea.” He punched Illya again on the jaw, and this time, he didn’t hold back on the force.

Kuryakin hit the mat prone with a strangling grunt of pain, cradling his lower jaw with both hands, as he tried not to make any other audible sound.

Napoleon bent over, almost low enough to grasp an arm. “Did *that* hurt? Hmm?”

Illya rolled over onto his hip, his hand still holding his jaw. “No,” he muttered stubbornly, but his voice sounded thin.

Solo almost chuckled out loud. “You are such a liar, Kuryakin.”

“You hit me in the exact same spot—Are you trying to break my jaw?! Or knock me out?”

“So I can put up with your charming disposition while you have to eat through a straw? Or stand here waiting until you wake up again? No, *that* was a well-deserved one for being an idiot and going back to Dabree’s compound *alone* to destroy her brain-kill machine. And then almost getting *yourself* killed in the bargain. Didn’t talk your way out of that one very well, did you?”

“One person had a better chance of getting the job done. I would have just had to rescue you again.” He sighed heavily, but only partially due to his aching jaw. “But I will concede that I didn’t fully consider the THRUSH turning the tables on me.” He stood up very slowly. “I’ve lost track: whose turn is it?”

Solo looked at Illya intently. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Haven’t you two had enough of beating up on each other?” Pirelli called from the side of the room.

The two UNCLE agents looked over and spoke in unison. “Shut up, Pirelli!”

“Where were we?” Kuryakin said softly, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth.

“It’s your turn.”

Illya looked thoughtful for a moment; then he threw a punch at Napoleon that he expected to be blocked. He caught the blocking arm and used the momentum of it and his own body to flip Solo onto his back. “*That’s* for not trusting my judgment when you don’t have all the facts. Or any other time, for that matter.”

Napoleon threw himself at Illya's midline, tackling him just short of the edge of the mat. He got up quickly. "That's for kicking me out of your hospital room like I was some sort of annoying stranger!"

The blond Russian threw himself at Solo's ankles, shouting. "That's for *being* annoying!" He stood up, panting from the exertion. "I was unconscious for three days and the first thing you did when I woke up was pick a fight."

Solo punched Kuryakin on the right cheek. "*That's* for trying to end our fight by dying on me, you gutless Cossack!"

Illya returned the punch, also on the right cheek. "That's for getting yourself into a situation where you nearly died from lack of food and water, you bumbling *Amerikanskaya!*"

The image of Tony Simonelli flashed momentarily across Napoleon's consciousness. The CEA of UNCLE North America stared back at his Number 2 and knew then why he had been so angry for so long. He walked up to the blond agent and slapped him across the face with all of his strength. "*That's* for trying to make me think I want to do this alone," he accused harshly as Illya stumbled back from the force of the blow.

Kuryakin regained his equilibrium and stared back, stubbornly refusing to cover his stinging cheek. And in that moment, he too understood his anger. He frowned slightly and approached Napoleon. With all the intensity of his own outrage he returned the slap, back-handed. "No—*this* is for *you* trying to make *me* think I want to do this alone."

The pair stared at each other for long moments, sweat-soaked, bleeding, and emotionally spent until Napoleon lifted his hand to rub his cheek. "Wow, you have quite a back-hand there."

"I'm much stronger than I look." He lifted his hand to his own cheek in recognition of his partner's strength.

Napoleon nodded. "I know you are. It's one of the reasons we function well as a team. They misjudge you."

"Well, I wouldn't be able to do that if you didn't distract them."

Solo sighed heavily. "You know, Illya, I really don't want to work alone. I've grown accustomed to having a top agent at my back. And you're the best there is."

Illya cleared his throat self-consciously. "Napoleon, I absolutely detest everything about Berlin, including Buchmeister. And I have no desire to endure the headaches associated with being a CEA. I don't want to work alone either, and you're the best there is." A mischievous grin touched his lips. "Or so you tell me."

Napoleon chuckled for a moment; then became serious. "I should have admitted to you how much The Gurnius Affair affected me. It made me desperately want to get away from everything UNCLE for a while, to just put it out of my mind. Yeah, I had my doubts about the woman Flostone had transformed herself into, but I talked myself out of listening to my instincts because I wanted to forget about how we live most of the time. You have no idea how much I regret that mistake for what it put you through."

"I understand now, Napoleon, thanks to the input of our good doctor, Pirelli. I should have been more forthcoming to you as well. Doing what I did under the guise of Nexor tore into me like nothing ever had before. And I didn't enjoy it; I would have gladly, *willingly* switched places with you. At the time, I was too deep into my own remorse to understand what I was really feeling. And then, to do it all over again. The best I could hope for was that you would be alive so you *could* hate me."

"I could never hate you, Illya. I know and I understand that you did what you had to do to save both the mission and me, both times. Also input from Pirelli. Though, I'm surprised he was able to get as much as he did from you."

Kuryakin nodded pensively. "I am too." Then he smiled. "Actually, I think he drugged me."

"Well, I *know* he drugged me."

"Devious bastards, aren't they?"

Pirelli walked onto the mat to stand between them. "How else are we going to heal you guys? Your job does more than bruise and break you physically, you know. So gentlemen, are we done here?"

Napoleon raised his eyebrows at his friend. "What do you say, Illya? Are we done here?"

Again, there was a small smile, but it spoke loudly to Solo. "Yes, my friend, we're done. And just for the record, I could never hate you either."

Napoleon clapped his hands together, clasping them. "Well, when you put it like that, I guess the drinks are on me."

"Napoleon, where are we going to go looking like this?"

The CEA winked. "I think I know just the place."

"I'm not going to have to get dressed up, am I? Black eyes do not go well with black ties."

Napoleon ran an eye over his partner's attire: a torn, sweaty and bloody tee-shirt and an equally decrepit pair of sweatpants. "Any change in your attire is a step up, but your usual casual black turtleneck shirt will be just fine." He started towards the locker room with Illya not far behind. "You know, overall, that felt pretty good. Maybe we should do that more often; really does help clear the air." He pulled on the door handle of the locker room.

Illya caught the door as Solo stepped through. "I agree. I think once a week should be sufficient."

Napoleon turned around to face his partner, incredulous. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

The corners of the Russian's mouth turned up and the blue eyes held a hint of mischief. "Well, you *are* insufferable."

"*I'm* insufferable? Who else would put up with your moods, *Your Grace*?" Napoleon walked towards the showers again with his partner following.

“I told you to stop calling me that.”

“I think it suits you. Heather agrees with me.”

A look of horror filled the normally unreadable features. “You told Heather?”

“Of course, Illya, and she told Mitzi, and Mitzi told—”

“Napoleon!” Kuryakin interrupted angrily. “I’ll drag you back out to that gym and this time I won’t be easy on you!”

“Don’t get your heritage into a snit. I’m kidding. Damn, you’re touchy. I think the ladies here would find you being a high class Russian prince terribly sexy.”

“They already have enough to talk about where you’re concerned. I prefer to be left out of the gossip pool, if you don’t mind.” He caught Napoleon’s arm. “Speaking of which, did you *really* refer to me a ‘goddamn little godless Commie prick’ to Waverly’s face?”

Solo cleared his throat embarrassedly. “Well, I was mad that you had put in for a transfer to Northeast, and I guess I let my anger get the best of me.”

Illya smiled that quirky little smile which always meant trouble for the one receiving it. “Wow! You are so lucky he didn’t bust you down to Section Three.”

“How did you know about that anyway?”

The Russian pulled a towel from the cabinet beside the showers and pushed past the American. “I have my sources. Only one thing I don’t quite understand is how I can be damned by a god, when I’m a godless Communist. I believe the phrase is known as an oxymoron, isn’t it? Or does it just have to do with the last two syllables?” Illya smirked and began to lather the shampoo on his head.

Napoleon smiled fondly at the speaker of the glib and wondered fleetingly if once a week might not be often enough.

Epilogue

Illya was completely taken aback by the bar Napoleon had chosen for their post-clear-the-air-brawl drink. “You *know* about this place?” he asked incredulously.

“Tovarisch, I am a very cosmopolitan man-about-town. I know about every legit watering hole in Manhattan,” Napoleon responded smugly. “I even know about a majority of the non-legit ones,” he added with an undeniable smirk underlying his tone.

It was true this particular jazz club, “Two Beat in the Pocket”, was located in Little Italy on Canal Street just off Mulberry. So it was likely more in Solo’s general “entertaining zone” than a locale in the Village would be. Yet still Illya was absolutely amazed his sophisticated partner had any familiarity with such a downscale “watering hole” at all.

“Come on, let’s go inside. It’s too cold to just stand here,” Napoleon suggested as he shivered slightly from the brisk wind that was currently blowing.

Draping an arm about the shorter man's shoulders, Solo propelled his partner through the door of the establishment toward the bar at one end of the room.

"Hunny-bunny!" came a gleeful shout as a pretty young woman with hair more orange than red ran out from behind the bar and toward them. She quickly had Napoleon wrapped in a greeting embrace and was enthusiastically kissing seemingly every square inch of his face. Finally she pulled back to look at him. "You told me you were fully mended," she criticized lightly as she ran a careful finger along the darkening bruise that currently decorated his right cheek.

"In more ways than you know," Napoleon assured her with a ready smile.

"Barkeep," a patron called from the other end of bar, "another round here please."

"Perch, and stay roosted right here," Ginny charged Napoleon as she pushed him bodily down on a vacant barstool and then rushed back behind the wooden counter to fill the order from the vocal patron.

Illya watched the woman appreciatively as she moved. Dressed in a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a low-slung pair of snugly fitted, hip-hugging, backside-clinging jeans, and a small black apron stenciled with a silver musical cleft that was tied sideways and slanted down on one side to thigh-level, he had to admit she was well worthy of observation.

"Who is that sexy little hurricane?" he queried of his partner as he seated himself on an empty stool beside the other man.

Napoleon chuckled low in his throat before replying simply, "Just someone I met on a mission."

"Why does that not surprise me?" questioned Illya with weary yet very tolerant censure.

Then the 'sexy little hurricane' was back, taking hold of Solo's face in one hand and clucking her tongue as she further inspected the bruise near his cheekbone. "You're much too cavalier with your storybook looks," she chastised him.

Illya couldn't suppress his snicker at that remark, causing Ginny to look his way.

"Friend or foe?" she asked Solo in reference to the blond man.

Napoleon grinned mischievously, "Bit of both today. He is the creator of this bruise you are so taken with."

Ginny now looked Illya over. "That technicolor eye and gaudy mauve jaw a color-dubbing from Sir Lancelot here?" she asked him pointedly.

"Uh, I think the proper answer to that would be yes," hedged Illya a bit uncertainly.

Ginny now moved over to where Illya sat and, taking his face in hand, surveyed it as closely as she had previously Napoleon's.

"I imagine it's a measurement of the knightly friendly jousting philosophy?"

"Something like that," conceded Napoleon.

“Barkeep!” that insistent patron called again.

“Stay!” Ginny bid the two men as she scurried off behind the bar once more.

Illya’s eyes were surreptitiously drawn to the energetic young woman’s movements. “You going to introduce me?” he inquired of Napoleon.

“Maybe,” teased his partner with a devilish smirk.

Ginny returned in short order, this time staying behind the bar as she spoke to them, fixing various cocktails with sure efficiency all the while.

“So, you and Sir Bors up for a little alcoholic medication?” she questioned Napoleon.

“Sir Bors?” repeated Illya with a blink.

Ginny grinned. “Faithful companion to Sir Lancelot in his quest for the Holy Grail.”

“Whoa, Illya, she has you pegged!” Napoleon ribbed his partner. “And Sir Bors: that even sounds Russian!”

“Napoleon, you are begging for me to discolor that other cheek of yours,” warned Illya.

“Illya: that your name?” interjected Ginny with a big smile.

“Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin, at your service, Madame,” Illya formally introduced himself because it damned well didn’t seem that Napoleon was going to.

Ginny asked askance of Napoleon, “Did he just call me a madam?”

“He’s polite but none too tactful,” bantered back Napoleon, thoroughly enjoying the moment. “But he does like your outfit. He’s been admiring it since we first came in.”

The Russian glanced at his American friend at first with shock and then with retribution in his eyes.

Ginny only giggled and then introduced herself to Illya. “I’m Ginny Naline.”

“Oh, the woman who contacted U.N.C.L.E. from San Francisco when my partner here went so carelessly missing.”

Napoleon harrumphed a bit noisily, but Illya only ignored him as for the moment did the lovely barkeep.

Ginny nodded. “And then the dark prince had some of those avuncular types trace me so he could grant the prospect of this kingdom in the city.”

Napoleon looked a bit embarrassed as he rambled out his justification. “Well, you needed a place to set yourself up, and the manager here was looking for a bartender, and you are a licensed mixologist, and Benny has told me he certainly doesn’t mind that you keep the male patrons very interested in ordering cocktails.”

“Honey on wheat bread,” she stated with a warm smile at Napoleon.

“I have never known you to prefer such a sandwich,” Illya whispered in some confusion to Solo.

“No, that’s something she... uhm... never mind,” the other man prevaricated in a soft aside.

“I’m glad you decided to take the job, Carrot-top,” Napoleon now spoke to Ginny. “Benny’s a good guy, though I admit the name of his place here still makes me do a double-take.”

“Why’s that?” asked Illya.

“Well... ‘Two Beat in the Pocket’... Never understood using a verbal riff on... you know... pocket bingo,¹⁷” he spoke the last two words with *sotto voce* emphasis, “as the name of a bar.”

Illya was befuddled by the ‘pocket bingo’ colloquialism, but Ginny only started laughing uncontrollably. “Hunny-bunny, it’s a jazz club,” she emphasized, as if that explained it all.

“And jazz-babies are really into that sort of thing?” Solo questioned with widened eyes.

Ginny was laughing once more as Illya noted, “I think I’m missing something. ‘Two Beat in the Pocket’ is a perfectly acceptable form of jazz slang.” So she pulled herself up by placing two hands on the surface of the bar and then leaned in toward the Russian and whispered directly into his ear. At her private revelation Illya required of her, “Surely you jest?” Ginny shook her head most definitively, and then Illya too burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“What?” asked Napoleon in obvious frustration.

“Napoleon,” Illya finally managed to get past his mirth, “‘two beat’ is a slang term for a type of jazz rhythm where four-four time is given a bass drum grounding of only two beats.”

“And ‘in the pocket’,” supplemented Ginny, “means the rhythm section of a group is perfectly in sync.”

“Oh,” murmured Napoleon as his face turned uncharacteristically beet red.

Illya and Ginny looked back at each other and both again erupted into ringing peals of laughter.

“Hey, it’s not polite to gang up on a friend,” complained Napoleon with a just the hint of a whine in his tone.

“So much for that reputation as knowledgeable man-about-town, my friend,” countered Illya as he slapped the other man on the back.

“I don’t guess you’ll ever let me live this down, huh?” Napoleon surmised unhappily.

“Awww, hunny-bunny,” Ginny consoled him with a quick kiss as she once more physically raised herself on the bar with her hands and leaned across the counter, this time toward Solo. “You’ll always be my Sir Brave and Besotting. Drinks on me, my fine warriors,” she then advised the two agents as she slipped back fully behind the counter and knowingly poured a scotch on the rocks for Napoleon and an iced vodka neat for Illya.

¹⁷ New York slang, look up pocket billiards (British slang meaning the same thing)

“How did you...?” began Illya as she plunked the respective glass down before each guy.

“I’m a licensed mixologist, sky-eyes,” Ginny informed Illya with a sly wink. “But,” she continued as she turned her attention again to Napoleon, pulling him by the lapel of his jacket across the bar to her, “there is still plenty of mixing I want to try with you.”

“Barkeep,” the pesky patron at the other end of the bar called for her attention once more.

With a resigned sigh she flicked her tongue quickly over Napoleon’s lips and then let loose her hold of his jacket to make her way down to the other side of the bar.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents were quiet for a moment and then Illya declared frankly to Napoleon, “I’ll understand if you want to take her up on the offer.”

Napoleon slowly shook his head. “Not tonight, Illya. Tonight is strictly for celebrating the resurrection of a partnership and the return of a true friend.”

Illya smiled his signature half-smile as he raised his glass of vodka. “To partners and true friends!” he toasted, his voice deep with emotion.

“*Vchera, segodnya i zavtra!*¹⁸ “ added Napoleon with equal emotion and a signature smile of his own as he too raised his glass in toast.

—THE END—



¹⁸ Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow