



FORCED FOCUS

BY [LAH](#)

Spring 1968...

He couldn't move his eyes away. He wanted desperately to turn his head, to drop his eyelids, to press his hands up over his face and thus blot out the vision before him. But he couldn't. His eyes remained focused on the horror. His pupils dilated with revulsion, with anger, with shock. Mr. Waverly was being butchered right in front of him and he could do nothing. He uselessly battered his fists against the soundproof glass of the booth where the Old Man was being held. He was the witness, the witness to Waverly's flesh being slashed and stabbed and sliced a thousand times over. Fingernails torn out, ears cut away; eyes gouged and knives stuck deep in many places in his body: the assailants were relentless in their cruelty. Still the indomitable Old Man clung tenaciously to life.

"You've given it a good fight," he spoke a quiet plea, "but I don't want you to suffer anymore."

Ilya Kuryakin didn't believe in prayers; thus he did not believe in prayers being answered. Yet when he saw the Old Man collapse from the chair and one of the aggressors indicate with a shake of his head to his colleagues that he could find no pulse, he sighed softly in relief. His heart ached and his mind felt numb. But his body relaxed from its state of strained attention and he passed into his own state of temporary oblivion.

He awoke to the familiar sights, sounds and smells of U.N.C.L.E. Medical. He was groggy and had a splitting headache, but otherwise accounted himself in good condition.

"Hey there, Mr. I'll-take-two-aspirin-and-be-fine-in-the-morning."

His partner's teasing greeting caused him to swivel his head awkwardly in the direction of the friendly voice. "Napoleon, what happened? Was I drugged?"

Napoleon chuckled. "Only with too much vodka. The doctor told you not to try and self-medicate with alcohol, Illya. That virus you caught wasn't child's play, you know."

"Virus?" Illya's eyes widened in alarm as memories flooded back to him. He shook his head violently, not the brightest of ideas, but he was too panicked now to care. "Have you been put in charge, Napoleon?" he asked in seeming confusion.

"Illya, I'm not sure what you're getting at," Napoleon answered in a tone similar to that you would use with a bewildered child, "but I've been in charge of Section II for a while now. In charge of you? Well, that's something of a mere technicality. You're kind of stubborn you know, tovarisch."

"No, no," pressed Illya in some distress, "in charge of U.N.C.L.E. North America."

Napoleon squinted hard at his partner, trying to assess the man's mental state. He certainly seemed disoriented.

"I guess you could say that, but it's probably pushing the point."

"Pushing the point?"

"Illya, I'm sitting in for Mr. Waverly while he's away."

"Away?" Illya repeated in a befuddled manner. "*They don't know,*" his mental processes kicked into full gear. "*Damn, they don't know!*"

"He's not just away, Napoleon; he's gone. They killed him. They killed Mr. Waverly."

The change in Napoleon's facial expression from good-humored tolerance to overwhelming concern was immediate.

Napoleon had been summoned back from a solo mission yesterday by the U.N.C.L.E. Chief. The mission was in clean-up mode so his job was essentially done, and Waverly had need of him to helm NY HQ while the Old Man himself was off to various meetings in Washington. Waverly had flown out less than an hour after Napoleon's arrival in the building. The Number 1 in Section I was only to be gone a day-and-a-half. Lisa Rogers had everything set up for the temporary transfer of executive power, and it all had been deemed routine enough by the Continental Chief to not warrant personally going over last-minute details with his provisional stand-in.

"What are you saying, Illya?"

"I saw them kill him, Napoleon. It was the most horrific thing I have ever witnessed."

Napoleon had his pen out of his inside pocket and was contacting Lisa in a flash. "Patch me through to Mr. Waverly in D.C., Lisa."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Napoleon. There's a blackout on all communications while—"

"Break the damn protocol, Miss Rogers!"

“Yes, Mr. Solo, right away,” replied a stunned Lisa. Napoleon Solo never swore around a woman. Something had to be severely amiss. “I’ll signal when I’m through.”

“Okay, Illya,” Napoleon readdressed his partner as he waited, “now back up. Dr. Hawthorne said you went home the day before yesterday with severe flu symptoms and that you wandered back in here this morning completely incoherent.”

“I don’t know where I was. I only know I watched them kill Waverly.”

Illya was adamant. His memories were dreadfully vivid and he did not in the least doubt the veracity of them.

Though it took Lisa Rogers a good twenty minutes to cut through all the red tape of breaking blackout protocol for a non-specified cause, in the end Napoleon was rewarded with the welcome sound of the Old Man’s somewhat grumpy voice over the communication line.

“I trust you have an extraordinary reason for this departure from standard procedure, Mr. Solo?”

“So good to find you alive, Mr. Waverly,” Napoleon enthusiastically responded.

“Young man, have you been sampling the goods in my liquor cabinet?”

Obvious relief and patent disbelief warred for ascendancy on Illya’s face as he grabbed the open communicator from Napoleon’s hand. “Sir, is it really you?”

“Mr. Kuryakin, have you been joining Mr. Solo in an afternoon libation?”

“I have to be absolutely sure it’s you speaking, sir. What were we discussing the day before you left for Washington?”

“Really, Mr. Kuryakin, I don’t have time for silly pranks. We were discussing your suggestion about reposting to the U.N.C.L.E. auxiliary office we are opening in Prague.”

Napoleon turned his attention to his partner, the hurt and disappointment in his dark eyes unmistakable.

Illya purposely ignored Napoleon’s questioning glance as he spoke again into the pen. “I was so sure... I mean I saw... I guess it was just a nightmare,” he finished with a shaky exhale.

“Good heavens, Mr. Kuryakin, have you been drugged again by Thrush?”

“Not unless they are using the deadly combination of a flu virus with a vodka prescription,” chided Napoleon, still very upset by the conversation between Illya and Waverly that had gone on unbeknownst to him.

“You gentlemen will both have some explaining to do when I get back to New York. But, Mr. Kuryakin, as I told you during our discussion: I am not going to be cowed into backing off from the principles I believe in for U.N.C.L.E. by the CIA or the FBI or any other American government agency. Quite frankly, the threat to see to the removal of the U.S. portion of our United Nations funding was no more than empty blackmail. The Secretary of State himself assured me that having a Soviet national on American soil as part of U.N.C.L.E. is not an issue with his department. They are satisfied that our organization vouches for you; they are satisfied that I vouch for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” acknowledged the totally mortified Illya.

“Now I suggest you get back to work and prove all that vouching is worth the effort. Waverly out.”

Sheepishly Illya re-capped the communicator and handed it back to Napoleon.

“You want to explain to me what you were doing suggesting a transfer for yourself without at least talking to me?” Napoleon demanded as he accepted the pen and idly pocketed it.

“Napoleon, you wouldn’t have understood. Your optimism does blind you to some things.”

“No it doesn’t, Illya. I know sometimes it’s not easy for you here.”

“It wasn’t about that. It wasn’t even about me really. I just didn’t want to see your government bleed the life out of U.N.C.L.E. because of one aspect of the organization they wouldn’t accept.”

“That the United States and the Soviet Union have to work together within this organization,” stated Napoleon with a nod.

“That enemies have to learn tolerance. I don’t expect our nations to become fast friends, Napoleon, but they have to let go of some of the distrust between them.”

“You being here is part of that process.”

Illya looked Napoleon straight in the eye as he corrected, “**Us** being here is part of that process. It takes two to tango, and I think both our countries need quite a few more dance lessons to get it right.”

Napoleon grinned brightly. “Dancing is one of my best social skills.”

Illya gave his partner an amused half-smile. “And you can count on me to always keep my toes safely out of the way.”

Napoleon laughed as the last of the tension between them faded.

“I understand dreams sometimes force focus on a subject with an extreme symbolic scenario. But I still don’t get why in your nightmare Thrush had killed Waverly.”

“I never said it was Thrush,” was Illya’s final word on the matter.

—THE END—

