

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

### *Prologue*

It was a tumultuous night as the storm front passed over Essen and the surrounding countryside. Talia Alina Inova wasn't sure if she had even slept. The night had mirrored her emotions, restless and dark with flashes of tears and reality. Although she felt more exhausted than when she had first gone to bed, her mind was at ease because she had finally come to a decision.

As the morning sun broke its way through the thinning clouds a single finger of light brushed across her cheek. The golden lightness reminded her of someone she had known in another lifetime, and how the sun had reflected off his hair like corn silk. They had been so young once, so idealistic. They had proven time and time again what an excellent team they were, not only to those they helped, but also to themselves.

But as her desires had changed with time, his had not. She wanted stability. He had wanted justice in the world, which naturally lent itself towards to an uncertain future. And now, with her long sought for stability within her grasp, thoughts of him came to her and she knew he was right.

His justice was the only way to save her world.

The ray of light from the stormy sky was a message. Now all she had to do was find Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin and give him all she had gathered. She would put herself in his hands. They would be a team one last time.

Talia Alina Inova sat up and swung her legs over the edge of her opulent bed. Her feet touched the cold floor in a warning of a bitter path, but she pushed the thought aside to focus on her newly formed quest. She would follow the golden beam and find her white knight.

***ACT I: The Odysseus Program***

It began like all the other missions to save the world: A briefing with Waverly, airplane tickets, and the long anticipation of what was to come next as they flew towards their assignment in northern Europe. As usual, Napoleon Solo flirted madly with the stewardesses and Illya Kuryakin alternated between sleeping and reading technical briefs.

When they were in the taxi leaving the Brussels airport they began to behave a little more like one would think partners would. Solo was now all business and Kuryakin was, well, still business. He seemed to always be in business mode.

"What time is Felling expecting us again?" Solo asked, checking out the rear window to make sure they weren't being tailed.

"6:00. That's in thirty minutes," Illya replied without consulting his watch. He adjusted his tie while scanning traffic alongside.

"We should have rented a car," Napoleon growled, settling into the worn seat.

"And we both know Waverly wouldn't go for it. We're going to be here less than half a day."

They were silent for a minute. "What is it we're dealing with this time?"

"Software."

"Which is the stuff inside the hardware," Solo confirmed, still not comfortable with the intangible aspects of computers.

"Right. Think of it as the thing that controls the impulses of the brain. Thrush has the brain."

"And we want the software so their computer stays brain dead."

"I think you've got it," Illya said dryly.

"Like the Rain in Spain?" Solo quipped with a grin at his partner's blank face. After a moment, he got a response.

"What does Spain have to do with it?"

Solo rolled his eyes. "You're hopeless on American cinema."

Illya shrugged as he felt for his lock pick in his lapel. "I don't have time for movies."

"You have time to read those boring manuals." Solo pointed at his partner's bulging carry on bag.

"Lucky for you that one of us keeps up on technology. We all have our preferences for entertainment," the blond agent noted. "Yours is flesh, mine is paper."

"And you don't know what you're missing, my friend!" Solo grinned.

"As usual you've managed to twist the conversation to your favorite subject. I'm not getting into this," Illya said as the taxi bumped to a stop. "How did we get on this

subject, anyway? We were talking about software!" He gathered his bag to exit the vehicle.

"So was I. Just a different kind."

As the driver unloaded the bags in front of a modest hotel, both agents surveyed their surroundings from the sidewalk and automatically noted the locations and descriptions of everyone on the street. Illya paid the driver, who snarled at the measly tip and took off with a squeal of tires. Solo raised an eyebrow at the noise, and then shook his head in resignation at his partner's thriftiness. When they picked up their bags they entered not the hotel, but the tobacconist's shop adjacent to it.

The clerk eyed them from head to toe and then nodded slightly towards the rear of the store. When they moved to the back and through a curtained-off area, a stack of shelves miraculously slid aside and the agents entered U.N.C.L.E. Brussels.

They left their bags with the male receptionist and headed down the hall. "Not the welcome I expected," Solo grumbled. His complaining was short lived as he treated a lovely passing blonde to his charming smile. "That's more like it!" he noted, his walk a little lighter as he unconsciously adjusted his tie. A slight grin touched the corner of Illya's mouth as he shook his head at his partner's brashness.

The elevator took them up two levels to the top of the building where they found Mr. Felling's office to be the only one on the floor. There was a stunning view of the city from the reception area, and the agents paused to take it in. A trim brunette with accented English acknowledged them and broke their reverie. "This way Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin." They followed her obediently, and Solo particularly willingly, to a nearby conference room where she opened the door for them. "They are expecting you."

" 'They?' " Solo repeated to no one in particular as the pair stepped into the room, led by Kuryakin. The dark haired agent almost ran into the back of his partner when the door closed behind them as Illya came to an abrupt stop just inside the door.

"Welcome, gentlemen." Ruben Felling, an older, gray-haired man in a tweed suit, greeted them as soon as the door clicked shut. "Please sit and we will get started." It was exactly 6:00.

Illya did not move. Solo stepped around him and spared a glance at his partner, seeing a carefully neutral look on his face. What gave him away was the infinitesimal twitch in his jaw that indicated tenseness. Solo followed his look and saw that he was staring at the delicate, be-spectacled brunette seated at the conference table next to the Felling. Solo turned his attention back to his partner and tugged at his elbow.

"Come on, Tovarich," he said quietly, making note of his partner's behavior. Illya was rarely surprised.

The woman looked up from her files and smiled at them as they moved from the door. Illya immediately looked to his partner and moved, taking a seat as far as he could from the woman. Solo sat next to him, completely overwhelmed with curiosity, but managed to focus on the speaker.

"Do you know Dr. Reese and agent Jacob Neiman?" The agents nodded and greeted the two men seated to his left. Then Felling turned to his right. "And this is Talia Inova. She's here under unusual circumstances to help us."

Talia removed her glasses and extended her hand. Napoleon gave her his most charming smile in response and rose slightly to accept her greeting. "Miss Inova. You may call me Napoleon. Inova," he repeated slowly. "Russian?"

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"Yes," she replied politely as she drew back her delicate hand and rested it on the files in front of her. "And you may call me Talia." Her accented voice was warm, soft and husky at the same time and Napoleon immediately imagined her bare shouldered in front of a crackling fire. His smile broadened a little more at its sexiness.

"Um, yes, Talia, this is my partner," he began.

"Mr. Kuryakin and I are already acquainted," she said politely. "Hello, Illya." Her tone dropped slightly at the use of his given name.

"Talia," Illya acknowledged with a tight nod. He held her eyes for a moment, then dropped his head and began fumbling with one of the manuals. "It's good to see you again." He seemed almost embarrassed, and his cheeks flushed slightly much to Solo's surprise.

Solo sat back down. "Acquainted? Really?" Illya threw him a glare.

Mr. Felling, the speaker, began the brief. "Thanks to Miss Inova, we now know that Thrush is on the threshold of implementing a new software program into their Ultimate Computer that would allow them to enter any computer at will."

"How can they do that?" Agent Neiman asked. "Aren't computers separate entities?"

"Until now, yes," Dr. Jacobs replied. "May I?" He asked Felling, who nodded for him to continue. "Right now there are computer experts world wide who are creating a system based on the ARPANET network set up by the U.S. military. The universal goal is to have an uninterrupted way to communicate in the event of nuclear war. It would be a web-like structure, connecting all computers, worldwide, that were involved via established telephone lines already in place," he explained.

"Like a highways connect countries," Solo concluded, trying to keep things simple in his mind.

"Basically, yes. But each computer has to speak the same language, and they have to share software to do that."

That lost Napoleon, and he looked to his partner for clarification. Illya said, "So if a computer connected to this system was loaded with an altered software," he stopped and re-worded his thought in mid sentence, "it would work like a viral infection does in humans. The bad programming would invade the other systems striving to speak the same language."

"Yes. And all the other computers' files would be vulnerable," Talia finished. "All information could be open to anyone fluent in the language."

"Including military secrets," concluded Solo.

"Exactly," Mr. Felling concluded. "In front of you are the files of the involved parties. Miss Inova was the one that brought all of this to our attention and will familiarize you with the background. Miss Inova?"

When Talia Inova stood she struck Solo as being a person unused to scrutiny. As her body straightened to a stand, he saw that her classically cut suit hung on a petite, almost skinny, figure. Long, dark hair was rolled into a sensual chignon with unruly tendrils that fell sensuously and unintentionally drew attention to her swanlike neck. She moved tense control to the image projected on the screen behind Felling. The picture was of an older man with a square face and unsmiling mouth.

"Arthur Danzig," she said after clearing her throat. "Currently residing in the family compound just outside Essen, West Germany. He is a powerful millionaire who surrounds himself with the brightest minds. He has a controlling interest in many

industries, including new computer technology and weapons development. He has dealings world-wide."

The picture changed to a younger man with thick, curly hair, but the same recognizable jaw line. Talia now spoke with confident authority. "Arthur's eldest son, Marcus Danzig. He has been groomed to take the reins of the Danzig empire when Arthur retires. Marcus Danzig is hot-tempered, smart and cruel. He has no boundaries when it comes to protecting the family business. Arthur has the brains keep the Danzig empire solvent for decades to come; Marcus is more interested in the quick return. Together they are invincible."

Again the picture changed to a handsome, dark-haired man with a lesser version of the same jaw line and wider eyes. Talia's voice softened. "David Danzig, Arthur's younger son. A brilliant computer programmer and a bit more introverted than his father and brother, he still has the same drive to succeed. He heads up the project coding the program, which has been dubbed The Odysseus Project."

"Odysseus," Solo mused. "As in the Iliad?"

"Yes. Maker of the Trojan Horse."

"How appropriate."

"Currently, David is putting the finishing touches on the program at the compound in Essen. They have the most modern computer lab in Europe right in their basement. Potentially, the Thrush Ultimate Computer that Mr. Felling has told me about could be transferred there."

"How handy," Solo mused. "It replaced the dungeons, I suppose?"

She smiled an amused smile and her eyes sparkled. "That is probably so. It is pretty gloomy down there, but a perfect computer lab."

"It sounds like the Danzig compound is its own Thrush satrap," Neiman noted.

"In essence, yes, he does. I understand that Thrush only invites members in that can help them grow stronger. I can tell you that the Danzigs don't join organizations they take them over."

"The man that contacted the Danzigs, Emil Russo says he's on Thrush's Council. Arthur is not a fool. He knows this man Russo wants the Project in a move to control Thrush. He doesn't want the Danzigs. I also guarantee that Arthur knows more about Thrush and Russo than he lets on."

"This Program will act like the Trojan horse, hence its name. Once it's installed, Thrush will belong to the Danzigs. With Thrush's current holdings added to his, he could easily rule this hemisphere within a month and the world not long after that. Without the program, he's just another megalomaniac that would have to fight his way into Thrush. He needs this program to obtain his goal and he's told Russo very little about its full capabilities. They are under the impression that it's simply a 'tap' into other computers. It's much more than that."

The room was quiet for a moment. Finally Illya, who had been studying the papers in front of him during Talia's brief, spoke. "You seem to know the Danzigs and their compound well. Do you work for U.N.C.L.E.?" He raised his head and looked at her pointedly.

Talia moved smoothly to her seat and composed herself before meeting Illya's eyes and addressing him directly. "No. I know the compound because I have lived there for the past eight months. David Danzig is my fiancé."

***ACT II: "I'm Your Cousin Androv?"***

Talia Inova explained her involvement in a matter-of-fact tone. She had been plotting against her fiancé's family for nearly a year. Talia, a talented programmer in her own right, had met David Danzig two years before at a conference. He was intelligent and kind, apparently content with leaving the family business to his brother and father, claiming to be nothing like them. He had an idea of his father's ultimate goal, but tried to keep out of the loop. His brother wouldn't let him.

As they dated, Talia began to notice an increasing influence by Marcus' on his brother. Her own research revealed the power of the family. It was a temptation that David eventually found hard to resist. He explained to Talia that it was his destiny to stay with the family no matter how much she pleaded for him to leave and start his own life.

She helped David organize the Odysseus program and when she realized the implications of the software she set her own agenda. For the past year she had gathered all the information she could on the program, the family businesses, and everyone involved with Arthur Danzig. She couldn't copy the program, but could get access to the program tapes and key cards.

With the program nearly perfected, she knew it was time to act. Her research on possible allies to help her resulted in only one: U.N.C.L.E. She didn't elaborate on why she felt she could trust the agency other than they were the most knowledgeable about Thrush. She had been in the Brussels office for three weeks as they checked her, her story, and what she could remember of the Project codes.

"I left the compound with the excuse that I had to visit a sick relative in the Ukraine." Illya's head jerked up at that note, his blue eyes icy. "I knew they would check out my story."

"So how did you get here without them knowing?" Neiman inquired.

Her grin showed that she held some cards she wasn't willing to show. "I have my ways," she said evasively. "And I know you have checked them out from this end. Getting any information from the Ukraine is most difficult, even for Danzig. I came here from there."

Napoleon noticed that statement resulted in an ever so tiny grin from his partner, whose eyes seemed to warm with a connected thought. The dark agent leaned aside; his chin propped in his palm, and regarded his blond partner. Illya, feeling the look, glanced at him, momentarily squirmed in his seat, and returned his attention to his files.

Mr. Felling rose to his feet. "This is how we will proceed: Mr. Kuryakin will join Miss Inova when she returns to the compound. You are to get the program if you can

and, if not, destroy the program tapes and cards and the lab itself. Mr. Solo and Mr. Neiman will terminate the external lines to the lab, and act as back up. Pick up your papers from my office. Dr. Reese is going to attempt to tap into their computer system from here, outside the U.N.C.L.E. offices, to possibly act as a diversion if needed and to see what he can find. If we can get any information from their database that way, we will consider it a bonus."

"Sir?" Solo asked, rolling a pen between his fingers. "If I may ask, why were Mr. Kuryakin and I assigned to this? It sounds like a routine search and destroy mission." The question was posed to confirm his suspicions.

"Because I asked for Illya specifically," Talia interjected as she slowly swiveled her chair back and forth with crossed legs. An aura of weariness seemed to settle over her as she spoke. Her eyes rested on his blond partner. "I can't do this without him."

There was a heartbeat of silence as the two looked to each other and then Felling dismissed them. Dr. Reese and Neiman followed Mr. Felling out as Talia slowly rose to her feet. She fiddled with the temporary laminated U.N.C.L.E. identification card attached at her waist as she moved to the door. Napoleon waited to follow Illya, too many questions forming in his mind at one time. His partner fell in behind Talia as she passed through the doorway.

"Oh!" she yelped as the ID card jumped from her fingertips. Illya snatched it from the air in a blinding motion without even thinking.

He looked at the picture on the card then extended it to her. "You always took a good picture," he said quietly.

She accepted it with a fond smile, not at all surprised by his reflexes. "That's because I smile for the camera. You should try it sometime," she teased lightly.

Solo could see that you'd have to be blind to realize that they knew each other well. Very well.

Solo stepped up between them and took her elbow politely. The trio walked to the desk to get their documents where Talia handed over the temporary ID to the secretary with a sigh. "I guess I don't need that anymore." The woman took the card and put it in an envelope.

Illya was reading his documents. "I'm your cousin Androv? I'll have to learn some inane jokes," he commented.

"You'd have to double your weight, too, if it wasn't for your unfortunate recent illness, cousin," she giggled. She took his partner's elbow in an intimate way, and Solo was surprised that Illya accepted it without a second glance but noted that his posture stiffened slightly. "That's the reason why you are to come back to Essen with me. You need warmer weather to recover." She patted his arm.

Illya grinned a tight grin and tucked his papers under his free arm. "Let's go, then," he said. Solo detected a touch of nervousness at the tone.

Talia's small suitcase was waiting for her in the reception area. She released Illya's arm and he stepped aside quickly. "Bare essentials," she explained to Solo, who offered to take the bag. "I had to travel light across the border. The rest of my things are waiting near the train station there."

The two agents picked up their bags at the entry, and the three of them left the building. Illya kept just out of her reach and Solo happily filled in, chatting amiably all the way to the airport.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

When Illya slipped into the pilot's seat of the small U.N.C.L.E. jet Talia requested to sit in the right seat. His stony faced partner didn't flinch, but Solo thought he saw a flash of panic cross his eyes. Solo was delighted at the entertainment value that was possible here.

As Illya piloted the craft eastward towards the border with the Ukraine, Talia quietly initiated conversation in their native language. Illya responded but focused on flying the plane and kept his responses short. Napoleon cursed his lack of knowledge of the Russian language, and glanced at Neiman. Neiman shrugged his shoulders in ignorance. Apparently, Solo wasn't the only one wondering what was going on between the two.

Finally, he asked about her English.

"I learned at University. I had a good teacher." Her eyes strayed for a moment to the blond pilot.

"Where did you go to college?" Solo asked.

"In the Ukraine."

"With Illya? Is that where you know him?" There. He'd said it.

"Yes, with Illya. We also went to state school together, before University."

"You were a ward of the state, too?" Solo got an annoyed glance from his partner, which only fueled his curiosity.

"Yes. Somehow the Nazis missed me. I really don't remember much, except that they were Romanian gypsies." Her voice softened with the memory.

That made sense to Solo; she had thick, dark hair and a darker complexion and sensual brown eyes. When asked how a blond haired, blue-eyed Illya could pass as her cousin, she laughed shortly.

"Russian bloodlines are varied and complex. It isn't unusual, really. My people were ... well, gypsies. They moved around a lot."

"So you and Illya grew up together."

Her smile was disarming, but also communicated that she wasn't saying much more. "You could say that." She changed the subject and focused on U.N.C.L.E., Solo and Neiman.

The whole relationship between Illya and Talia was confounding to Solo, especially since his partner had never mentioned her before. He resolved to get to the bottom of it, but right now he and his partners had some serious problems to overcome in the terrain surrounding the Danzig compound.

Solo and Neiman picked her brain in that area. They realized that communications were going to be difficult at best due to the mountains, and if any large contingency were to be needed for an assault, there was no handy area for the cavalry to assemble. Therefore, an all out assault had to be the very last option on the list; success would rest on Illya and the mysterious gypsy woman.

Solo leaned back in quiet on final approach and sorted his thoughts while Talia and Neiman observed the countryside through the windshield. Although the Brussels office had checked her out as best as they could, they had admitted that access to the records in the Ukraine was difficult and unreliable. Solo was finding that he trusted her only because his partner seemed to trust her, and he began to wonder at his partner's frame of mind concerning her. He'd come to respect Illya's judgment, but this time he felt he needed a little more confirmation. He instinctively knew that love was an issue here somewhere, and he also knew how blind love could be.





They found their way from the small airstrip to a small town just outside the Russian border. The train from the Ukraine stopped here, and this is where Talia and Illya's return journey to Essen was to begin. Illya had time to buy some slightly oversized clothes to give the illusion of recent weight loss. He transferred his collection of ordinance-laced clothing to his suitcase with Talia's help. Napoleon observed them from afar as he and Neiman made a list of equipment needed for their extended time in the woods.

Solo noted a change in his partner since Brussels. When they'd first seen Talia, Illya had been cool and guarded. With time together he had melted into someone quite different. He actually laughed with Talia and became more animated as they conversed in their native tongue. Solo's concerns about his partner's judgment grew.

They had to talk.

The opportunity came as they were preparing to leave for the train station. Napoleon stopped his partner and pulled him aside when Talia left to secure a taxi and retrieve the luggage she had stashed somewhere in this small village. He sent Neiman to follow her discretely.

Illya frowned at the order. "There's no need for that," he said levelly.

"Look, Illya, a lot is depending on that girl and something about her makes me nervous."

"There's no need to be nervous. I trust her."

"That's just it. I don't get why you trust her. In all the time we've worked together you've never mentioned her. When was the last time you saw her? What has she been doing? What are her motives? My life may depend on this, too, my friend. How well do you really know her?"

Solo saw a wave of discomfort in his partner's expression. He knew Solo had a point. Finally, with a little sigh and a glance to make sure they were alone, Illya told his story.

He'd first met Talia in state school where she had been teased and distrusted due to her heritage. Illya, however, became her friend and they stuck together because they were both targets for the school bullies. She was quick minded, smart and adventurous. Illya was her mental equal, but a bit more reserved. They made a good pair, strengthening each other's weaknesses and backing each other up without question.

Both were involved in a Soviet 'underground' that ferried secrets and, eventually defectors, to contacts outside the country. It was an idealistic time. Both felt they were doing a great service to people stifled by an iron-fisted government. They were sent to same college where their studies leaned heavily into the sciences. While there, they continued their underground services.

"Eventually, at University, we went different directions," Illya said carefully. "After graduation, she left and I never saw her again. I know her ideals, though, and I trust her."

Solo cocked his head and studied him. "You loved her, didn't you?"

The slight flush to his cheeks gave him away and the hesitation before speaking was more telling than the reply. "We were both young."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"She dumped you?"

"No, that's not what happened," Illya bristled. "We simply grew apart. I was willing to continue the subterfuge while serving the regime. She wanted a clean break from the system."

"Same thing."

"To you maybe, not to me."

"Are you sure she's the same girl?"

Illya nodded. "She has not changed."

Solo thought that one over for a few seconds. He hoped that was a good thing. "All right, then. If you trust her, I trust her." He had the feeling that there was something else, but had to trust that it didn't matter right now. Satisfied, he nodded.

When Talia returned they had a final briefing and set up a loose schedule for checking in. Finally finished, they boarded the Essen bound train.

Solo watched from a discreet distance as his partner and the dark woman walked the platform to board. Physically they were match, his lightness complementing her darkness, and they appeared very comfortable together. The carriage of his stoic partner's chin, however, and the ever so slight hint of stiffness in his back told the agent scores about his friend and partner of so many years. It was a posture that was a rare sight to Solo these days, but one clearly remembered from Illya's first days in the agency.

Illya may trust Talia, but it was clear to Solo that Illya did not trust himself.

That was a sight that Solo wasn't used to seeing in his partner anymore and it made him more than a bit uncomfortable. He realized how little he really knew about Illya Kuryakin and the events that had made him the man he was today.

"I hope you know what you're getting into," Solo mused in his partner's direction as they disappeared into the train. He scanned the small platform and station for any possible surveillance, and was satisfied. With a turn and a nod, he and Neiman stepped aboard several cars down the line from the couple.

***ACT III: Family Business***

A driver in a sleek, black sedan met Talia and Illya at the station. The bags were loaded with efficiency.

"Prompt service," Illya commented. "Why isn't David meeting us?"

"The Project is probably keeping him." She turned to him with a sad smile. "Family business first, remember?" She squeezed his elbow briefly.

"Oh, yes. I must keep that in mind," he replied as he pulled his arm, and Talia, a bit closer.

The ride to the compound made Illya wonder how any communications would get through. The hills were steep and rocky, thick with trees. Napoleon could hide and observe easily enough, but he'd have to get in close to talk. He kept his mind on the logistics of the mission, trying to ignore the woman next to him and the familiar scent about her. They said little on the ride, making innocuous comments about the scenery flying by their windows.

They began to climb up a narrow mountain road. "Almost there," Talia said

Illya looked out as they topped a first hill. Over the trees he could see a stonewall traversing a mountain towering above them. It zigzagged across the face of the hill and disappeared among the trees. A few turns later they approached a gate in the wall. The driver slowed. Illya saw the gate swing open automatically. Cameras, but no guards here. The area here was well-groomed grass, void of any brush or tree. Approximately 100 meters later they came to a second wall and gate. Here, there guards. The small buildings were visible beyond this wall.

The guard outside the gate made eye contact with the driver and then signaled a guardhouse inside the wall. The gate swung open without a word. Double sentries, at least, Illya noted. He was beginning to admire the security. Talia's description had been exact, but that didn't surprise him.

The road curved leisurely between the small buildings and he finally saw the massive mansion. "Nice," he mumbled admiringly. She laughed brightly, but her hand found his and squeezed it firmly. He could feel her trembling and knew she was scared. "You'll do fine," he said so quietly she barely heard him.

She smiled shakily in reply, squared her shoulders, and released his hand to pat her hair in place. The car pulled up to the statuesque entry. "Remember to look sick," she breathed, now fully in control as the doorman opened the car door. She unfolded her legs and stepped out with Illya following. Taking his arm she led him up the path to the front door. When they stepped into the mansion's marble foyer there was a spray of red

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

roses on a small table set to one side. "Oh, how sweet," Talia said, bending over the display. "American Beauties. My favorite."

Illya raised an eyebrow. "I thought purple hyacinths were your favorite."

She blushed slightly and cupped a bud in her hand. "Well, yes, but I was talking about roses."

He gave them a passing glance. "They're day olds," he commented as he looked around at the sweeping staircase, sparking chandeliers and other impressive touches.

Talia cleared her throat, then plastered on a fake smile. "Killjoy," she said without moving her lips.

"Flatterer," he replied straight-faced. Talia had said there were cameras everywhere, and that they were very well hidden. They would have to be careful.

"Ah, Talia!" The man's voice carried strongly through the air, causing Talia to turn with a genuine smile.

"David!" She released Illya's arm and accepted David Danzig's embrace. They kissed affectionately as Illya stood by.

"I missed you, dear." David said warmly. He looked her over and intimately smoothed her hair with his hand. "And this must be Androv?" He stepped aside and extended his hand, his other arm around Talia's waist.

"Yes. David Danzig, Androv Inov." Talia's introduction was breathy with nervousness.

Illya took his hand. David gripped it with a firm grip and met his eyes. Although David's lips were smiling, his eyes were cold and his grip tight to the agent. "Finally, I get to meet a relative! Nice to meet you!"

"Thank you for having me in your home," Illya said softly with a heavy accent. He didn't return the grip of the handshake, and dropped his eyes to give the appearance of being weakened by illness. "Some warmth should help me build my strength."

"You speak English quite well," David noted as he released Illya's hand.

"I speak several languages," Illya answered. "I seem to have a skill for it, and lots of time to study. Talia is the only one in the family that seems to share that skill."

"Yes, she is fluent in many tongues," David remarked.

"Um, Androv's been in poor health for some time now," Talia noted, deflecting the attention from Illya. "And must be tired and hungry. I was just taking him to his room. The Green Room, correct? It has the best light." She stepped away from David and took Illya's elbow. She steered him towards the stairs. "David? Could you have Tonnie send up some broth and maybe some of that wonderful black bread he makes? I'd like to get Androv settled."

David nodded and spoke to an old butler that seemed to appear from nowhere. He disappeared just as quietly. The driver came in with the bags, and David directed him up the stairs.

"Who's Tonnie?" Illya asked.

"The butler." Talia whispered. "He's been here forever and I think he's deaf."

David came back to them after issuing orders and took Talia's hand. They ascended the stairs together with Illya following. The pair paused to wait for him at the top of the stairs. Illya made sure his role as a recovering invalid was completely believable.

When they got to the Green Room Illya sank into an overstuffed chair, appearing winded and tired. The skeptical lines on David's brow smoothed into ones of sympathy.

"Please feel free to move about the grounds as you see fit," he told the smaller man with a softer tone. "There are guards, but they will be briefed." Unexpectedly, the agent noted a look of empathy now in David's eyes.

"Thank you again," Illya replied in a weak voice.

Talia had to bow her head and turn away to conceal her amusement.

"If you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. I'll see you at dinner, I hope?"

"Yes. I just need some rest. Thank you."

"I'll join you as soon as Androv's settled and the food gets here," Talia said as she escorted her fiancé to the doorway. David kissed her lightly on the cheek disappeared.

When she firmly shut the door, Illya immediately began to fiddle with his watch. "The room's clear for audio," he said quietly after a minute. "But I don't know about video."

Talia walked to the window next to him and drew back the curtain to open the window. "I'll check the security room. This room was clean when I left but things may have changed."

"Marcus?" Illya questioned.

"He's paranoid and thorough. That's why he's successful." She stopped and cocked her head in his direction. Slowly, he raised his head and returned her stare. She bit her lip. "I'm scared, Illya."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips and he aborted the urged to reach out to her by clasping his hands together in his lap and dropping his gaze. "I know. We've prevailed in the past, Talia. Just trust me."

"I always have and always will," she said shakily. Straightening, she brushed her hair back with her hands and began to unpack.



When she finished unpacking Talia bee-lined straight to the computer lab. The room's familiar and comforting hum soothed her jangled nerves as soon as she entered. She paused to gather herself.

Seeing Illya again had rattled her more than she'd expected. It had taken years to deny the feelings she had for her blond countryman. The feelings came rushing back the moment she saw him, but she brushed them off, repeating to herself that David Danzig was everything she wanted.

Her mission of betrayal was begun to get David for herself. Without Arthur and Marcus in the picture, David would strike out on his own. She knew he'd be successful and ultimately happier away from them. She could see David being forced by a sense of duty into a business he didn't really want. He would eventually appreciate what she was doing.

She craved the closeness of a family, but David's family was stifling. She could see the influence already. David was determined to prove himself to his father and brother. His eyes grew harder with each passing day. She feared for him and the promise of stability. She would have to fight for him.

Talia was wholly unprepared for the rush of memories and the attached feelings when she had seen Illya in the Brussels office. She could still feel the electricity between them and was sure he did, too. She passed it off on nerves and donned a lab coat,

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

instantly feeling comforted. She sighed as she stepped up to the coding room door and entered her personal sequence.

Talia could count on one hand the people that had access to this room. The door slid open and she walked into a sterile room lined with computer cabinets, each with two large reels spinning spontaneously as they were tasked for information. She lately envisioned the cabinets as rows of dominoes waiting to topple; her fingers tingled with the thought, a mix of fear, sorrow and excitement. Passing several cabinets she finally found David alone at a complicated console with an empty chair next to him.

He glanced over his shoulder at her approach and flashed a grin. "Hi! Come and sit. I'm just checking the final stage."

She accepted the chair next to him, feeling at home once again in front of the console. "Really? How many reels did you end up with?"

"Looks like two. Just think, Talia! The past three years of coding on two reels." Excitement tinged his voice and she smiled. He and Illya were similar in this kind of situation, and this was the David she was trying to save. Her smile faded, however, when she reminded herself of the purpose of this particular program.

"What about the keypunch cards?" She asked. The cards had been the first step in the program, a paper form of the program itself. "Are they even needed anymore?"

"Not really. I'm just using them for reference. Marcus plans on storing them in a safe place after it's launched. Redundant backup is a good idea. Reels are so easily damaged."

"Marcus is paranoid," Talia stated in a matter of fact tone.

David responded with a short, low laugh. "I wouldn't call him paranoid, really. 'Prepared' is a better term."

"Where's he going to store them?" She inquired casually as she worked with the console. "In here?"

"For now, yes," he said, waving at a heavy metal cabinet to one side. "They will be moved off site late next week. He has a place in mind."

I bet he does, thought Talia with a slight nod. "So when's the dry run scheduled?"

His voice was excited again. "Wednesday we give the overview and tour. Thursday's the actual launch day. In fact, dad is planning . . ." An intercom buzz cut him off and the tinny voice of Marcus Danzig issued forth.

"David?"

"Here," David responded.

"What are you doing down there? Get Pfitzer to take over and come to my study." Marcus did not sound pleased. To Talia, he always sounded like sour grapes.

The change in David's face was instantaneous and remarkable. At the sound of his brother's voice, David went from an excited scientist to a humorless executive. It was obvious to Talia that Marcus was determined to bring David to his level.

"Talia's here. She can continue," David remarked shortly as he rose to his feet.

"I'm sending Pfitzer down. He's been here for the last few weeks," Marcus stated with barely concealed contempt.

David ducked his head, embarrassed. "Fine," he barked as he snapped off the intercom. He glanced at Talia.

"David, it's all right. He has a point. I haven't been here," she said soothingly, knowing her fiancé would be going up alone. One rule she had learned was that you

didn't enter Marcus' study without an invitation. She rested her hand on top of his. "Meet you before dinner?"

"Can't wait. I'll see you in a while." He kissed the top of her head.

"All right," she said softly as he retreated. When she heard the door close behind him she hoped one more time that she wasn't fighting a losing battle.

She spent the few minutes waiting for Pfitzer to show up going over the inputs done since she'd left. When he arrived Pfitzer gave her a verbal summary of what was to be done. She nodded, impressed. They would be ready to launch on Thursday just as David had said. She congratulated Pfitzer and rose to leave.

Her next stop was the communications lab next door to make sure Illya's room hadn't been wired for video in her absence. Although she and David had insisted on privacy for her cousin, she wouldn't put it past Marcus Danzig to do what he wished anyway.



Solo and Neiman moved carefully and slowly into the area. They knew it would be a day or so before Illya's first check in; his partner had to find a hole in the security to do so. From what he heard from Talia and saw for himself, that hole would be difficult to find. The girl was right; Arthur and Marcus Danzig were a formidable team.

Bit by bit they planned to map the area around the compound for anything that could be used to their advantage. Radio dead zones, guard postings, natural caves and other formations, rivers and even hostile wildlife areas had to be noted. It would be tedious and grueling work, but if needed, the information would be invaluable.

The outer wall didn't exactly mark the edge of the Danzig holdings. Trees and shrubs were stripped away 20 meters out from the wall. With the security cameras, this created an open zone that would make sneaking in or out extremely difficult. The tree line actually marked the end of the Danzig compound.

Solo wanted his own sources to check out Talia Inova. He meant it when he said he trusted Illya's judgment, but he needed to know more about her. How would she act under pressure? What were her strengths and weaknesses? The person he wanted to start with the real Androv Inov. When he told his sources where to look he was told point blank not to expect much. Solo then decided to go a different track and follow up on some of those sealed details in his partner's file. Grudgingly Waverly had agreed to obtain some names for the follow-up.

"Some of the names linked to Mr. Kuryakin's past have sealed files of their own," Waverly had imparted. "I shall investigate those individuals from here."

Solo's eyebrows climbed at that comment and he again wondered about his partners' mysterious history and how Talia Inova fit in.

***ACT IV: "So Much For Friendly Service."***

Illya looked much better when Talia returned to escort him to dinner. "Well," she said. "I see you seem to have recovered from your trip." He looked at her questioningly. "And I checked the security room. There's no camera in here that I can find."

"Good. I felt like I was center stage all afternoon." He was in front of a large mirror straightening his tie. "David had this jacket sent up. I guess I passed the pathetic invalid test." He tilted his head toward the window to his left. "This room has a good view of the outside terrain," he commented as he slipped on the jacket and began to fiddle with the collar.

She stepped up to him and helped him with the collar. "That's why I selected it," she mused as she worked the cloth. They were eye to eye, and when she reached for the back of the jacket their faces were mere inches apart. She froze, and then slowly backed off, her cheeks flushed. "Um, it's also closest to the inner perimeter wall," she said quietly. She smoothed the front lapels and stepped back.

Illya's pulse jumped when he felt the warmth of her breath on his cheek. The smell of her hair brought forth a familiar tingle, but he forced his heart to calm and ordered his arms to stay at his side. "I noticed," he said lowly.

"Ah ... and, um, this window isn't visible from any other room on this side of the, um, house," she stammered. "If Napoleon sets up right there," she turned her back to him and pointed out the window to a rock outcropping in the nearby hill outside the double walls, "he can see us."

She finished in a strong voice but the agent had noticed the stutter and her trembling hand. Unbidden hope fluttered in the back of his mind, and he again forced the feelings down. He looked out the window and saw storm clouds gathering overhead. The outcropping glowed momentarily in the disappearing moonlight.

Their eyes connected uncomfortably when she turned back to face him. "You look," Illya began, instantly noting a frightened flash in her eyes. "Hungry." He offered his elbow. "Shall we go?" She breathed a relieved sigh and took it with a shaky smile. He turned his mind from the building emotion to the event at hand as Talia escorted him to dinner.

David met them at the bottom of the stairs. Talia smoothly transferred to his arm. "You look rested, Androv," he said politely as they moved off down the hall.

"Yes. It was a tiring trip. The room is very nice," Illya replied.

"I'm glad you're comfortable." He turned to Talia. "And you look wonderful," he said, patting her hand.

"Thank you, sir!" She said with a playful smile.



Illya felt a twinge inside that irritated him and he deftly ignored it. As they walked through the moodily lit hallway to the dining room a low rumble sounded from outside followed by sudden, heavy thrumming of rain. The idea of Solo camping in the rain was a good distraction from the emotions he was working to ignore.

Fine art tastefully displayed hinted at the wealth of the Danzig family. The dining room was accented with silver, crystal and porcelain, as was the entire house as far as Illya could see. The agent felt like he was in a museum. The long table in the dining room was highly polished mahogany that would easily seat 20 under sparkling chandeliers.

In his head Illya ticked off the names of those already seated at the table. Arthur at the head, an empty seat to his right, and then Marcus Danzig followed by a platinum blonde woman in a tight red dress. David led them to Arthur's left, seating Talia to his own left and putting Illya directly across from the elegant blonde, dripping in diamonds. She eyed Illya with obvious boredom as he took his seat, and gave Talia the same glance while tapping her crystal wine glass with a lengthy red nail. Talia ignored her and spoke to the patriarch.

"Hello, Arthur," she said pleasantly as she settled into her seat. "Is Emily still indisposed?"

Illya figured she was referring to the empty chair to Arthur's right. Emily Danzig, Arthur's wife, he recalled.

Arthur Danzig smiled, but his eyes remained cool. "Yes. The doctors feel she needs more rest," he stated simply, then turned to Illya. "We still set her place in respect." Illya recalled that Emily Danzig spent a lot of time in Nice. Talia thought she was merely a figurehead wife, as she was rarely seen with Arthur. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Inov," the patriarch said, his tone clear that the subject of Emily was closed.

"Androv, please," Illya insisted. "Yes, the pleasure is on my part."

Tonnie appeared at Arthur's elbow to fill his wine glass. "You'll be here for our little soiree next week," he continued. "You will be able to attend?"

"Thank you for the invitation. I'd be honored."

"So we finally meet cousin Androv," Marcus said firmly, suspicion clear in the tone.

"And you must be Marcus," Illya replied, inferring a rudeness on Marcus' behalf for not introducing himself. That got a surprised smile from the blonde across from him, and her green eyes momentarily reflected respect. "Talia has told me all about you." Illya then saw a flash of uncertainty in the man's eyes as he tried to interpret the comment. The agent then turned to the stony face at the head of the table. "And Mr. Danzig, I want to thank you for your hospitality." He shook out the napkin in his lap and faced the blonde. "I haven't had the pleasure. . ."

The blonde sat up a bit straighter and began to speak, but was cut off by Marcus. "This is Monica," he started.

"Ah, yes. Your wife. Certainly. I am honored." Illya ducked his head towards her in polite acknowledgement and gave her his most charming smile, which she returned with glee.

"Thank you," she said, slightly breathless. Marcus glared, but she ignored him and sipped her wine, her eyes fixed happily on the latest arrival. The agent managed not to jump when he felt bare toes tickling his ankle moments later and glanced up to a knowing grin on Monica's face. She tipped her glass towards him with a wink.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"So, Mr. Inov," Arthur Danzig started. "I mean, Androv; tell us about yourself."

He indicated the serving to begin with a slight nod to Tonnie as a loud clap of thunder shook the windows menacingly.



Solo and Neiman snuggled down in their temporary shelter as the rain outside pelted the fabric. The lights of the house could barely be seen through the rain, so they decided to concentrate on organizing what information they had gathered.

While getting supplies in town, Neiman had heard that a large gathering was planned for the next week. Merchants had already begun ordering and stockpiling food and party items, but no one knew the purpose of the event. They didn't really care; it was money in their pockets.

"That would be the perfect cover for action," Neiman commented.

Solo rolled the warm cup of coffee between his hands. Neiman had been efficient so far and was a good agent, but he missed the familiarity of his regular partner. "Yes, it would. We have to locate those phone lines as soon as possible. With a gathering like that I'm sure Marcus will increase security so we may have to assemble a respectable back up team."

"To keep the Danzigs contained?" Neiman asked.

"To get Illya and Miss Inova out," Solo corrected. "They're going to be Marcus' first target when this starts to go down."

"Ah. Of course," Neiman concurred as a deafening bolt of lightning made them both wince.



Dawn broke surprisingly bright and clear, the air fresh and clean. Illya opened his window to get an idea on how to dress and took the opportunity to study the rock outcropping Talia had pointed out. It would make a good observation point, but the rocks were visible from the entire back of the house. I wasn't far from the road that twisted its way through the hills to the front gate, either. Solo would have to be very careful to stay out of sight.

Pulling on boots and casual clothes the golden haired infiltrator decided it was time for Androv to set an exercise schedule of walking around the compound to build his strength. Throwing on a light jacket, he proceeded down stairs. He intended to leave via the back of the house by going through the kitchen but was stopped by the matronly cook.

"You must eat!" The woman insisted. Illya, who was half the woman's size, had to admit that the smells were mouthwatering, and after a light meal he headed out the door without seeing Talia or any of the Danzigs. "I won't see them for another two hours," the cook commented as she kneaded bread dough and barked at a young boy to get the pans.

Illya blinked at the bright sun and strolled down the path from the kitchen door. It wound around to the front and joined the main drive. He headed to the front gate, noting the intense scrutiny he received from the guards posted there. They grudgingly let him through. Illya had an idea where his partner should be and leisurely headed in

that direction. Noting the muddiness of the ground underfoot, he knew Solo would be pretty grumpy after the rainy night. As he walked he noted guard and camera positions. The security was above par. He fiddled with his watch and determined that, aside from the cameras, there weren't any electronic detecting devices this far from the house. Aware of the cameras, he removed and opened his communicator and then slipped it into his breast pocket.

"Prince to pauper," he said softly. Only getting static in return, he moved on and tried again. The third attempt was successful.

"Pauper here. And I'd like to officially complain about my designation," Solo replied, sounding tired.

"Are your feet wet?" Illya asked with a very tiny smirk.

"Come over that wall and I'll show you up close," Solo replied, delighting Illya with his shortness.

"I'll decline the invitation. There's a rock outcropping visible from my window on the south east side. It looks to be better protection from the elements."

"And closer to the road, making it a bit riskier. We scouted it out yesterday afternoon."

"My room is clean of surveillance and I can talk from there. It would be the best way to communicate."

"We'll move this evening when it's dark. Hey.."

Illya instantly tensed at the sound of his partner's surprise. His hand itched for a gun. "What?" he asked lowly.

"Oh, nothing. There's lots of wild life around here. I think we share this bush with a deer."

"Too bad it's not a skunk," Illya commented as he physically relaxed and stretched for the cameras.

"With friends like you, who needs a skunk," Solo replied instantly.

"Friend? Guess again." Illya said dryly. "I met the Danzig family last night. Arthur, Marcus, David and Monica. They were quite polite and very . . . inquisitive." He decided not to mention the game of footsies under the table.

"I'll bet. I'm surprised Marcus didn't strap you down to a chair and interrogate you all night."

"That still may happen." With someone other than Marcus, he thought, footsies in mind. "There's a gathering next Thursday to release the program. Marcus is suspicious of the timing of my arrival, I think. I don't have the exact time or guest list yet, but it would be quite valuable to attend, I'm sure. Little birdies everywhere."

"No doubt. We heard about the gathering while in town. I think we may have found the main trunk for the phone lines, so we both have our little projects."

"We can schedule my delivery to arrive with all the party things."

"I'll inform the delivery boy," Solo acknowledged. "Should not be a problem. Everything is ready to go. How's Talia holding up?"

There was a slight hesitation. "She's a little nervous, but she'll be fine."

"Hope you're right, partner. I'll take my leave of you now and look into some serious eavesdropping."

"Don't call me, I'll call you," Illya quipped as he walked on and carefully closed the pen. A guard appeared from nowhere and Illya concluded that his little rest had been

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

noted. He smiled and waved at the guard, getting sneer in return. "So much for friendly service," he said quietly to himself as he turned and started back to the house.



Before hitting the phone lines to install the taps, Napoleon met with Neiman about Illya's delivery. "The party will certainly make it easier to get the explosives in there," Neiman agreed. "If the amount of food and party favors is even close to what I estimate no one will ever notice an extra box."

"Yes, the timing is perfect. I only hope everything else about this mission goes as well." Solo couldn't ignore the tiny niggling in his brain that had plagued him since they had received this assignment in Brussels. It was just a feeling that wouldn't go away; something big and unexpected was going to happen. And it would be bad. Why can't those kinds of feelings be good for once? He griped mentally. I hate surprises!

He gathered his tools and prepared to spend the morning installing another line in the Danzig phone system.

***ACT V: Building A Routine***

For the next two days Illya set a routine that put him between the perimeter walls twice a day with his walking distance growing longer each time. He was looking for the best area to breach the wall and pushed aside the admission that he needed to get away from Talia.

He couldn't help but smile at the thought of her. She hadn't changed a bit; she was still as efficient and thorough as he remembered. She had been a good partner in their underground days. And there was something strangely comforting about the fact that she knew him in a way his current partner did not. There were no secrets between them . . .

. . . which is exactly why their parting had been so painful.

The scene in his mind that he'd managed to relegate to the deepest, darkest place of his memories came forward with surprising clarity. Illya set his jaw and refocused on the mission, the scene pushed back to the dark place again.

He ran the layout of the mansion through his head. Talia had filled in all the details of the rooms in the basement area, along with the security protocols that made it almost impossible for him to get down there. He included the 'almost' part because he hadn't yet tried. So far, there was no need. He trusted Talia's evaluation and had a clear picture in his mind. The explosives and magnets that would be delivered here under the guise as a gift for the library would easily take care of the computer labs, drives and keypunch cards; the mission was falling in place as intended which made the pessimistic Russian uneasy.

Things rarely went as planned.

All the pieces seemed to fall in place when the Talia told him about the plans on Thursday. Now all he had to find was a way out of the compound when the fireworks began. With that being his only task left, the week ahead seemed fraught with spare time.

Time he had to keep away from Talia and temptation.



The dinner routine of the Danzig compound was the same as the first night of Illya's arrival. They all dressed and assembled at the massive table precisely at six.

Monica Danzig seemed to consider the gathering her chance to tease and bother Illya to distraction. The more he ignored her, the more aggressive her technique became. On the second seating, her stocking foot made its way up his leg and close to his

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

sensitive regions. A well-placed cappuccino spill caused the wandering appendage to retreat. The glare that resulted didn't last long; the offending foot was soon tickling his ankles again.

She also began to make whispered sexual innuendos whenever they passed in the house. The agent was glad they rarely saw each other during the day. Monica was usually attending some luncheon or the nearby spa. The distance to any large city that had those amenities made her gone for a major part of the day. Marcus seemed oblivious to her maneuvers, and Illya wondered about their relationship, but never enough to ask Talia. He and Talia were busy with their own game of emotional tag.

As a result, he spent a lot of time outside walking every inch of the property. Sometimes Talia joined him and they talked on safe subjects, but he managed to see that she was determined to make her life with David work. He just wasn't clear if David was going in the same direction.



Waiting was never one of Talia Inova's strong points. With all the things in place to remove the Odysseus Program from her and David's life, waiting for the Program itself to be complete was wearing her thin. Sleepless nights worrying and days filled with routines in the lab were making her edgy. She'd gone over the set up of the lab so many times with Illya that he rolled his eyes when she insisted on going over it again. It wasn't that she didn't trust him; it was just that it was a safe subject. She had found her attraction to him had not waned.

She walked the grounds with Illya when she needed a break during the day, and she found the walks very enjoyable. After several days she found herself making reasons to meet him and knew that it probably wasn't a good idea. But he was familiar to the point of being a tremendous comfort, and she needed comforting now. David was in constant high gear with his family, and she was feeling neglected. Intellectually, she knew this was a dangerous combination but couldn't resist time with her lifelong friend.

Each morning she awoke and counted down the days until this would be all behind her. She could finally feel safe with her future husband thanks to the white knight of her past.



Illya's walks around the grounds were not unnoticed by Marcus Danzig. From his dressing room on the upper level he watched the blond man amble around, some of the time with Talia beside him. Their behavior together was nothing that would arouse suspicion; they were respectful to the guards and to each other, sometimes walking arm in arm. He could see them quietly talking and wondered what they talked about.

The man certainly looked sickly enough, and his investigative team in the Ukraine hadn't reported in yet. They were unable to track Talia because Marcus had sent them after her too late. Her trail was lost as soon as she crossed the border. Her arrival here in Essen with her ailing cousin was as scheduled, but something still bothered him, and he knew exactly what it was.

Timing.

The timing of a stranger arriving just as their plans were being finalized was just too coincidental, and Marcus Danzig did not believe in coincidence. He had conceded to his brother's request to respect the privacy of his fiancée and her cousin and not wire their rooms. After all, David was entitled to have a say in the happenings of the family, but he was also naïve. Marcus hoped his brother's request didn't result in their downfall. Highly unlikely, especially after meeting the meek little man, but still the feeling of unease wouldn't go away. He'd just have to wait for his contacts in the Ukraine to report in.

Even though Marcus Danzig stood at the window in his den and appeared to be thoughtfully gazing at the scenery, there was nothing calm about what was going on in his mind. The closer they got to achieve their goal of taking over Thrush, the more pressure he felt. It was what they'd been working towards for years.

His father depended on him to make this go right. Arthur was already making noises about taking a back seat in the family business after this affair, and Marcus was both willing and able to step in. He was well prepared to take over the Danzig Empire. The only thing missing was his own back up, and David was the only one he would trust in that position. If he could only get him focused on the job ahead.

Ever since that woman had entered his brother's life he had seen a difference in David's attitude. She brought out the weaknesses in him. And the fact that her history was a blank disturbed Marcus to no end. He simply did not trust anyone he did not know. The longer it took to get information from Talia's homeland, the greater his wariness grew.

He saw his brother at a crossroad, with his choices being either the family or Talia Inova. Marcus intended to force the choice as soon as he got the information he needed on her. And Marcus Danzig never lost. Marcus hoped that David would get on board before the introduction of the Odysseus Program to Thrush. They needed to present a unified front.

In the meantime, there were things he needed to do. He picked up the phone to go over the security protocols for the upcoming event one more time.



The headache was from overworking and under-sleeping, and David Danzig had been plagued with it for days now. With a sigh, he leaned back in his office chair and put his feet on the desk. He knew Marcus wouldn't approve of such a relaxed posture in a place of business and the thought made him stretch back even more.

I can't wait until this is over and Talia and I can get away for a while, he thought. Maybe a tour of her homeland. He smiled. Marcus would have a fit. The Soviet Union was not a safe place for a Danzig. It was, however, an area that was wide open for business expansion, and he had been toying with the idea. With Talia as a guide, he could carve his own niche in the Danzig family business, and yet still have a life of his own. It would be the best of both worlds. All he had to do was get this Program finished and launched, and he would be free to go.

He glanced at his watch. If he got down there now, he could work until dinner, but Marcus had tasked him with this other detail. He dragged his feet to the floor and scooted back up to his desk, his mood swinging back to work mode. David Danzig was

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

glad Marcus was around to handle the business; he wasn't sure he was cut out to do this on a day-to-day basis.

The file folder was fat, and he started with page one. His schooling in the Danzig affairs, with Marcus as his instructor, was almost complete. When they took over this Thrush operation, he would be free.



The next two days were busy for Solo and Neiman. They successfully embedded themselves in the rocky outcropping and Illya was able to communicate with them on a regular basis, but the terrain hampered any other communications. Keeping an eye on the comings and goings was easier this close to the road, but also more hazardous. Solo noticed that Neiman was remarkably skilled at camouflage and let him head up that duty as well as monitor the telephone traffic of the numerous lines into the house.

"Napoleon, I think there's a small problem." Neiman had been monitoring the lines for nearly two days. He pressed the earphone tighter to his head and frowned.

"That's not exactly music to my ears. What's up?"

"I think I'm listening to a private line to Marcus Danzig. This is the first time I've heard it used." He listened while Solo waited impatiently. "Marcus has investigators looking into Miss Inova's background."

"Really?" Solo replied, not letting on that he was doing the same thing but in a different way. "What's he saying?"

"Apparently, his investigators haven't come up with anything on Androv Inov and he's not happy."

"What's he going to do?" Napoleon wished Illya could get into that office to bug it, but knew it would be picked up immediately. Marcus Danzig was fanatical about electronic sweeps inside the house. He was again thankful for the lousy phone service that made the clicks of the tap blend in with the static and crackling that was normal on the line.

"Well, they're supposed to keep digging."

"I'd better tell Illya to watch his back."



***ACT VI: Turning Point***

Marcus knew Thrush was not an organization of fools. He already had detailed files on the credible threats within Thrush, and was well prepared to deal with them once they were in control of the Ultimate Computer. He grinned; they didn't even know he was aware of that particular device. Marcus intended to step into the organization as fully functional satrapy with his eye firmly fixed on control of the Ultimate Computer. He knew that Thrush itself would soon be under the wing of Danzig International. Next would be the world.

The only risk he saw right now was the fact that all the Odysseus Program files and programming were all here at the compound. David had requested redundant backups, but Marcus did not want to spread their security thin by covering too many fronts. Everything was in the safest place it could be: right here directly under Danzig eyes. When the program was released, then he would scatter the physical details.

The only weak link he could see was that woman and her just as mysterious cousin. Physically, the man was weak as a kitten and appeared to be just as weak minded, but the fact that Androv's background was unsubstantiated galled him. Marcus hated loose ends.

The ringing phone caught his attention, as it was his private line. Only his trusted inner circle had the number. Marcus calmly picked up the line. "Yes?"

"I have information on the Inovas," an unfamiliar voice stated lowly.

"Who is this and how did you get this number?" Marcus growled, hackles rising.

"One of your operatives supplied the number. If you want the information, come to the Inn at Essen, alone, in two hours with one million in cash or diamonds."

"I don't meet with people I don't know," Marcus snapped. How dare he?

"Then the information is lost, Mr. Danzig. I will tell you that your security is already breached and you can't trust anyone in that house. How else would I know about the diamonds and your investigation of Talia and Androv Inov? Come alone."

Marcus hated ultimatums more than loose ends. Smoldering fury was now fanned to a full-blown rage. Through clenched teeth, he hissed, "How do I know this isn't a set up? That you have what I want?"

"You don't. I did get this number, didn't I? Proof enough that I, too, have my sources."

Marcus ground his jaws together, his teeth squeaking in protest. No one gets the best of me! You will get a lesson on how to deal with a Danzig as soon as I get my hands on you, he thought. "I'll be there."

"And I'll find you. Goodbye, Mr. Danzig." The line clicked dead.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

Marcus slammed down the phone then ripped it out of the wall and threw it across the room with an animalistic growl. He snatched an attaché case from a bookcase, opened it, and dumped the contents. Ripping open a desk drawer he pulled out two powerful handguns and made sure they were loaded. He placed them in the case and snapped it shut.

From the coat rack he pulled down a shoulder holster and yanked it on, and then checked that weapon for readiness. It had been awhile since Marcus had gotten his hands dirty, but he was fully capable of committing murder. He'd done in before to promote the Danzig empire and he had no qualms about doing it again.

This loose end was going to be tied, one way or another, and Marcus Danzig was going to make sure it was tied into a hangman's noose.



"Who the hell was that?" Neiman whispered, overhearing the conversation on the tapped line through a small speaker.

"I have no idea," Napoleon mused. "Sounds like we have more players in the game."

"Well, we figured someone in Thrush would try to make a move for the program. It must be them."

"That's the only thing that makes sense," Solo agreed as he rose to his feet. "I'd like to get a look at the person that has the nerve to cross Marcus Danzig." He pulled on his jacket and prepared to depart. "If I go now I can get to the Inn just ahead of Marcus. And here I thought it was going to be a boring day!"

"I'll check the readiness of Dancer's team. We may have to move sooner than we thought," Neiman said.

"Good idea." Solo slipped from the tent and through the trees to a motorcycle stashed in the brush. He hit the road and quickly found himself at the top of the last hill overlooking the valley. He pulled to the side of the road and stopped to look down the picturesque valley, the outer wall of the compound just visible between the trees. He saw a black car roar through the gate and grinned. "Someone playing in your sandbox, Marcus?" he said quietly to the speeding car.

As he turned to pull back on to the road the sound of an enormous explosion made his heart leap. Solo spun around, and his jaw dropped when he saw a giant fireball where Marcus Danzig's car should have been. Ambush! Black smoke roiled skyward as Solo felt a blast of wind from the shock wave and realized the overkill was meant as clear and powerful message: There was another player in town.

In that instant Napoleon also realized that he was the only one in a position to see who just blew Marcus Danzig to the stars. There was only one road out, and he was on it. He hated being caught flat-footed. With a curse, he gunned the engine and raced to the first intersection in the road to lay in wait.



The explosion shook the windows of the compound and Illya dropped to the floor in his room in an automatic reaction. It took a few moments for his brain to register the details, and he leaped to his feet when he realized the explosion was outside. He glanced

at the rock outcropping where his partner was based and was relieved to see no indication of an explosion there.

He yanked open the door and raced down the stairs to the foyer where some of the house staff had gathered and milled about in confusion. The agent made his way through them and headed down the hall that led to the computer lab and private dens. Glancing out a front window he froze when he saw the inky clouds of smoke crawling to the heavens from outside the perimeter walls. It was a substantial amount of smoke for the distance, and the lower layer reflected red. Something was still burning.

"Talía?" he whispered as he looked out the window with a sick feeling of dread in his heart. He tore his eyes from the oily smoke when he heard running footsteps.

"Oh my God, what was it?" Talía cried as she ran towards him. David was close behind, a pair of guards on his heels.

"I...I don't know. An explosion," Illya said pointing out the window. His entire body tingled with relief and the desire to take control of the situation, but he stayed in character.

The three of them gazed outside. Talía clung to David's arm, speechless. "What do you think it was?" She finally whispered.

David did not answer, but stood up straighter and brushed her arm away as he stepped back. "Stay here," he said firmly and headed to the foyer with the guards right behind. Illya itched to follow, but forced his feet to stand firm. David strode quickly to the front door and pushed it open, the pair of guards now flanking him.

Illya and Talía turned back to the window and saw David boldly step outside and signal for a car, which pulled up instantly. He jumped in the back with the two men, and they shot down the driveway. The car screeched to a stop at the guard gate and angry voices were heard through the window glass. The guards weren't willing to open the gate, but David got his way and the gate swung open. Another motor vehicle escort, packed with guards, shot out the gate right behind him.

Steady footfall behind them caught their attention. Illya and Talía turned together to see Arthur Danzig, surrounded by his men, making his way towards them. The security radios were abuzz with static and broken voices as the truth was searched out. Arthur stopped a short distance from them. His eyes smoldered darkly as he looked them both over.

"Arthur," Talía started. "What happened?" Illya could feel the grip her fingers hard on his forearm. She was afraid of this man, and the agent could understand why. If he suspected for one second that she was betraying the family, she would be dead, and he had the capability to do it with his bare hands.

"Sir," one of the security men said boldly. "Sir," he reached out and touched Arthur's arm to disengage his stare from Talía. "I'm sorry, sir .." he started.

"Sorry? About what?" Arthur snapped.

The man's hand retreated as if he'd touch molten lava. "The explosion, sir. It appears that Marcus' car . ."

"Where's his bodyguard?" Arthur yelled. "He wouldn't go out alone!"

"Here, sir," a large man stepped in the front door. Illya had to admire his bravery.

"IS MARCUS DEAD?" Arthur screamed at the man who appeared to shrink in size before their eyes. Bravely, he kept his head up and his eyes locked on Arthur.

"Yes, sir. He didn't tell me he was leaving. He was alone in the car, according to the guard at the gate."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

Talia gasped, and Illya steadied her. They all turned at the shriek that came from the stairs.

"NO! He can't be! NO!" Monica Danzig's grip on the stair rail was the only thing keeping her on her feet. Her silk robe, tied by a knot at the waist, fell aside to reveal two shapely, bare legs and feathery slippers. Her knees wobbled dangerously as the color drained from her face. One of the maids ran up to her as she began to cry hysterically. She clung to the maid like a life raft.

Arthur's look slowly went from her to the bodyguard, still frozen just inside the door in the foyer. The patriarch's face slowly went ashen and his facial muscles rippled as he worked his jaw. "Is this confirmed?" He said in a low, shaky voice through gritted teeth. Instinctively Illya stepped in front of Talia to shield her from whatever Danzig had in mind. "IS IT?" he barked at the man to his left.

"Yes," the man said quietly. "It's confirmed. The two gate guards just confirmed it."

For a moment everyone held their breath as the reality of Marcus' death settled over them like smoke from a dying fire. Monica's hysterical sobbing increased in pitch to an unearthly keening.

"Sir, I . . ." the bodyguard started.

In a movement quicker than Illya could ever have expected, Arthur Danzig pulled a gun from his astonished guard's holster, and threw out his arm. A single shot deafened them all, and Marcus Danzig's bodyguard collapsed in the foyer, a small, red hole in the middle of his forehead.

Monica's screaming increased in pitch, the kitchen staff scattered like rabbits and Talia screamed once then jammed her fist in her mouth to control herself. Illya turned her away from the sight.

Without a word Arthur handed the gun to the shaken guard, spun on his heel and retreated. "Take me to him," he ordered, "and clean that up." Followed by a flurry of 'yes sirs' from the very respectful staff surrounding him, Arthur Danzig began his journey into grief.

Talia was sobbing quietly and Illya held her tightly in his arms. "Come, let's get out of here."

"Monica," Talia wept. "We have to take care of Monica."

Illya maneuvered her towards the stairs. A pair of guards appeared through the front door and began to gather up the body, their faces pale. Illya turned Talia's face to the shrieking woman on the stairs. "Concentrate on her, Talia. Come on." He could feel her shaking subside as she focused on a task and they relieved the frightened maid of her burden. Together, they half-carried, half-dragged Monica back up to her room. Illya was grateful for the distraction for Talia's sake.

He knew that Solo's position was now endangered, as security would naturally be increased even more. And what about the Program? Would it still launch on time? Inwardly he cursed.

He hated surprises.

***ACT VII: A Thrush In The Coop***

At the first intersection in the road Solo pulled aside and waited, pretending to read a map. He heard the motorcycle before he saw it. The throaty growl became louder at an amazing rate. When the bike came into sight, he decelerated instantly. The rider was decked in full racing gear and being careful not to attract undue attention. By the time he crossed Solo's path his speed was substantially lower and he didn't give the agent a second glance. Solo tucked the map away and pulled his bike out from the crossroad. This was the only road to the small town nearby, and it made sense that another person would be on it at this point.

Solo kept a respectable distance as he followed the assassin. There was only one pub, and that's where he found the bike parked. The agent parked his bike next to it, dismounted and made an effort to look casual.

After leisurely removing his gloves and loosening his jacket he joined the afternoon crowd in the pub. Once his eyes to adjust to the darkness he spotted the rider immediately. Leathers were hard to miss. He was in a far corner talking with two others at a table. The cigarette smoke was heavy in the darkness of the interior, and Napoleon cursed the poor visibility. Finally, someone pushed the front door open and lingered, which allowed the light to filter its way to the back of the room. When Solo saw the dimly lit face sitting at the table, he was grateful for the haze and ducked his head.

The racer was talking to Devin Knight, a top Thrush man last known to be working out of Austria and well known for his stable of successful hit men. They had known that the Danzigs had a formidable power struggle ahead of them, but hadn't expected a preemptive strike. How Arthur Danzig responded would tell all; fall back and regroup, or all-out war?

The agent pushed thoughts of the future aside and focused on the immediate question of how the famous Danzig security got such a huge hole blown in it, and how this could possibly affect his undercover partner as well as the mission.

Napoleon casually finished his drink and left the pub. When he was clear, he pulled out his communicator.

"Open Channel D, overseas relay," he requested. After a few moments and a few clicks, the recognizable voice of his boss came over the waves.

"Mr. Solo? Is that you?" Mr. Waverly sounded flustered.

"Yes, sir," the agent responded.

"Good. I was just going to contact you. I have some information for you on Talia Inova," he began. Solo's eyebrows rose.

"Go ahead," Solo said.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"Since we want to know where Miss Inova has been since her days at University, I went through Mr. Kuryakin's file and located the last incident that both he and Miss Inova worked together. She disappeared right after that incident, which was the defection of a mathematician and his wife from Russia. The husband has since died so the records have been unsealed. The man's widow may be able to give you more details on the incident and where Miss Inova went after that. The woman, Sophia Transenburg, now lives in Paris."

"Transenburg?" Solo questioned. "That's the name they took after the defection?"

"Yes. It's oddness made her easy to locate, actually. Mr. Slate and Miss Dancer are in that area rounding up your assault team. One of them can contact her."

"Good idea, sir. I'll arrange that. And something else has come up. Marcus Danzig has just been assassinated."

"Is that so?" Solo could just picture the old man puffing furiously on his near-dead pipe as he mulled that one over. "Who was behind it?"

"I followed the assassin to no other than Devin Knight. I see a coup in progress, and Illya's cover could be blown. Our phone tap alluded to that possibility. We need to know where Danzigs' investigators are. I'd like to send someone to the Ukraine to find out if the real Androv Inov has been discovered."

"Yes. That's a good idea. Split up Slate and Dancer. The assault team is assembled and waiting for insertion. They can delegate that job and split these new assignments."

"Yes sir. Consider it done. Solo out."



Napoleon had reached April at precisely the moment she collapsed for the first break she'd had in days. Assembling an assault force was a major undertaking in itself. The fact that they had to be stealthy in treacherous terrain to surround a seemingly impregnable compound only complicated matters. She plucked the communicator from the breast pocket of her jumpsuit and opened it with a sigh.

"Dancer here."

"Hello, April. How's it going?"

"Napoleon! Do you have any idea what you've dumped on us? Leave it to you to test us to our limits."

"Well if you can't handle it..."

"I didn't say that, luv. You just don't give a girl time enough for outside pursuits, if you know what I mean. And Paris is so lovely in the spring!"

She heard a low chuckle on the other end. "As are the young men strolling on the Champs d'Elysee? You'll be glad to hear, though, that you will be able to take a break for a bit!"

Immediately suspicious, she frowned at the pen. "Why don't I like the sound of this?"

"My aren't we skeptical today. We need some information on a woman named Talia Inova."

April pursed her lips. "The woman that started this whole affair? What more do you need?"

"I need to know her motives. Why is she doing this? And, I'd just like to know what she's been doing since 1952. That's the last time Illya worked with her."

"OK, I'll bite. Where am I going?"

"Outside of Paris to interview a woman named Sophia Trsenburg. She and her husband Mikhail defected in 1952 with Illya and Talia's help. That was the last case they worked together. Talia disappeared after that. Find out what happened."

"The inscrutable Mr. Kuryakin isn't telling?"

"Not only is he not telling, he's saying there's no need for us to know this information. I'm curious as to why."

"Me too. Consider it done."

"And April, time is of the essence. Associates of Devin Knight have just assassinated Marcus Danzig. There may be a mole in the Danzig compound. I need to know who we can trust." Solo gave her the last known address of the Trsenburgs, and signed off to contact Slate.



Grimy with dirt and grunting with exertion, Mark Slate was never so happy to see a box of ammunition in his life because it was the last box he had to load. With that finally done he collapsed onto the bumper of the van, panting heavily. Next to him was a second panting agent that had been helping him.

"This is quite an assault force," the other agent breathed, wiping his brow.

"It's quite a target, so I understand. We have time for a cold one before I go." The warbling of his communicator interrupted that thought, and he rolled his eyes as he pulled the slim pen from his pocket. The other agent barked a short laugh and moved off. "Slate here," he said, wiping his grimy hands on his coveralls.

"Mark! How's it going?"

"The only good thing about this whole effort is that I get to empty the boxes at the bad guys eventually," he stated wearily. "What do you want now? A tank?"

Napoleon's low laugh emitted from the pen. "Good idea. I'll keep that in mind. Actually, I have a lighter chore for you. After the items are shipped I want you to take a side trip."

One eyebrow arched in curiosity as he eyed the pen. "I hope it's to a nice beach resort."

"Unless the Ukraine has a tropical beach I don't know about, I wouldn't count on it. Pack your parka."

A tired sigh escaped the Englishman. "Then what?"

"Marcus Danzig has just been assassinated. He had some investigators in the Ukraine trying to find the real Androv Inov. It seems a minion of Devin Knight's managed to milk one of the investigators for information and contacted Danzig on a private line just before he was murdered."

"Devin Knight of Thrush assassin fame? So, Knight is following Danzig's boys. If he's trying to pull the rug out from under the Danzigs before they even get started, he's off to a stellar start."

"I think so, too. We have to make sure no one has found the real Androv and try to keep the lid on all this until we're sure the program is recovered or destroyed."

"I understand. I'll be off in a bit."

"Solo out."



Napoleon slipped his communicator back in his pocket and chewed on his lip. With Devin Knight in the picture, difficult was now approaching impossible. Security was going to be practically impregnable in the Danzig arena, and there was still the possibility of a retaliatory strike. How far would the Danzigs go? Who was going to control the Odysseus program at the end of the week? Knight was a careful man; he rarely took chances. The possibility of a plant on the Danzig pay roll put Illya was squarely in danger. He mounted his motorcycle and raced back to the rocky outcropping. They had to move their makeshift base to a more remote spot and get in touch with his partner.



Talia spent the next hour settling Monica. Illya managed to stay near her and keep an eye on the movements outside the house. After the initial identification of Marcus' body, security moved in to clean up the mess. Both Arthur and David refused to retire to the house until the remains had been secured and moved inside the compound for further arrangements. Then Illya surmised by the actions of the men that there was to be an impromptu meeting of security.

Illya knew he had to find out what the Danzig's next move was going to be, and he had to find out in a hurry before the U.N.C.L.E. assault team began to assemble. With increased security and another entity now involved, the team would be easily spotted if they assembled where they had previously planned. He checked on Talia and found that Monica was in a drugged sleep in her arms. Talia motioned for him to go, and he slipped back to his room where he retrieved a tiny listening device from a set of cufflinks.

Bugging rooms anywhere in this house would be risky. Marcus had the best electronic screening devices, according to Talia, and they were used regularly. He weighed the device in his hand for a moment, and then replaced the cufflinks. Instead, he pulled out a conventional listening set that amounted to no more than a glorified stethoscope from the lining of his suitcase. The risk of being physically searched was less than the risk of being detected by a screening device. Even with the risks, he had to hear what was going on in at this meeting.

With the premise of getting something for Monica from the kitchen, Illya was able to pass through the gathering crowd downstairs virtually unnoticed. He picked up on the talk of the men and found out that the meeting would take place in Arthur's office. Illya recalled that the office was on the other end of the lower floor. He assembled a small tray of water, crackers and cheese then retreated upstairs.

The layout of the manor was clear in the agent's head. The rooms downstairs on either side of Arthur's office would be too risky. Below was the basement containing the labs, which was a security setup he wasn't ready to hit quite yet. Marcus' private dressing room was above, next Monica's parlor. He deposited the tray with Talia and gave her a reassuring smile.

When he stepped back into the hall it was deathly quiet. He slipped down the hallway quickly and entered Monica's parlor without incident. As Illya inspected it he noted that the sickeningly sweet smell of the woman's perfume hung heavily in the air. After untangling the listening device he moved to the wall adjoining the dressing room



and pressed it to the wall. He could hear footsteps padding about inside as well as murmurs of a pair of guards. He heard the door lock with a sharp click and retreating footsteps down the hallway.

Now was his chance. He poked his head out in the hall and saw the backs of the guards. Sliding down the hall he picked the lock to the dressing room, not really surprised at the ease of it. Marcus probably didn't keep any sensitive material here. He entered the huge closet after he deduced where the den below was situated, and lay on the floor under a long rack of hanging clothes. After peeling back the carpet he pressed the listening device to the bare floor.

The voices were very faint, and the agent had to reluctantly plug his free ear to hear and move the device around to find the best spot.

". . . it is. We still have Solomon and Krinsky under watch. It wasn't them." Illya recognized the names of major Thrush players in the area. "If we . . . cancel. At least put it off until we ... security." The agent only heard snatches of sentences because the speakers were walking around the room. It made hearing the entire conversation difficult. ". . . a day or two, sir." "It really is the best . . . Marcus would . . ."

"Marcus is not here now, is he?" Arthur Danzig's voice was very strong and clear. He must be sitting right under me, Illya thought. "Nothing changes until I say so. Now leave!" With a couple of respectful 'yes sirs' and a click of a door, the room became quiet. After a moment Illya heard the squeak of a chair followed by a cough. Figuring the program release was still on track for Thursday, he was just about to pack up and go when another noise caught his attention. He pressed the device harder to the floor and frowned in concentration.

The all-powerful Arthur Danzig was crying.

***ACT VIII: The Tale Of Illya And Talia***

Solo and Neiman quickly shut down the operation and disconnected the phone taps. They just made it to the secondary retreat when Danzig security forces began a sweep beyond the outer wall. The terrain was wild and thick and the guards were none too quiet as they thrashed their way around the perimeter. At one point they were less than a handful of meters from Neiman, on his way back from getting the last of the wiretapping equipment. He covered himself with leaves and shrubs, and heaved a sigh of relief when they continued past. As he retreated, he almost had a heart attack when he flushed a deer from her daytime resting spot.

"Wildlife," he grumbled as he clutched the butt of his Special. "They don't belong in the woods." When he related his story to Solo on his return, he didn't get much sympathy.

"What?" Solo replied, intent on studying the security squads with his binoculars. "You didn't tackle it and get us some fresh dinner?"

Neiman rolled his eyes. "I'm getting tired of field rations, too, but wrestling a deer isn't my idea of shopping."

Solo and Kuryakin had spoken late the previous night. Illya had relayed that the release date still looked to be on Thursday, but the status of the accompanying party was not confirmed. Supplies were still coming to the house and a lot of Thrush Council members were still scheduled to arrive Wednesday. Solo's signal to move in with the assault team would be very obvious; the computer lab would be blown to the sky. Illya and Talia would then head to the area of the rocky outcropping for pick up.

Although things seemed to be moving right on schedule, the agent was tense. The little voice in his head wouldn't be quiet. He hoped to hear from April and Mark soon; maybe that would help. And Illya's explosives had to be delivered to the house as soon as they arrived. When the Russian was armed and ready to go, he figured the deed was as good as done, and perhaps then the little voice would shut up.

For now, he could only hope and wait.



"Mme. Transenburg?" April Dancer found the elderly woman tending her small garden behind the tidy house outside Paris. She'd tried the front door, and when no one answered decided to try the back. The sound of someone humming drew her to the white gate surrounding a gathering of glorious flowers and healthy green shrubs. When she stepped through the gate she felt enveloped by nature. "Mme. Transenburg?"

The woman straightened as much as she could and turned to the agent. Her startled eyes were wide for a moment, but a friendly sparkle soon replaced the surprise. "Oh! Oui? Je suis Mme. Transenburg."

April apologized in her perfect French. "I'm so sorry to startle you. My name is April Dancer." She cupped a perfect rose gently in her hand. "Your garden is beautiful."

"Thank you, dear. Here, let's sit under the plum tree. I need to get off my feet for a moment." The matronly lady indicated a bench under a tree festoon with delicate flowers. "Where are my manners? Can I get you something?"

"No, I'm fine. Please." April motioned towards the bench and they both settled down. Mme. Transenburg let out a sigh and removed her gardening gloves.

"Well, April, was it?" The agent nodded. "What brings you to visit an old woman in her garden?"

"It's about you and Mr. Transenburg."

The woman's eyes lit up at the mention of her husband. "Oh, Mr. Transenburg, my Misha, has been dead for years," she said apologetically, placing her hand briefly on April's knee. "He was a wonderful man."

"I know and I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sure you miss him. I'm here to ask you about you're coming to France."

Mme. Transenburg looked momentarily confused and then frightened. "Who are you, again?" She asked tentatively.

"I don't mean to frighten you, Mme. I'm an agent with U.N.C.L.E., an international law enforcement agency. I believe you knew one of our agents. That's why I'm here."

"You must be mistaken," the woman said softly. April noticed her begin to fiddle with her hands in her lap. "I don't know any U.N.C.L.E. agents."

"Oh, Illya wasn't an agent then. He was, um, well, I guess the best term is freelancing, then. He became an agent later."

"I see, I see." Slowly, April saw a look of recollection enter her eyes. "Is he a blond boy? Thin?"

April laughed. "Well, he's still blond, yes. And I'd call him wiry. Blue eyes? He was a college student when you met him."

Mme. Transenburg smiled warmly. "Yes. So young. I remember him." Her eyes sparkled again. "Talia didn't want to talk about him very much."

"Talia Inova?" April wasn't expecting to hit pay dirt so soon. "She's why I'm here, actually."

The woman turned a suspicious eye on April. "I think I should look at your identification."

"Certainly." The agent pulled out her gold card and the woman peered at it closely.

"It looks to be in order. What exactly is it you want, my dear?" The suspicion hadn't dissipated completely, so April decided the best way to gain this woman's trust would be by quid pro quo: A trade of knowledge. Briefly, she ran down Illya's assignment, leaving out names and details, and how Talia had appeared from nowhere to enlist his help.

The woman laughed and any shred of suspicion left her eyes. "Oh, dear! That is so Talia. She has you all perplexed, doesn't she?" She patted April's hand with a soft chortle. "You aren't the only one she's left in her wake. I love Talia dearly, but

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

sometimes she just can't see the nose plainly on her face." Now it was April's turn to look perplexed. "I will tell you what I know about Talia only because I want to see her happy. I don't want her to lose that young man again."

That's when Mme Transenburg began her tale to a now very curious April.



"It was the fall of 1952 and Misha, my husband, was very sick. He was working for the Russian government then on something to do with rocketry. His last remaining relative, his brother, had died a few months before and there was no one left on either side of our families as my parents had passed on when I was young. Our son left Russia two years earlier," her voice cracked, but she continued, "And we missed him so. Misha really missed him. Maybe he was thinking about the quality of life, or how life was so short, but he decided to defect as Rennie, our son, had. We had talked about it before; I only had him and Rennie, so I left it entirely up to Misha. He knew I'd follow him anywhere.

"We finally got in contact with Rennie and he arranged the whole thing. You see, Rennie is a mathematician just like his father and he knew what to offer another government. France jumped at the offer and it was set."

The woman's face had taken on a faraway look as she recalled the events. "The night we left was cold, very cold. When the young couple came to our door I thought they were travelers looking for warmth. They were practically babies!"

April suppressed a burst of laughter and covered her mouth. She could clearly imagine the whole meeting.

"He was so professional, but his eyes had this inner fire; it was so difficult not to stare. And she was as delicate as a spring flower." She leaned down and plucked a yellow bloom and stroked the petals as she spoke. "They were both so warm and caring." April had a hard time connecting those two words with the Kuryakin she knew. "And they were so in love!"

The agent's jaw dropped; it was the last thing she'd expected. "In love?" she repeated.

"Oh, yes. The way they looked at each other, the way they talked. Always touching. Not blatant like the kids now a days; it was tender and respectful. You could see in their eyes how dedicated they were to each other." April was speechless. Mme. Transenburg was quiet for a moment, a soft smile on her aged lips as she continued. "They had every detail covered, every question answered before we ever left the house. When we started out that night I saw a light of hope in Misha's eyes that I thought was long gone."

"You left that night?" The woman nodded. April had dealt with her share of defectors and knew the work required to set it up. To swoop in and remove the subjects in the same night without any prior contact only showed how professional, prepared and qualified both Illya and Talia had to be for this kind of work. No wonder U.N.C.L.E. had noticed him. "Very efficient," she said, impressed.

"It took two days of travel to get out and there wasn't one hitch. It all went smoothly until the end." Mme. Transenburg seemed more puzzled than sad, and April's curiosity was piqued once again. "We talked a lot with them as we traveled. It soothed me and I felt the young man . . . Illya?" April nodded. "Seemed to know that. He chatted

with me constantly about my life and his, how he was looking forward to having a family. He was quite the conversationalist." Again, words Aril never connected with the agent she knew.

"And so was Talia, but I could see something in her eyes; something I couldn't pin down then, but realized later it must have been sadness." She studied the flower for a moment and April kept respectfully quiet as the woman gathered her thoughts. "She and Misha clicked instantly. They even favored each other. They could have been father and daughter. The whole affair, which should have been so terrifying, was more like a dream, a pleasant dream.

"When we got to the final train transfer, the one that would actually take us from Russia, the escort that was to stay with us from that point on couldn't be found. The crowds, the pressure; something finally went wrong.

"We almost missed the train. They got us on, though, at the very last second. Misha's heart was not strong, which was why he was so ill, and Talia practically carried him on the train and found seats for us. Then the train moved, and that was our last day in Russia."

"What about Talia? Did she get off the train?"

Mme. Transenburg raised her head and caught April's gaze. The old woman's eyes were aglow. "She didn't get off. She was supposed to, but didn't. She came with us all the way here and was like our daughter for nearly two years. Misha, Rennie and I loved her like family. Wonderful girl."

Again, April was stunned. "She just left? She never went back?"

The woman shook her head. "I could tell the decision broke her heart, but I had to concentrate on Misha. She never spoke of that young man again and I never pried. She must have had her reasons. I don't know what they were. She certainly wasn't the same after that. True, I'd only known her for a few days when we left, but something in her eyes was gone. She truly loved that young man. Deeply. And he loved her." She sighed.

"What did Talia do after leaving Russia?"

"She worked in a lab and paid her way through post graduate school. Then she got work in Germany. When we last spoke, she said she was engaged. I don't recall his name, but she said she was happy."

"You didn't believe her?"

The woman smiled a knowing smile and folded her hands in her lap with the stem of the flower between them. "I was lucky to find my true love in my Misha. I believe it only happens once in a lifetime. I saw that kind of love in Talia and that young man. And like I said, it only happens once."

April felt a wave of understanding wash over her. The whole story was so tragic, and all the gaps they wondered about in Talia's life had been filled, as well as some of the mysterious Illya Kuryakin. There didn't seem to be anything nefarious in her motives to this point. Napoleon was going to be disappointed - or maybe not. April rose to her feet.

"Thank you, Mme Transenburg," she said politely, taking her hand. "You've been very helpful."

"If you see Talia, give her my love. And tell her she needs to visit."

"Certainly. I can find my way out."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

The woman smiled and handed April the flower she'd been holding. "Take your time, dear. Enjoy the blossoms while they are here."

The agent nodded and smiled, then slowly strolled to the gate. She took the time to appreciate the heady fragrance of nature's offerings before heading to Germany to check Talia's past employment.

***ACT IX: "They Don't Know It's A Surprise Party."***

The next days were an odd mix of routine and heightened tension. Illya made rounds daily and noted the changes in security. Being slight and considered sick and weak was a bonus, as the security teams deemed him a non-threat and basically ignored him. This allowed him to observe things undisturbed.

The first dinner after Marcus's death was surreal. The table was set for the regular number, but only Illya and Talia showed. They spoke in low voices and tried to ignore the tense atmosphere as they ate. If it weren't for the enormous table and empty place settings with ghosts seated there, they might have even enjoyed themselves; but between their memories of past, intimate dinners and the tense setting, they kept a respectable distance between them and sat on opposite sides of the table.

Talia had been taking care of Monica but soon was directed by David to join Pfitzer in the lab. The Program details had to be finished. This left the harried maid to keep the grieving widow in control. According to Talia, David was rarely in the lab now as he was overseeing the details of the program release as well as other family details.

Illya, meanwhile, volunteered to oversee the arrivals of both party and sympathy deliveries. Tonnie, the near-deaf butler, and the head cook were having a difficult time keeping up. The agent also wanted to keep his eye out for his special delivery.

Monica Danzig didn't handle the fact that she was a widow with any grace. She stumbled around the house in nothing but her robe, her hair wild and eyes bloodshot. Between alcohol and tranquilizers, she was finally corralled to her room where the sound of moaning could be heard in various octaves throughout the days.

The people Illya was most interested in watching were Arthur and David Danzig. As Saturday turned to Sunday and then to Monday, Arthur was seen less and less, becoming a veritable recluse and physically appearing to wilt. He was rarely outside his personal rooms since Marcus's death.

On the other hand, David seemed to be getting stronger and more vital. His eyes, which had on Illya's arrival a touch of sympathy to them, grew hard and more determined. It appeared that David Danzig was coming into his own now that older brother Marcus was gone.

Monday afternoon brought a lull in deliveries from the village. Illya stood at the very window where they had learned of Marcus' murder, and considered a walk outside. He wanted to try and find exactly where his partner had relocated, but he changed his mind when he saw Talia coming down the stairs. Even tired, she looked beautiful. Illya stood at the bottom of the stairs to watch her. A weary smile touched her face when she saw him there.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"Hi," she said.

"Hi yourself," he replied, taking her hand when she reached the bottom. "You're tired."

"Yes, I am. But it will be over soon, won't it?" She sighed. "David called for me. I'll check with you later?"

"Sure." Illya dropped her hand. As she moved down the hall, Tonnie appeared at his shoulder.

"Sir, one more delivery in the kitchen. I believe it's for you."

"Thank you, Tonnie," Illya replied loudly, and headed to the kitchen.

The cook was bustling around in a huff, and snapped at the agent when he entered. "I don't need personal deliveries in my kitchen! It's already in a mess!" Illya had to agree; party items were stacked everywhere, and she and her helper were working constantly to keep everything in order.

"I will get it out of the way right now," he said gently. The cook had taken a liking to the lean agent almost immediately. She immediately made it her mission to put some weight on him. Her eyes softened when he spoke; he was the only person in this house besides Miss Talia that bothered to treat her like a person.

"Just take your time, dear," she said in a more polite tone. "Those guards certainly make more difficult to accept a delivery."

Security looked over every box arriving in the house, and was now talking to the delivery boy just inside the door. "A bookstore? Why is a bookstore sending something here?"

"I don't know! I just do what I'm told." Illya recognized the voice of his partner immediately and suppressed a grin. He'd expected Mark. Napoleon, dressed in a deliveryman's uniform, leaned on a wheeled dolly loaded with a crate. One of the guards was trying to pry the crate open.

"Careful!" Illya barked. "There are rare books in there. Please do not damage them."

"This is yours?" The second guard growled. Illya hadn't received much respect from any of the guards since he'd arrived. Slight, sickly men didn't deserve much notice as far as they were concerned.

"Yes. It's a gift for the Danzigs," Illya explained as he removed the top of the crate and pushed the loose packing material aside. Aged book spines became visible amongst the straw bits. "Something from my uncle's personal library for the Danzig library. It's a thank you for my being here."

The guards looked at each other and smirked. Solo looked at Illya from under his deliveryman's cap; his eyes sparkled in humor. It was a good thing they didn't know the kind of thank you the agent had in mind and who, exactly, his uncle was.

"Fine. Take it up. We're ready for a break," the first guard said shortly. "Books. What a waste of space." The agents wheeled the crate off.

"You forgot to tell them it was a surprise," Solo said lowly as they left the kitchen.

"They don't know it's a surprise party. That's the beauty of all this," Illya replied, directing his partner up the stairs. He watched, amused, as Solo negotiated the stairs with the dolly and only grinned more when his partner glared at him.

"Don't over extend yourself," Solo growled sarcastically.

"I wasn't planning on it." Illya replied lightly as he examined his fingernails.



Once in Illya's room, the wheat-haired agent looked over the contents carefully. Solo surveyed the room. "Nice," he quipped. "Beats sleeping in the jungle out there."

"We all have our crosses to bear. Looks like everything is there. You better get out of here."

"All right. Oh, my new location is about there," Solo said, pointing out the window. "We took over a nice, homey spot formerly occupied by some sort of large critter. I can only hope it isn't a bear."

"I doubt it. According to Danzig, there's only deer and other small game around here."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel much better." The sarcasm was not missed. Solo moved to the door with the dolly. "The assault team is assembling west of here. So far, so good. I saw some of Danzig's men installing things along the inner wall that you may want to check out. If they're putting in electronic sensors, then this may be the last time we can talk before Thursday."

"You know my signal. Lots of noise."

"We'll be watching." Something peeked out from under the bed and caught his attention. He leaned down and pulled it out: A security guard uniform! "Well aren't you a tricky Russian," Solo said with a gleam in his eye.

Illya shrugged a non-committal shrug. "They put me in charge of the incoming deliveries. Can I help it if some of the items were misdirected?"

"You'd better hide it better than that."

"Yes, mother."

Solo stuffed the item back under the bed. They went down the hall and out the kitchen door together, dodging the cook and her helper who hustled around other boxes. Solo made a loud, disparaging remark for the sake of the onlookers about the tip Illya slipped him and bounced away in a tattered box van.



The funeral was the next morning, Tuesday. It was unusually chilly when daylight finally broke and Illya's walk found him chilled to the bone. He moved along the wall, checking his watch every few yards. The men Solo had seen were doing exactly what he'd suspected: There were now electronic sensors in the area. The Danzigs had boosted security to a new height. There really was no need for him to contact his partner, but it was good to know the extent of the security.

He arrived at the house in time to see a limo pull up to the front and disgorge a uniform-clad nurse. She was waiting in the foyer when the agent entered the house. The nurse had a pinched expression and tapped her foot impatiently. Talia made her appearance at the top of the stairs a moment later. She was dressed in a tasteful black shift and sweater, her hair up in an off-the-neck style that showed her elegant neck. The vision wasn't lost on the agent.

"Oh, hello," she addressed the nurse. "Mrs. Danzig is up here. Please," she motioned down the hall behind her. "Come on up."

"I'm Mrs. Deeds," the curmudgeon nurse snorted.

"May I help you?" Illya offered his arm, but the woman gave him a quick once over with her eyes.

"No. I'm not an invalid."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

Illya suppressed a grin at the woman's snappishness and stepped out of her way. She marched up the stairs with purpose. Illya followed the nurse up the stairs at a respectable distance, and when he reached the top, followed the women to Monica Danzig's door.

Talia tapped respectfully on the door, which was opened by the harried maid. When she saw then nurse, relief washed over her face and she quickly stepped aside and let her in. By the time Illya reached Talia's side the maid had stepped out to the hall, shut the door and hurried off, mumbling to herself.

"They got Monica a nurse to accompany her to the funeral. I don't think it's going to be a pretty sight," Talia said.

"Unlike you," Illya replied, eyes sparkling.

"You cad!" Talia giggled. "Really, we should be more respectful of the event."

"I suppose you are correct. I guess I'd better get ready."

It wasn't much later when a line of black limos made their way through the gates, each one getting a thorough examination on arrival. There was a short memorial in the ballroom of the house with a very small number in attendance.

"Family only," Talia whispered. "And there's not much extended family left." Illya studied each face as he passed them to his seat, but was most taken by Monica Danzig.

The nurse had pulled her together quite well, but he could tell she was heavily sedated. The lively sparkle was gone from her eyes, replaced with a dull look. She swayed in her seat through the short eulogy by David. Arthur Danzig looked like a shadow of his normal self and allowed David to run the show.

By the time they arrived at the gravesite, the numbers had grown a bit. The nearby village had sent its representation, as well as Danzig business partners. Illya noted a face or two that regularly graced the business sections of papers worldwide, as well as a politician or two. It was a respectable crowd and the security was impressive. The whole affair went smoothly.

When it was over and the crowd mingled to give their condolences Illya noticed that Monica was lead away by the nurse to a waiting limo.

Talia also noticed and frowned. "That's odd. I thought she was going back with us. David?" She touched David's shoulder as he shook a hand with a serious looking man. He turned to her as soon as released the handshake.

"Yes, Talia? What is it?"

"Isn't Monica going back with us?" She asked.

David didn't answer right away. Instead he put his arm around her shoulders and said something in her ear in a hushed voice. Talia's eyes grew wide. David turned back to the reception line and Talia stepped back.

"What did he say?" Illya asked lowly, taking her elbow.

"It seems that Monica is joining Emily in Nice."

"What exactly is in Nice? Arthur mentioned doctors there."

"Emily is in a sanatorium. A mental hospital." Talia was shocked.

"It looks like the Danzig women are interfering with the family business," he commented.

Talia shot him a stern look and clamped her mouth shut. Taking the hint, Illya backed off. She joined her fiancé at his side.

After a short time Talia, David and Arthur got in a limo. Illya rode back with some of the house staff in a separate limo. The ride back was quiet, save for some

sniffing from one young female. They arrived at the house in the early afternoon. As soon as Illya stepped into the house he instantly knew that something was wrong by the glance Talia gave him. She was scared.

David escorted her up the stairs and Illya followed at a respectable distance. He waited in his room, knowing she would come to him when she could. He scanned the room with his wristwatch just to be careful; it still was cleared for audio.

Nearly an hour passed before there was a tap on the door. He quickly let her in, and noted that she'd changed to casual clothes. "Illya, he's moved up the release."

"What?"

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail as she spoke. "I'm supposed to finish up with my part of the Program tonight and David is going over it tomorrow. The introduction and tour that was scheduled for tomorrow? The one for the Thrush Council? Well, that's all a front to launch the program. It wasn't supposed to get launched until the next day, Thursday, when more of the Thrush technical personnel arrive. Arthur doesn't want the technical staff on the property now. He wants full control immediately."

He gripped her shoulders. "When, Talia? Do you have an exact time?"

"Not exact, no. I know that the Council members arrive tomorrow around noon. There's a cocktail party to welcome them and their spouses late afternoon, then the Council and David meet in the conference room for a brief. That should take about a half hour or so. Then David plans on taking them to the computer lab and show them the set up."

"Is that when he's launching it?"

"Yes. He's launching it up right under their noses. I'm guessing eight o'clock?" She paced a small circle, wringing her hands. "He's angry and wants to prove something to them. It can't get launched, Illya! Every computer on that system will be exploited. The information that will be available to them is . . ." She was unable to finish the sentence. "The power they will have will be immeasurable. No one will be safe."

Illya's voice was calm as his mind raced. He pulled Talia into a quick hug. "I know, Talia. I'm well aware of what those men want. Then the program will be finished tomorrow?"

"Yes. I don't see a problem. I'll have to work most of the night, but yes."

"Then we'll just move things up, too. Don't worry. I just have to tell Napoleon. I already have everything I need."



Napoleon Solo was bored and tired of waiting. Neiman kept track of the assault team assembly, and informed him of the progress. By noon Thursday, all of them should be here. "Slate and Dancer want to discuss details with you. They're in the village."

Solo made his way to the village to find the pair enjoying a hot meal.

"This beats that Russian food all to heck," Slate mumbled with a full mouth.

"What did you find out, April?" Solo asked, giving Slate a friendly slap on the back.

"It looks like Talia Inova is on the up and up, Napoleon." She said, wiping her fingers on a napkin. "Her work prior to meeting David Danzig checks out, as does her

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

whereabouts after Illya." She told them the story relayed to her by Sophia Transenburg. When she finished, both Slate and Solo had a look of astonishment.

"Didn't know he had it in him," Mark said quietly.

"It certainly doesn't sound like the Illya we know," April replied.

Solo nodded thoughtfully. "But it does explain a lot about him, doesn't it?" He was quiet for a moment then leaned in closer. "Illya wanted this information kept private. I expect you to respect that."

"No problem," the agents agreed.

"Mark? What did you find?"

"I can tell you that strangers definitely stand out in that area of the country. When I finally got close to where I believe the real Androv Inov lives, I began to hear about 'the other two strangers'."

"Danzig's investigators?"

"Sounds like it. Anyway, they had been snooping around about the Inovas, but I don't know if they found them or not. It seems that they met up with an auto accident and wound up in the river. And with a river that cold, they couldn't have lasted long."

Solo frowned. "So, if we were lucky, what we heard on the phone tap was just a lure, and they didn't get any information from them at all."

Mark sucked some air between his teeth and looked doubtful. "Well, the problem is that only one body was found in the car. The other one has not been found."

They were quiet for a minute as they contemplated the possibilities. "So, one investigator was taken by the assassin, got away, or washed down river," April summed up. "He could show up here at any moment."

"Exactly."

Solo chewed his lower lip. It wouldn't be good for Illya if he did return; they'd have to watch for him and risk exposure. It was a tough call. "So much for luck. We have a day and a half to watch for that investigator; we're too close now to have Illya's cover blown. I'll put Neiman on the watch. I have to admit, he's good at concealing himself."

They all knew that anything could change in day and a half and ruin the whole operation. The clock was now counting down.

***ACT X: Over The Wall***

When darkness fell Tuesday night, Illya was ready to go. He had darkened complexion and added a moustache, knowing the bad light would help. Dressed in a black coat and topped with a knit cap he turned off all the lights and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark and for the household noises to settle down. He spent his time watching the security patrols and their patterns.

It was near midnight when he moved. He slipped out his bedroom window to the narrow ledge that ran the length of the building and used the worn bricks of the walls for finger holds. He sidled over to the downspout not far from his window. When he reached it, he waited for an opportunity in the guards' patrol.

When one came a few minutes later, a statement from Houdini crossed his mind: Safes were built to keep people from getting in, not getting out. "And the same thing can be said for security here," he mumbled to himself when he noticed the lack of interest in the façade of the building on the behalf of the guards. That would work for him now, but getting back would be a whole different affair.

He quickly rappelled down in the side of the building and landed softly in the shadows on the manicured lawn. He appraised his situation then, satisfied, pulled off his dark coat. Underneath was the security guard uniform. The black coat was stashed in the bushes by the downspout.

He kept to the shadows of the building and maintained body language that said he belonged there as he worked his way to the front gate. He knew where he wanted to go to scale the outside wall; his daily strolls had allowed plenty of time to study them.

When he reached the guardhouse he passed it without slowing. He was nearly out the pedestrian gate when a voice stopped him.

"Hey. Where's your partner?"

Illya stopped and waved an arm at the house. "Back there. Sick. Something at dinner. Did you eat in town?"

The guard laughed shortly. "He ate at that hole in the wall place, didn't he? I thought we warned everyone about that dive. You must be from the new bunch."

Eavesdropping on the guards' chatter had paid off. "Yeah, well, he's deaf as well as dumb."

"I'm not surprised. I think that's a requirement to work here. Doucat!" A guard close by snapped to attention.

"Sir?"

"Perimeter patrol." He motioned towards Illya who didn't have a chance to protest.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"Yes, sir." The young man trotted to the agent's side and they walked out together.

"Where's your rifle?" young Doucat asked.

"I won a bet and it's getting cleaned for me," Illya bluffed. He patted a lump on his hip. "I have my own sidearm. Let's split up. This will get done faster and then we can get some coffee." The agent turned from the young man before he could protest.

As Illya walked off alone Doucat stood for a moment with his mouth open to say something. After a second he closed it, shrugged, and went the opposite direction.

As soon as the front gate was out of sight and he was in the area he wanted, Illya pulled out the lump at his hip - a harpoon gun with cable. He knew there was a six foot dead camera area here and confirmed the location by the marks he'd made on the wall. The only thing he'd have to avoid is the single team roving outside the walls. After listening carefully, he took a chance and shot the cable.

The first launch was successful. Quickly, he scaled the wall and rolled over the top in a low-profile maneuver and gathered the cable for his return trip. When the Russian dropped to the ground he ran low to the woods. He moved just inside the tree line until he was close to where he thought Napoleon was camped. He checked his watch; the electronic scanners were still enabled.

Illya entered the woods cautiously and tried not to rustle the brush. He slipped through easily at first but the shrubbery became thicker the deeper he entered. Finally, a sweep indicated he was out of electronic surveillance range and he hunkered down and pulled out his communicator pen. "Prince to pauper," he whispered.

It took a few moments for the reply. "Pauper here. And I'm surprised the Prince has graced us with his presence."

"There are new complications. The plan has to be moved up 24 hours." Illya heard voices in the background. The news was not going over well.

"Can do, but only half the serfs will be here. You may be on your own to get out. And there's a possibility that you may be uncovered. There's a missing bloodhound on the loose, last seen in the homeland."

Illya mulled that one over and caught the drift. "Understood. Prince out." Marcus wasn't taking any chances if he had investigators on Talia's tail. That puts both of us in danger. He pocketed the pen and turned go back when a noise to one side made him freeze; something was moving in the brush close by. He waited, his hands ready for attack, when a large shadow breezed by. Illya exhaled - it was a deer. Just as he straightened to move, a smaller form crashed through the brush just behind the bigger shadow.

"Hey! Who's there?" The security patrol had heard it, too.

The agent had to take cover. He lunged towards a large stand of brush as several gunshots split the night calm and white-hot pain seared his upper arm.

He stumbled and fell to his knees, then hugged his arm tightly to his chest. The cause of the second crash in the brush and the guards' attention crossed his path - a smaller deer. Another volley erupted behind the injured agent and the smaller deer dropped at Illya's feet. The frightened look in the creature's eye quickly faded to dullness with its death. Illya felt another bullet pluck his jacket and was knocked flat by something zinging across his temple.

Fighting unconsciousness he crawled around the dead deer and into the stand of thick bushes. Vision spinning, he made himself as small as possible and listened. His head and arm throbbed as he tried to make out anything in the inky darkness.

Voices came near and a slash of light rippled over the surroundings. The ray circled around the dark form on the ground and settled on it. "I got a deer!"

"I shot, too. I could have been me!" A second beam merged with the first.

Two shadowy forms blended together in the darkness moved to the deer and stopped next to it. They hovered proudly over the dead creature as they reported in.

"It's Code 4. We just shot a deer making noise in the brush. Would the cook do venison for us?" The speaker kicked the form then pushed the rifle around to his back. "We're heading back to the open area before someone shoots us," he said. Stowing the radio, he tipped his head in the direction they came. "Let's go."

The shadows moved off and the agent let out a shaky breath. Being carefully silent he assessed his wounds when his vision slowed its spinning. The head wound was only a graze and had stopped bleeding already. He pulled the cap down to conceal it. As far as he could see, a bullet had gone cleanly through his upper arm. He pulled out the communicator and checked his watch to see if he was clear. He was, and called his partner.

"What was that?" Napoleon snapped.

"The wildlife flushed out some hunters," Illya said quietly. "I'm fine. A deer acted as my shield."

"So the guards aren't suspicious?"

"No. You're fine. I'm heading back now."

"Be careful, partner."

"Always. Prince out."

It took a few minutes to wrap the arm tight enough to stop the bleeding with a narrow strip of cloth torn from his uniform shirt. By the time he got to the edge of the woods and within sight of the outer wall, his vision was clear but his arm throbbed. His fingers felt numb. Climbing the wall was going to be difficult.

Illya rested a few minutes to gather strength and focus. He dashed to the wall and launched the cable and was able to make it to the top unspotted. Gathering the cable as he rolled over the top, he then dropped to the grass and knocked the breath out of himself when he hit the ground.

In a haze he wobbled to his feet, stashed away the cable and gun and stumbled towards the gate where he met up with Doucat. The young guard was puffing from the run around the perimeter zone. "Where were you? Did you fire your gun?"

Illya gasped for an entirely different reason unbeknownst to the young guard. He shook his swirling head and took the opportunity to steady himself. "Personally, I think it's a bit too late for target practice. Come on." They slowly tramped their way back through the gate and toward the house. "I'm going to find my lazy partner," Illya said, taking his leave from the excitable Doucat. He found a dark patch of ground near the downspout and collapsed in the shadows. He fought lightheadedness.

After a bit of rest he found the black jacket tucked away in the brush and covered the uniform. For a few long seconds he toyed with simply going through the front door before he filed that thought as 'not-in-this-lifetime'. Instead, he took the time to watch the guards and gather his strength.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

He had no idea on how long he'd sat there. Time seemed to take on a surreal edge. With a final sigh he stood, fought off the dizziness, and began his ascent up the downspout focused on one step at a time. Finally, his head spinning and his arm screaming, he made it to the ledge and paused. Both his head and arm pounded. Eyes narrowed in determination he locked his sights on his destination and edged his way along. Luckily the moon was on the other side of the house and the guards still focused on the perimeter. He was able to get to the window of his room unspotted.

The window pushed it open easily and he bit his lip to hold back the gasp of pain when the temporary patch on his arm tore open. A motion inside the room made him jerk his head up and he came face to face with a shocked Talia. Without comment she helped him inside. He collapsed against the wall under the window and fought to see through the spinning stars in his vision.

She'd obviously been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and watery, her voice shaky. "God, Illya, what happened? I was so worried! When you weren't here, I thought for sure. . ."

"I'm all right," he said through clenched teeth.

"You're bleeding," she stated flatly.

"I am now. It wasn't before."

"You've been shot!" She said, shocked, when she unwrapped the wound.

"It went through. I've had worse, Talia. I'll be fine."

Talia found the graze on his temple when she yanked off the cap. Her fright turned into stubborn determination. She helped him out of the shirt, got a wet towel from the bathroom over his protests and cleaned off the area in awkward silence.

When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "Napoleon knows about the new timetable. This will all be over soon." He watched her eyes for a moment, trying to read her. "Why are you crying in the dark?"

She rubbed her nose nervously. "I'm afraid, Illya. I'm afraid for both you and David." The agent raised an eyebrow at that. She continued to clean the wounds, her words coming out more easily while her hands kept busy. She laughed a short, sad laugh. "When I first met him, he was different. He was curious about everything, fun, and smart. He's a brilliant man. When he's away from his family, he's the man I love. He's changed since we've been here, Illya, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all." She dropped the cloth and tore a bandage from one of the many pillowcases. "I have to confess that my reasons for betraying him are purely selfish. Without the program, David would have no reason to stay here. We'd have a chance at a life." Her eyes again became watery as she fought back the emotion. "Now that Marcus is dead, I think I may have lost David. Arthur needs him. David is moving too easily into Marcus' place."

Talia took a moment to steady herself. She rested her hands on top of the agent's and he could feel her trembling. "Illya, he wants revenge on four men coming here tomorrow." Her voice was tired and wavered as she fought unsuccessfully to keep the tears gathered in her eyes from spilling over. "He's sure one of them murdered Marcus, so he wants to destroy all of them. He wants revenge. He's not the David I fell in love with."

Illya had to suppress the urge to wipe the tears from her cheek. Instead he ducked his head and studied their hands. The desire to gather her in a comforting embrace was strong. She was right; David was lost and was on a path of no return. "I'm sorry, Talia."



She nodded absently and helped Illya to his feet and to the edge of the bed. They sat side by side in the shadowy room for many minutes. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "When I first met him, he reminded me of you."

Illya didn't know how to respond. He felt his heart flutter and turned his attention to getting dressed. He stood and picked up a clean shirt from the bedside table but before he could pull it on, Talia took his hand. The weary agent was forced stand and listen, the cool breeze from the window tingling his bare skin.

"He had the same excitement in discovery, the same quick brain; he was you, Illya. And I missed you so much." She stifled a sob, and took a breath. Her voice became stronger. "I need stability, Illya, and he can offer that. He has roots and holdings and history; and he does love me."

Illya caught her eyes and she met them with determination. After a moment he said quietly, "He has a strange way of showing it."

Talia's eyes flashed. "What do you know? You haven't been around him when he's away from here. He's . . . he's ..." the tears started again, and her voice sounded defeated. "He's just like you." She quickly stood and turned to go. Illya's hand flashed out and caught her arm, stopping her in mid step.

"Are you sure he will go away with you when this is all over?"

"Yes. I'm sure he will come with me. He loves me."

"Talia," he said firmly, keeping his grip. "Just remember that Emily and Monica Danzig also wanted the security you seek. And they have it."

She turned on him, her eyes burning. "David wouldn't . . ."

"Put the family business ahead of you? You didn't think he be driven by revenge, either."

A heavy silence hung between them before Talia finally replied. "He hasn't done anything yet. And what about you, Illya? Isn't U.N.C.L.E. your 'family business' just like the Underground was before that?"

Taken aback, he dropped her arm. Neither of them moved or broke eye contact, but for Illya, suddenly everything looked different. The first impression he had was surprise. Then the weary agent allowed a door to open to his unconscious where he examined an idea from a new point of view. It was an idea he had done his best to ignore since he'd first seen her in Brussels.

What he said next came from the heart, backed by truth, and both scared and comforted him.

"Yes. But I would leave it with the right incentive."

Where Illya's eyes did not waver, Talia's eyes widened like a frightened deer. Quickly she moved to the door where she paused over the knob.

Softly, she said, "I came up here to tell you something. The Program is finished." Then she fled, leaving in her wake an ex-lover with a new plan.

***ACT XI: The Train Station***

The pressure was on for Napoleon and Neiman. Throughout the night a flurry of communications resulted in a little over half of the assault force being on site in time. It would have to do. Luckily, April and Mark were still in the area to handle the team.

Neiman located the phone lines a distance from the house and was able to get a partial list of Thrush names expected to arrive the next day. Eli Soloman, Dagmar Krinsky, Jean-Luc Arboneau and Devin Knight.

Solo rubbed his eyes when he heard the names. It was approaching dawn and he hadn't slept. His eyes felt like sandpaper. "All on the Thrush Council, I believe. All of them would kill their mother for advancement. Marcus and Arthur Danzig would be in their element, but it sounds like more than David could handle. Any indication that they know Knight is responsible for Marcus' death?"

Neiman shrugged and slumped to the floor of the tent, exhausted. "No. I'm sure Marcus has the takeover set up to the last detail. David should have not problem if he has the stomach for it."

"True. And he has an impressive support system backing him. It sounds like the Danzigs are continuing as planned." His somber brown eyes tired but determined, the senior agent glanced out of the tent. "Come on. We have about an hour until dawn. Let's find the best place to breach the wall and assemble some explosives."



Illya awoke with a start well after dawn. Sleep had been restless and pain-filled, but he'd managed to get in a few hours. When he rose from the bed his head swam and his arm reminded him of his injury. He rolled his shoulder, testing the extent of damage, and was pleased to find no loss of flexibility. It simply hurt, and that could be ignored.

After his head stopped spinning he stood and looked in the mirror. The head wound was near the hairline and easily covered by his shaggy cut. Satisfied, he washed and dressed and went downstairs to eat.

The household was a hive of activity. Illya weaved between all the workers and found the kitchen in a barely controlled uproar. The cook, barking orders left and right, didn't verbally acknowledge the agent but shoved a full breakfast plate into his hands before he could open his mouth. Grateful, he backed out and ate the food as he walked through the rooms.

Talia's job was to sabotage the security cameras in the lab area while David was briefing the Thrush Council. They would have precious few minutes to set the

explosives, retrieve the Program, and escape. Good timing would put the Council members in the area of the labs during the explosion. Perfect timing would allow the Council members to be captured by the assault team. Either way, he and Talia had to get the Program and safely escape with David in tow. Marcus' office offered the best way out. Since most of the sensitive items had already been moved to David's office, it would be empty and unguarded and it had a window that opened to the quiet side of the house. There was a good chance they would slip out unnoticed in the confusion.

After that, Talia would be gone.

He didn't regret what he'd said to her the night before. He knew that Talia had her mind set on finishing this and starting a new life with David. I just hope you know what you're getting into, Talia Alina, he thought.

He returned the empty plate to the kitchen and returned upstairs where he integrated his explosives into his tuxedo. Then, he tightly re-wrapped his injured arm and tested his mobility. It was tender, but still functional.

The guests would be arriving soon, and there would be cocktails and music in the ballroom beginning at 4:00. The briefing started at 5:00 and the tour at 5:30. They had a 30-minute window, and planned to be ready.



Talia hadn't slept well at all. She was tense, her stomach upset and her nerves rattled to the point of distraction. David made it clear that she was to see to the details of the gathering and she did so on automatic with no sense of accomplishment. It seemed to her like she was on a long walk to the gallows.

After tonight, everything would be different. After tonight, she and David would be embarking on their new life. If that was so, then why did this dread hang over her like a black cloud? Why did this feel so right and so wrong at the same time?

The number of details that she attended to seemed endless. Finally, as the first of the guests drove through the gates, Talia felt everything was done and she had a moment to catch her breath. She turned the greeting duties over to Tonnie, who would show the guests to their suites, and retired to her room to dress.

She was ready shortly before 4:00 and surprised that David had not yet called for her. Checked the collar of her silk blouse and the waist of her flowing silk skirt one last time. Her hair was just the way he liked it - swept up with loose tendrils around her face. Her makeup was perfect and even covered the tired bags under her eyes. With a final steadying intake of breath Talia threw back her shoulders and decided to find him instead.

Would he leave with her and Illya tonight, or should she meet with him later, after the Program is gone? Or maybe she shouldn't leave at all and stay by his side. Even after the betrayal is discovered, surely he would see that she did it for him, for them. The David she knew would be happy to have his hands clean. Now was the time for her to feel him out and make the decision. Then she could tell Illya at the cocktail party.

The guard at David's dressing room announced her, much to her annoyance. That would change after tonight. She used to be able to move freely about his quarters, and planned on it being that way again.

She stepped in with an excited smile on her face. What she walked in on took her aback.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

David wasn't alone. There was a beefy security guard, a harried-looking assistant, a prissy valet and Arthur. It was clear to her that David was the one firmly in charge. As he issued orders to the assistant Talia was shocked at how he sounded; he was Marcus reborn. His tone, his posture and his words were all Marcus.

Arthur was seated to one side and looked to be half the man he was a week ago. David, on the other hand, looked larger, confident and empowered. He'd easily slipped into the vacancy left by his brother. It was obvious who was running the show now.

Talia mentally tried to slow her racing heart. There was still a chance, there had to be. When David glanced at her, he smiled.

"You look fabulous, Talia, my dear. I need to settle some details. Would you greet the guests downstairs? I will meet them in the conference room for the briefing."

She reasoned the brush off was due to nerves. "Certainly, David. I'll see you downstairs." Disappointed, she stepped out of the dressing area and out of his line of sight then paused.

"I will handle everything, Dad." Arthur said in a low, calm voice. Talia had to strain to hear the rest. "Tonight, I will personally kill those responsible for the death of my brother. Tomorrow, we will be invincible."

Talia felt the blood drain from her face and she slumped against the wall for support. At that moment, she knew she'd lost him. The David she knew was now the David that Arthur wanted.

There was only one person Talia Alina Inova could turn to now. Quietly, she slipped from the room.

She didn't hear David's private line ring or see his expression when the missing investigator requested to meet him privately on a most important matter.



The ballroom was sparkling with crystal and lights. The small band played popular dance songs and the dance floor was alive with Danzig business partners and Thrush Council members. Illya stayed to the sidelines and was doing an excellent job of not being noticed. He picked up from the buzz of the crowd that some guests were insulted that the Danzigs hadn't shown themselves yet, but most of the guests excused them because of the recent family tragedy.

Talia descended the stairs with her chin up. Her hands gathered the flowing skirt to free the hem from her feet as she moved downward. Her shoulders were back and her upswept hair framed an elegant profile. Everything about her carriage said she was the woman of the house. As she followed the sweeping turn of the stairs and approached the entry Illya saw her eyes. They told him everything; he'd seen that look before.

It was over with David Danzig.

He knew that she made a decision she hadn't wanted to make. Seeing that look again brought back a moment in full clarity that he had filed away in his mind long ago:

*The sounds of the train station alone were confusing. Along with the press of bodies in the winter chill, the smell of grease and the sight of hurrying people's icy breath coming out of their noses as they brushed by, it was enough to distract anyone's thoughts. The intense blond college student working his way determinedly to the train platform wasn't just anyone.*

*Tight in his elbow was the hand of an old woman whose heart he could see racing in the pulse of her neck. Her eyes were wide with fear, but also glimmered with determination. Illya spared a look over his shoulder and saw Talia doggedly keeping on his heels with the old man caught in her elbow. The old man did not look well and Illya feared he would drop dead of a heart attack before they could board.*

*The final 'all aboard' caused the crowd to surge ahead like the tide at the beach. Illya ducked his head. "Hang on," he said lowly as he forced their way through a tiny hole in the crowd, successfully getting to the edge of the platform. The doors to the eastbound trains were impassable, so packed with bodies they were. Each set of eyes he saw was tired and wide with anxiety; it was a common look to those trying to escape the regime. Most of them would not make it, and they knew that. Illya knew, though, that this old couple would as all his clients before them had. Still, the stress to the old couple was understandable.*

*The train lurched forward once, and Illya knew it was now or never. He steered the old woman to the last doorway and politely chastised those that blocked it to make room for the couple. Desperation recognized desperation, and a small opening appeared as the train lurched once more.*

*Snow was beginning to fall and icy flakes blew over the platform as Illya helped the old woman and old man up the train stair; the old man slipped, and Talia leaned into him, bodily lifting him up. She was attached to his arm in what Illya saw as determination stepped back to give her room to work. Talia stepped on the stair, still guiding the man. The train lurched again, and began to slowly chug forward. Talia stepped up another step.*

*"Talia," Illya warned, but he didn't get any further. She was now on the third step and the crowd in the doorway had swelled shut again. She turned and fixed her wide eyes on him, only her face clearly visible in the press of bodies. Illya opened his mouth to say something, anything, but her eyes told him it wouldn't do any good.*

*She had made a decision. She was leaving him.*

*The grip on the old man's arm that he had interpreted as determination was actually desperation; Talia Alina Inova was finally making a desperate attempt to find the stability she felt she needed, no matter the cost.*

*All Illya could do was stare in open-mouthed shock as the train gathered speed and moved away. He didn't believe she would do it. He didn't believe she would ever leave him. His breath was gone and his head swirled as the train took her from his sight. He didn't hear any of the crowd, or smell any of the damp station smells, or feel the snowflakes brushing his face as they tumbled at the will of the wind to the earth. All he felt was his heart, and it had turned as icy cold as the steel tracks taking his love away.*

*And then he felt it shatter.*

*When Talia's foot touched the floor her eyes found his across the room. He didn't see the crowd between them or feel the heat of the room; he did feel his heartbeat, strong and full.*

*Talia reached him and he saw her eyes shimmering with tears she refused to shed. He found her hands escorted her to the dance floor, and then turned her to face him. Gently, he pulled her close, the flat of his hand lightly placed on her lower back. He felt the warmth of her body under the silk. The skirt flowed around them as they moved.*

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

For those few moments they were in another place. They were in an alternate future and knew it was within their grasp.

For Illya, it was living day to day with a woman he respected and trusted, seeing her every morning and holding her close every night; a woman who knew him, his beginnings and his inner self. Before, it had been beyond his thinking, but now, with all that had happened to him since she had left and all that he had learned in that time, he knew that true happiness was what he had right now in his arms. He vowed to not let her go this time.

For Talia, it was like coming home. She regretted ever leaving him. This time she knew she would be happy. This time, she knew exactly what she had right here in her arms, and she couldn't push him away again. At that moment she realized that stability was not rock and mortar, it was trust and faith.

This the new world settled into their minds as a possibility to be dealt with when this affair was over. And it would be over, and they would prevail as they did all those other times, together, in the past.

"It's time," Talia whispered in a breathy voice. It was plain in her eyes that she wanted this over with as soon as possible so they could begin again.

Illya grinned. "I know," he replied, referring to more than just the mission here tonight.

She smiled in complete understanding and he escorted her from the floor. They were a team once again.



Neiman was breathless when he found the senior agent. Solo was checking the final placements of explosives and confirming the location of the assault team. The expression on Neiman's face was enough to give the agent his instant, undivided attention.

"He's back," Neiman puffed. "The investigator. He's back and requested to meet with David in private, immediately. He wouldn't report over the phone. He's to meet with David in Marcus' study."

Solo's heart sank. "That's it, then. He knows and it's just a matter of minutes before David knows." He glanced at his watch: 5:00 straight up. Illya and Talia were committed. The investigator was no doubt enroute from the village and would be here in less than 10 minutes. In 15 minutes Illya's cover would be blown and he could be dead. "Can we stop him on the road?"

Neiman shook his head. "The road is lined with Danzig security from here to the village. If we take him out, they will discover the assault force."

"And since we have half the force we really need, we can't afford that." The CEA pressed his lips into a tight line. "It's up to Illya and Talia. They're on their own, for a while at least. If we don't get his signal in 20 minutes, we're going in. Inform April and Mark."

***ACT XII: Finale***

The sounds of the ballroom faded as they moved down the hall. This was new territory for Illya, but not unfamiliar; Talia's description was very accurate.

She stopped him before the first turn in the hallway. "I'll go ahead and disable the cameras. I have a feedback loop ready to go." She disappeared around the corner and was gone for less than five minutes. "Let's go. There's two guards in the first hall."

Illya slipped her a small aerosol sprayer. "Spray it right under his nose. He'll drop instantly." She took the cylinder with a shaky hand. "They should be out for a minimum of 10 minutes."

She stepped up to the doorway and Talia entered her code. The door slid open and she stepped through with Illya right behind. Two guards already had their rifles leveled at them as soon as the door was open.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I think I left my bag in the lab." Talia chatted cheerily, ignored the guns and walked right up to them.

"He can't be in here, ma'm," the first guard said.

He allowed Talia to step next to him as he eyed Illya. "Oh, him? He's harmless."

"Still, he needs to . . ."

His protest ended as Illya spritzed his face at the exact moment Talia sprayed the second guard. They both fell silently. Talia took Illya's hand and led him down the hall. When they reached the first door she whispered, "Communications. Wait here." She slipped inside and re-appeared seconds later. "Number three down. One more in the main computer room."

Illya gave her his sprayer and she entered her code. She bit her lower lip nervously and stepped in when the door unlocked, and again reappeared seconds later.

"Why am I here?" Illya teased as she grabbed his hand and dragged him in.

"You still have to get us out." The comment was supposed to be a joke but her shaky smile didn't pull it off. She checked the door, and then her watch. "It's secure now. We have 5 minutes until the feedback loop times out and the cameras come back online." She unfastened the billowy silk skirt and dropped it to the floor revealing a sleek, black bodysuit underneath. She nervously tied the silk blouse at her waist.

He met her eyes as she pulled her hair back into a practical ponytail. "Talia," he said gently. "I am truly sorry about David."

Her smile was fragile and her eyes shiny with emotion. "Don't be, Illyuska," she replied. "He was lost to them before I ever came along. It has just taken me this long to figure that out. Now let's quit wasting time."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

Illya got back to business and went directly to the seemingly endless racks of punch cards. "We'll have to destroy these. There are too many to carry. The tapes will be enough." He applied an accelerant to the cards along with an incendiary device.

"I agree," she said crisply as she removed the reels. "There are two reels we need. The rest can go up with the lab." She stacked the reels by the door and applied magnets to the rest of the reels to destroy the data.

Illya quickly wired the lab for total destruction. Talia wrapped the ungainly reels in a lab coat and peeked out into the hallway. "Still quiet." She kicked the billowy pile of skirt away from the door. "Pity. There's enough material there to clothe a family of gypsies," she quipped. "You ready, comrade?"

He grinned. "Always. Time?"

"Three minutes. Let's move." They darted out of the main computer room and into the communications room. They stepped over the unconscious guard and Illya planted more explosives in record time.

Talia pointed at a small room on the side. "Phone trunk."

Illya planted the last of the explosives in the little room and set the timer to coincide closely with the others. "When this basement goes, the whole upper structure should collapse into the pit. I've wired all the supporting walls. This compound will be rendered useless to anyone."

"Ninety five seconds, Illya, we have to go. Now." She hugged the wrapped tapes to her chest.

"Your wish is my command." He took her elbow and they fled.

They passed the guards and slipped out the door. Music from the party drifted down the hallway and grew fainter as they moved away in the opposite direction.

"There are a few innocent lives in that room," Talia commented as they made their way to Marcus' office.

"There will be time to get out. The ballroom isn't over any basement area, and there are doors that go directly outside." He propelled her urgently down the hallway by her elbow, his internal clock counting down. It would be close, very close.

Talia stopped him before they made the turn to the final hall. "Two guards," she whispered. With her hands full with the ungainly reels Illya readied the gas. They walked briskly around the corner as if they belonged there.

"Have you two had anything to eat?" Talia asked cheerily as they walked up to the wary pair. Her smile threw them and they didn't even raise the rifles. Illya sprayed the first one and chopped the second before they realized what was happening. The first one had fallen in the hall, but the second rebounded off the office door before he fell. Talia checked the hall to see if anyone heard while Illya approached the door.

In a flash, he picked the lock, pulled her inside and softly closed the door behind them. A breeze fluttered the drapes in the open window as moonlight spilled onto the patterned carpet, making a bright path to escape. Talia went directly to the window, but Illya stopped just inside the door.

"Come, we're almost there," she said, breathless with excitement.

The little hairs on the agent's neck were standing at attention. The incoming breeze now seemed icy. "Wait, Talia." Alarms were going off in his mind. "Who opened the window?"

"I did."



The deep voice caused Talia to gasp and spin around. The tapes fell from the lab coat to the floor with a thud; a small table lamp snapped on. In the dark recesses of the room a figure, backed by two other dark forms, stepped forward. Illya froze with his hand on the butt of his gun.

In the yellow of the meager light, David Danzig's face was hard and lined. His eyes had a glimmer of sadness. His hand held a pistol directed at Talia.

"David!" She breathed, her eyes wide.

"Talia. I'm such a fool." He motioned the men towards Illya, and they disarmed him. "Marcus never did trust you, you know. I should have listened to him." He stepped in close to her. "I defended you to him and my father." He stroked her cheek with a finger as she stood there, transfixed. "I loved you Talia. Did you ever love me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I did."

He nodded towards Illya. "And according to this man," he indicated one of the shadows with a nod of his head, "your cousin Androv is 100 pounds heavier and two inches taller." He locked his eyes on Illya. "Who is that man, Talia?"

Illya spoke. "My name is Illya Kuryakin and I'm from U.N.C.L.E."

"U.N.C.L.E.?" Angrily, David turned and raised his arm to Talia. The sound of the slap was loud and sharp and she flew against the wall. She slid to the floor with a look of absolute horror on her face.

The henchmen instantly subdued the agent when he began to leap to her defense. David was in front of the struggling agent in a heartbeat and pressed the pistol to his forehead. "Are there more of you? Answer me!"

Illya stopped struggling. One of the goons gripped his injured arm and he could feel the wound tear open again, but he stood stock-still. His eyes burned with blue fire as he locked his gaze on David Danzig. "You don't have much time," he said calmly.

The next moment found them thrown to the floor as an explosion rocked the foundation of the mansion. Illya, expecting it, continued the motion and managed to roll to his feet, but the bucking floor and loose items flying about the room made it difficult to stay there. Everyone else in the room had been knocked to the floor. One of the henchmen's rifles skittered to Illya's feet.

He kicked the closest goon in the face, retrieved the rifle and managed to make it to Talia's side. "Come," he barked as he pulled her up.

There was another explosion, and the walls shook. Parts of the ceiling rained down on them and pictures popped from the walls and crashed to the floor. They moved towards the window, but the crack of gunfire made them duck down. The shot shattered the windowpane just in front of Illya's face and peppered him with shards. A second shot made him reel back as it skimmed his shoulder.

Illya slammed into Talia and drove her back. Another shot, barely heard above the sounds of the rumbling house, pushed him on. His thigh burned and he realized he'd been hit. Adrenalin blocked the pain and fueled his survival instincts as he pushed her out the door and back into the hallway where they stumbled over the unconscious guards.

"Up," he barked, eyeing a stairway at the end of the hall.

They could hear the screams of the party guests mixed with the sounds of the collapsing house. Thick, black smoke, hot with fire, billowed down the hallway and made their eyes water instantly. The floor rolled and gaping holes opened around them.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

Getting up the stairs was like trying to swim up a waterfall; the floorboards shook, the walls rocked and the railing fell away from under their hands. Gasping and coughing from the smoke and heat they fell to their knees at the top of the stairs.

"Move!" Illya ordered. He heard another 'pop!' and felt a sting high in his back, in the shoulder of his injured arm. He pushed Talia forward as he fell to the floor. He rolled to his side, brought up the rifle and blindly returned fire. He heard an unearthly scream in response from somewhere in the maelstrom below.

"Illya!" Talia yelled over the destruction. "Over here!"

The agent was unable to hold the rifle any longer because the fingers of his hand suddenly lost their feeling. It clattered to the floor and he pulled himself towards her voice with his good arm. Suddenly he felt hands on him, and he was helped him to his feet. Inky smoke veiled Talia's face. "There's a door," she coughed.

"Leave me," he rasped. "It's impossible. Save yourself, Talia!"

Her grip only tightened. "I won't leave you. Come on!" She moved in close so he could see her face. The fierce determination in her eyes made him move. They stumbled through an opening in the wall that used to be an elegant French door to a small patio.

Escape was ten feet below them. He focused on that alone as he helped Talia over the marble railing where she hit the grass below and rolled. He threw his leg over to follow her but was yanked backwards at the moment he let go of the railing.

Illya crashed into David and they fell to the patio floor in a tangled mass, David's rifle sandwiched between them. They exchanged blows and a roundhouse punch sent the agent against the wall where he left a trail of blood as he slid down into a sit. David jumped to his feet and brought up the barrel of the rifle. His hair was frizzed and singed, his eyes wild, and his features deeply shadowed by soot and flame. His hands shook with fury as he aimed the weapon.

With a desperate sweep of his leg, Illya took out David's feet as the trigger was pulled. Bits of stucco stung his face when the bullet hit the wall, which Illya ignored as he scrambled to the downed man. The agent grabbed the rifle's barrel and yanked it from David's loosened grip. Pain lanced through the agent's body with every move he made, but he managed to get to his knees and slam the rifle butt against David's head when he tried to rise. He fell and didn't move.

Another explosion in a different direction and the sound of gunfire announced Napoleon's arrival and a route to safety. Illya pulled himself up to the railing and caught a glimpse of agents spilling like ants through a breach in the wall before his sight was obscured by thick smoke.

"Illya!" Talia screamed from below. Shrapnel shot through the air on hot wind, and Talia covered her head with her arms at the onslaught. Illya managed to roll over the smooth marble railing and landed with a painful thud on the grass near her. Bright lights flashed in his vision, and he wasn't sure if they were real or in his mind.

Talia pulled him to his feet and he found his balance. He wrapped his good arm around her waist and they moved quickly across the manicured expanse of lawn now strewn with embers and debris. The heat from the fire on the backs of their necks forced them towards the breach in the wall. The pain in his leg made him thankful for the adrenalin that kept him moving.

Burning shrapnel from numerous explosions rained down as they fought to keep their feet on the shaking ground. Talia stumbled and Illya managed to pull her up

without breaking stride. They locked arm in arm, comforted by the gritty sweatiness of their skin against skin. The darkness around them throbbed red.

"Almost there!" Illya encouraged, his smoke-singed voice raw.

Napoleon beckoned them from the edge of the blasted wall. His eyes sparked with a fiery reflection as he lay down cover fire for the pair. Bullets zinged through the air as the assault force continued to spread out from the breach. Illya made eye contact with his partner, the grim determination that drove him very clear in the icy blue. They were almost home, when Illya heard a projectile whiz by his ear.

When he heard the shot Solo ducked and shouldered his rifle in one smooth motion to cover his friend. Through his gun site he found David Danzig on the second floor balcony, raging flames behind and below him. The careful time he took to aim the next shot indicated to Solo that he knew there was no escape; he intended his last act on this Earth to be one of a true Danzig: Revenge.

Solo snapped off a shot in response that hit low, and cursed. The figure on the balcony didn't even flinch. As the agent adjusted his targeting he saw the muzzle flash of Danzig's second shot through his gun sites. He squeezed off his own shot almost simultaneously, and the figure on the porch collapsed.

"Talia!" Illya's voice was ragged, the shout impossibly loud.

Solo looked up in time to see his partner fall with his arms wrapped protectively around the woman. The momentum of her fall carried them just into the breach and safety before they both hit the ground. Illya managed to twist and cushion her fall with his body. Napoleon reached their side as his partner struggled to a sit.

"Talia!" Illya whispered urgently, cradling her head in his lap. "We made it!" His voice was tight and raw with emotion as he held her face with the palms of his bloody hands.

Kneeling by her Solo saw the blossoming rose of blood seep through the front of her blouse. He took her wrist, felt the weak pulse and knew between that and her hugely dilated eyes, that there wasn't a thing they could do for her. Sorrow made him hoarse as he spoke.

"Talia, thank you." Her eyes told him that was all he needed to say. She gave him a weak smile. Then her lashes quivered as her eyes sought out her true love.

"Illya." Her whispery voice was barely audible over the surrounding chaos. When she found his face, her eyes were dull.

"I'm here," he replied gruffly. He pulled her close to his heart.

Feeling like an intruder Napoleon, backed away. Sounds of the assault were growing faint as the U.N.C.L.E. contingency overtook the compound. Distant shouts and occasional gunfire were the only noises that punctured the sound of the inferno.

The sound of running feet coming up behind made him half-turn. April, dressed in black, erupted from the darkness. His arm automatically barred her from any further intrusion on the couple. She stopped with a small gasp when she took in the scene and gave Napoleon a questioning glance. When he shook his head once in response April's eyes immediately turned watery. She placed a grimy hand over her mouth; her gun hand dangled at her side. Needing some human contact, Solo put his arm around her shoulders and they watched their friend and partner say goodbye.

In voices so soft that only they could hear, Illya Kuryakin and Talia Inova shared their thoughts. "We made it," she breathed softly in their native tongue. Her lips floated into a whisper of a smile.

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"Yes," Illya murmured, stroking her cheek. "Yes, we did."

"You said it was impossible."

He forced the small sob that escaped his throat into a chuckle. "Of course I did. You know I'm pessimistic by nature." The searing pain from his injuries was nothing next to the pain he felt in his heart; it grew and grew until he was sure it was going to choke the life out of him, but he wasn't going to let her see that. Their last minutes would be only between them and shared not with the pain. He carefully moved the hair from her forehead with gentle fingers. "I suppose you are thrilled to prove me wrong."

"Again." She finished, her momentary bright smile giving way to a grimace. "Oh!"

"Shhh, I'm here, love. I will always be here." He whispered in her ear then kissed her temple.

"I know. You have always been with me." Her voice was growing more and more weary with each passing second. Her dark eyes drifted shut.

"I will always love you, Talia Alina," Illya finally confessed. He found an odd strength in actually speaking the words. For a moment it seemed like this would all go away; that the words alone would simply fix everything and change their lives forever in a way he could now clearly see. But inside he knew it wasn't to be, and could only hope that she saw the same fleeting vision from his confession.

"We really did make it." The lines of pain drained away from her face and were replaced with a brilliant smile and a moment of sparkle in her eyes as she opened them wide and looked deep into his soul. "I love you, Illya Nickovetch." The last of her breath left her body with those words while the life left her eyes with a brief flicker of farewell.

With a ragged sob, Illya stroked her pale cheek one last time and ever so gently closed her eyes with a shaking hand.

### *Epilogue*

Napoleon wondered if it was possible to delay your own body from healing by sheer will, and if so, that's what Illya had done for the days that followed the end of their last mission. The inscrutable blond had carried himself with cool aloofness as he arranged for the delivery of Talia Alina Inova's body to what was left of her family in the Ukraine. He turned down Napoleon's offer to go with him and accompanied the coffin alone.

Illya Kuryakin returned to New York four days later a bit more pale if that was possible, red eyed and close mouthed. True, Illya was far from talkative, but even the minimal chat that was usually the norm between them dried up completely. He surrendered himself to the Medical Wing as soon as he arrived home and slept solidly for five days.

Finally, with a few days' off after his release from Medical, he was back to work. Napoleon noticed that his partner still moved stiffly, but, as usual, didn't complain. There was still some healing to be done. When they entered their office on his first day of active duty the blond agent stopped just inside the door. Solo nearly ran over him.

"What?" Solo said when he noted Illya's disapproving stare.

"My desk is empty."

Solo glanced at the clear desktop. "How about that?" he said in amusement. He circled around the surprised agent to get to his own desk. "Gee, do you think maybe your partner actually took the time to do the reports?" The sarcastic tone in his voice made the corner of Illya's mouth twitch as a grin was suppressed. Napoleon flopped into his chair and put his feet on the desk.

Finally, Illya moved stiffly to his own chair and sat slowly down. "I was actually looking forward to being busy," he admitted, and began to rearrange the items on his desk. "I guess I'll have to ..." his voice stopped when he opened the top drawer.

He stared for a moment, and then picked up the plastic temporary ID card from the drawer. His lips tightened into a thin line as he studied the small photo on the card next to Talia's name. After a moment, his face softened and he slipped the card into the breast pocket of his shirt, on the side over his heart. His cheeks flushed lightly and he met Solo's eyes. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome," Solo replied. "Now let's get back to work. Waverly's waiting." He dragged his feet off the desk, stood, and stepped toward the door.

"The world needs saving again, I suppose," Illya sighed as he shut the drawer, rose, and fell in behind his partner. "And you owe me lunch. You were late breaching the wall."

## THE ODYSSEUS PROGRAM AFFAIR

"What?!" Napoleon protested as he opened the door. "How do you figure that?"  
And the debate was on.

***FINIS***