

THE PRINCESS GAMBIT AFFAIR

PRELUDE : Snow Job

The wind was steely blades slicing across exposed cheek and icy breath instantly crystallizing wind-induced tears, making eyelashes heavy with brittle frost. Crouched in a hollow of muddy snow that sucked away every degree of heat from his fleece wrapped body, Illya Kuryakin awkwardly tugged down the earflaps of his llama-lined hat in an effort to cover the tiny sliver of skin under each ear that was open to the elements.

The collar of the coat would come up high enough, but then he would be unable to use the binoculars effectively if he covered his lower face as common sense dictated. He also wondered if the thick, lined gloves he had in his pocket would be any worse on his hands than the ones he currently wore which had the fingers cut out. The ones in his pocket were warmer, true, but his fingers were so cold right now that they were just as ungainly and unfeeling as they would be inside his lined gloves. But he knew that the trigger guard of his sniper rifle was unforgiving to the sensible cold weather pair.

The thought that the bare skin of his finger just might freeze to the trigger distracted him momentarily and he pulled the rifle in closer to his side. Maybe, just maybe, an inkling of heat would trickle out from his body and warm the metallic surface a bit. The nip of unforgiving wind caused him to hunch his shoulders and nestle down with a shudder. Reluctantly, he put the binoculars back up to his eyes and tried to ignore the chatter of his teeth and the crawling fingers of cold trying to work their way to his belly.

He knew snow and he knew cold. This wasn't the worst he'd been in, but he was more accustomed to New York winters at this point in his life. Western Russian winters seemed much more harsh.

He also knew he shouldn't be here too much longer and was brightened by the thought of getting to lie in a bed instead of icy snow.

Again he found the building in his binoculars and viewed the front porch with a well rehearsed sweep. The guards were still there and looking just as miserable, but at least they had a porch on which to take refuge. The front windows were illuminated warmly from the inside with friendly yellow light. Evening was approaching. The lower windows flickered, indicating a lively fire in the fireplace. The curl of smoke from the chimney, gray against the falling white of snow, confirmed that fact.

Movement in an upper window caught his attention and he refocused the lenses to get more detail, looking around the snowflakes that gathered on the lower part of the lens rim. A teenage girl, her hair pulled into a ponytail that curled down her back, disappeared from one window and appeared in the next. She stopped, her mouth working and her body language shouting that she was arguing with someone. Who?

Illya's grip on the binoculars tightened and he pushed his body lower and forward in anticipation. Two hands appeared in the window's frame and rested on the girl's shoulders to calm her. After a moment, the hands firmly pulled the girl from Illya's sight and a moment beyond that, the drapes snapped shut.

With a resigned sigh Illya realized that he might be here longer than he planned. The binoculars dropped into the snow with a plop and he took a luxurious moment to jam his bare fingers into his armpits. When he felt the painful pinpricks that indicated minimal thawing he withdrew his hands and fumbled for the communicator in his pocket.

"Open Channel H." He waited a moment, calculating the time it would take for his partner to open the connection. "Napoleon? Are you thawed enough to respond?"

After a few seconds the smooth voice of his American partner emitted from the silver pen. "I think so. I can't feel my lips to know if I'm talking, though."

A half-dozen comebacks entered Illya's mind but he decided to keep the conversation to business. "I know what you mean. We'll be losing daylight in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to attach the night scope. Cover the house until I'm finished."

"Good idea, but if your fingers are in the same shape as mine right now, that may be a bigger chore than you think. "

"I tend to agree. Pay attention while try to get my fingers to obey."

"Will do. Out."

Snow was falling a little faster as he disconnected and slipped the pen device in his pocket. He moved back from the edge of the slope and sat up. The wind found the tiny opening along his collar and icy tendrils crawled down his neck while he concentrated on the rifle he pulled into his lap. Illya removed the day scope with a few turns of a screw and pulled the infrared scope from his pocket.

Daylight retreated quickly, chased away by time and the incoming dark clouds rolling above the towering trees that surrounded him. The Russian fit the night scope expertly and began to tighten the screws, glad he'd started when he did. It would be dark sooner than expected; a storm was coming in.

He had to concentrate fully on what his fingers were doing because he couldn't entirely feel them. He redoubled his effort and completed the attachment. By now the snow was falling at a rapid rate, as was the temperature. A puff of icy breath blew back into his face as the wind shifted as he gripped the rifle and flopped down on his stomach. He crawled back to his snow perch and just as he touched the freezing scope to his eye and found the front door, a finger of ice pressed firmly against the soft hollow barely exposed on the back of his neck.

"Do not move or your blood will ruin this nice, fresh snow."

The Russian voice was low and menacing. The UNCLE agent didn't think he could feel any more of a chill, but the voice managed to do just that and he froze in place, flat on his stomach in the freezing hollow of snow.

"Drop the rifle."

The sniper rifle nearly disappeared in the fresh powder when Illya's fingers released it. It was quickly covered by snowfall.

"Put your hands behind your head and lace your fingers."

Illya did so, his face millimeters away from the snow as he leaned on his elbows. A slight grin touched one cheek; his unseen adversary had committed the cardinal sin of

touching his victim with his gun's muzzle - Now Illya knew the exact location of both his adversary's gun and body.

The agent's mind ticked off seconds as he waited for his moment to spring.

"Now get to your . . ." The voice didn't get the chance to complete the order.

Illya rolled and whipped one arm back and down, which knocked the rifle muzzle aside and allowed him to clamp his hand down on the top of the weapon. He yanked the barrel forward until the muzzle stuck in the snow at his side. The man was abruptly pulled off balance.

The agent pushed upward from the ground and managed to scramble to his feet. Following through with his forward motion he bowled the man over and landed on top of him. They rolled over and over in the snow, leaving wide rifts behind that filled quietly with new fallen flakes as they fought.

Both rifles were now lost in the snow as both men grappled for the upper hand, the miserable cold forgotten. Illya could feel his foe's hand wriggle downward to get to something stashed in his waistband. The agent quickly calculated that it would be faster to take his opponent's weapon from the waistband than to try and go for his own shoulder holster that was buried under layers of clothing. Illya worked his hand down and located the bulge at the man's hip; the man's efforts redoubled to keep the agent's hands away.

They continued to roll as they fought for the hidden weapon. With the fingers cut out of his gloves, Illya's bare fingers had the slightest of advantages in maneuverability and he managed to get his hands on the object first.

A knife, he realized. A large one.

Illya yanked the blade out and the other man got a two handed, vice-like grip on the agent's wrist. The goon was larger than the agent, but they were nearly equal in strength and continued to struggle. The man opened his mouth to yell and Illya jammed his forearm between his jaws and put his full weight behind it to keep him quiet and hopefully prevent him from biting.

Sporadic, violent gusts whistled through the trees blew the snow into near white out conditions. Neither one noticed that they were at the edge of a rift in the forest floor that fell down into a rocky creek bed ten feet below; the blowing whiteness hid the danger.

With a triumphant yank, Illya got full possession of the knife and rolled to his knees. He raised the blade to strike as the guard swore and rolled away from him. Illya saw him jackknife and fumble for something near his ankle.

An ankle holster, Illya thought immediately. Napoleon will never let me forget bringing a knife to a gunfight!

The agent lunged as the guard pulled an object up from his ankle. Illya slammed the big blade into his opponent's chest with all his weight behind it, and felt a thud against his own body at the same time. They rolled together, connected by momentum and Illya's unyielding grip on the knife.

Blinding fireworks invaded Illya's consciousness as agonizing pain ripped along his left side.

Then he felt like he was floating.

The reality of their fall came home when they hit the rocky creek bed below. His opponent broke his back and died instantly on impact with the ravine floor; he also happened to break Illya's fall. The back of the dead man's head had smashed through

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the thin ice on the creek and his chin stuck up like a small island in the icy swirl while the rest of his body lay on the rocky terrain. Illya pushed off from the body and flopped aside. Falling snow immediately blanketed the dead man and he soon blended in with the snow-covered boulders of the creek bed that surrounded them.

Illya fought to keep awareness and rolled to his knees. He tried to crawl to drier ground but the heavy snowfall made it difficult to determine exactly where that was. His dazed mind didn't realize that he'd lost complete use of his left arm, and he distractedly wondered why it was taking so long to get anywhere. Everything around him looked the same no matter how hard he struggled.

Eventually he bumped into several large drifts that wouldn't yield, and he looked carefully at them through his fading vision. The whiteness was blinding and hid the fact that he was up against the ravine wall. Shivering in shock and cold, the agent snuggled between the protruding rocks seeking shelter. He pushed deeply between them, and to his muddled surprise, fell backwards into a large cave.

Things were dark and brown and still in here; it was a welcome respite from the unforgiving white outside. Illya struggled, crablike, to the smooth, rock wall furthest from the entry. He propped himself up and pulled his knees in tightly to his chest in a desperate effort to conserve body heat. It wasn't long before he didn't feel anything at all.

ACT I: Discovery

Katherine Tarasov angrily stuffed her diary into her rucksack and circled the room like a caged lion looking for prey. She snatched a small, silver framed photo from her desk as well as the small transistor radio that worked sporadically in this area and added them to the pack. Her eyes fell on the ragged stuffed tiger on the bed, and she hesitated for a moment. In a quick decision with a resigned sigh, she tucked the tiger in with the rest and topped off the pack with a bright red heart-shaped pillow. She pulled the buckles down snugly, checked that the sleeping bag was securely attached and shrugged on her winter coat.

A meek tap at the door made her smile. She stepped over and cracked the door open.

"Please, miss, take this with you. The cold takes your energy as quickly as your warmth." The tiny maid pushed a paper bag toward her. Kat knew it was enough calorie-laden food for the day, and probably a night. Standing aside, she allowed the small woman in and traded the bag for an affectionate smile.

"Oh, Lucya, I know that my babushka must talk to you from heaven. Only she took care of me like you do."

"Be careful, child." Kat could feel the soft, velvety warmth of Lucya's wrinkled hand patting hers as she accepted the bag. "You are like one of the creatures of the woods, I know, but I still worry."

Since her beloved grandmother had died so many years ago, Kat knew this was the only person in the entire of Russia who really knew her; the only person she really and truly knew wanted the best for her and understood her thoughts. She considered Lucya to be her mother, and if her actual mother ever knew these feelings, Lucya would be gone in a heartbeat.

A direct descendant of royalty could never consort with the house staff. It simply wasn't proper.

Kat gave Lucya a quick hug. "You know I'll be careful. I respect the out doors." She smiled again. "I'll be back in the morning. I just have to burn off some steam. You know how I am."

"Yes, dear, I do." Lucya backed away and hesitated in the doorway, her work worn hand on the crystal doorknob. "You are just like your father. He watches you from above, like a guardian angel. I know you're safe." She backed from the room and closed the door quietly.

Katrina slipped the bag into her pack and shouldered it, then turned off the lights in her room. She didn't bother sneaking out anymore. She also knew that Josef, the

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security chief and old family employee, kept a close eye on her but allowed her some freedom at the same time. Katrina was followed everywhere she went, she knew, but the men were skilled and rarely noticed by her. She knew her freedom was artificial but she would take what she could get for now. Next year, when she turned 18, she had plans to really live that involved an intricate scheme to escape Russia . She didn't know if she'd ever have the guts to actually do it, but it was fun to think about.

Escaping down the servant's stairs that went through the kitchen Kat thought briefly of her stepfather and felt her temper flared again. What did her mother see in that man? For perhaps the millionth time in the past eight years that question plagued her. If there was one thing she could thank the man for, it was the fact that in the past eight years she had figured out the kind of man she DIDN'T want to marry!

The kitchen was unusually quiet for being so soon after dinner but she didn't wonder why as she opened the back door. Outside the snow was falling heavily and the darkness nearly complete. Kat pulled down the snowshoes that hung on the delivery porch and skillfully put them on along with the fur hat with earflaps. With an excited grab she took the sturdy wood walking stick from its hook and was ready to go. It was dark and near white out conditions, but that didn't faze her. Katrina knew where she was going; it was the one place she could call her own.

Helplessly, Napoleon Solo had watched the focus of their assignment leave the cabin just after darkness fell and the heavy snowfall had begun. All he could do was watch him go; snowfall essentially blinded him in his location - Illya had the only chance at a clear shot, and he didn't answer his communicator. The target drove away, undisturbed.

What had happened to Illya? His failure to check in was unusual.

By the time Solo dodged the forest guards and made it around the perimeter to the last known position of his partner, visibility was nonexistent. The cold wind tossed his unruly forelock in all directions around his concerned eyes as he studied the area. His face was flocked in fresh white, his cheeks red from cold.

It's like he simply disappeared from the Earth, he thought. Solo hadn't heard any ruckus and the guards were still in place and unconcerned. His communicator went unanswered, and Solo didn't dare try it again because the beeping might not help Illya's situation, whatever it may be.

He chewed his wind-chapped lip. The snow didn't reveal any clues, but that was to be expected in this storm. He carefully moved in and located the spot where his partner had been and began to poke around with his toe as he kept one eye on the lighted house.

Solo was about to give up when he felt it - something hard and unforgiving and on the edge of an unnatural hollow. He squatted down and fumbled through the drift until he pulled up a rifle.

Illya's rifle. And there was another one next to it Napoleon didn't recognize.

With a desperate glance around he held the rifles close and retreated. It still didn't make any sense. Where was his partner? And why wasn't Adrian Kozlov's security crawling in these woods right now?



Kat made it to the rocky cave in no time. She could do this hike with her eyes shut. What she didn't expect was to find a crumpled body against the far wall.

Kat entered the cave loaded with wood she'd gathered as she walked, planning to get a fire going as soon as possible or the cave would be a cold respite. She kicked off the snowshoes, dropped her pack and blew a feeble fire into a respectful flame that illuminated the entire cave in a matter of minutes. When she saw the still form in the flickering light her heart leaped into her throat.

Whoever it was had yet to make a noise. After several long seconds of heart settling study she decided to approach it. She felt the pounding in her chest begin again but she commanded control and knelt down by the form. All she could see was a slash of eyelashes and skin between collar and hat.

Loosening her parka while she nervously studied the stranger, Kat finally built up the nerve to see if he was dead. Gently she reached out and felt the exposed spot of cheek. It was cold and only slightly pink. Katrina worked her fingers down the cheek to the groove in the neck where she thought she would find a pulse.

There it was - barely - a thrumming in the neck against her warm fingers. Next, she lifted an eyelid and saw the pupil contract from the firelight. He was alive.

Katrina rocked back on to her heels. Now what? She leaned in and sniffed his faint breath - he wasn't drunk, and he certainly wasn't asleep unless he slept like a rock. Who was he? She knew all the surrounding estates and didn't recognize him.

She pulled out her sleeping bag, opened it and threw it over the man. Then she sat by the fire and warmed her hands while she thought. I wonder if he needs a doctor. I'll need more wood to keep this fire going all night. She stood to do just that, but before she left she took time to get her hands really warm over the fire and approached the stranger again. This time she pulled off his hat, which released a cascade of blond hair, and began to unbutton the outer layers of clothes to look for injuries.

As soon as the light colored outer coat was pulled aside she saw a large shiny area on the black turtleneck beneath. She touched it with her bare fingers and they came away sticky. When angled in the light, she realized it was blood. Kat gasped, and tugged the sweater to check under it when the form jerked slightly, then groaned. Amazingly, his hand moved with surprising speed and grabbed hers, taking her wrist in a painful grip. Kat yelped.

His eyes fluttered open. "Who are you?" He slurred in an accent typical of Western Russia.

"Be still," she snapped to cover her fear. "You're hurt."

The grip lessened enough to allow her to expose the skin surrounding his wound and she regained what was left of her bravery. When the chill of the cave hit the open wound he sharply sucked air between his teeth and the grip tightened again. This time she set her jaw in determination.

"Stop," he growled. "Who are you?"

"Kat," she replied. "And you need a doctor." The raw wound began to bleed freely again when exposed.

"Nyet." The man pushed her hands away and pulled the clothing back over the wound. "Where's Napoleon?" He mumbled drunkenly.

Kat leaned back and raised her eyebrows. "In France?" She replied brightly. Then she shook her head. "We can't be talking about the same Napoleon." When the man's

hands struggled to close the coat, she leaned over and closed it for him. "And I hope your Napoleon is a doctor because there's a lot of blood here."

The man tried to sit up a bit taller, his hair falling forward and covering his forehead in a wild way, but he fell back with a groan.

"That'll teach you, mister. I told you that you were hurt."

He focused his startling clear blue eyes on her through the unruly bangs. "Who are you?" A pain filled grimace passed over his features and he ground his teeth.

"Kat. You seemed to have found my private escape." She indicated the cave with a wave of her hand. "And you? Who are you?"

He blinked as her words sank in. He looked around. "Illya," he said. "Sorry for the intrusion. I didn't have much choice." He spoke through gritted teeth and held himself tightly. "What time is it?"

Kat consulted the small watch on her wrist. "7:30."

Illya's fuzzy brain backtracked what he remembered. It had been at least two hours since sunset, and Napoleon had to realize something was amiss. "My partner, Napoleon, is out there looking for me. He can help."

"In this storm? I don't think he could find his own feet if he doesn't know this area. Plus he'll be discovered before he gets far. My stepfather has this whole area, and me, watched very closely. I'm sure there's an armed guard camping nearby right now." She smiled a bit as she peeled off her parka. "And with this storm, I'm sure they aren't very happy about that right now."

Logic seemed to be coming back to his muddled brain; she was right. And if his partner had followed procedure, he'd scrubbed the mission and would fall back, regroup, and apply a new plan. He should be long gone from this area by now.

But something in what she said made the injured man study her again. She shifted uncomfortably with the scrutiny, but stood her ground. Those icy eyes were unnerving. After a few moments, his eyes widened a bit and he said, much to Kat's surprise, "Inessa Katherine Tarasov."

"It's Kat," she squeaked instantly. "And how do you know my name? I don't know you." Frightened, the girl scrambled to her feet and eyed the cave exit.

"Your mother is Viktoriya Lukin Tarasov Kozlov, and your step father is Adrian Desnya Kozlov. Your father was Alexei Vitaliy Tarasov. He died about nine years ago." The injured blond slumped against the wall. "Now if I could just figure out if your being here is a curse or a blessing."

"Hey! What do you mean by that?" Kat stuttered, suddenly indignant. Then she crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. "Who are you? If you don't tell me, I'll get the guard that I know is out there. And I get the feeling you don't want that."

A tired chuckle came from the man. "No, not really. But I don't think you'll do that."

"That's it. I'm letting you bleed to death." She turned her back to go, but his next words stopped her in her tracks.

"How well do you know your stepfather?"

Slowly, she turned back and squinted suspiciously at the mysterious man. "How do you mean? I know I don't like him much, but he gives my mother what she needs."

Illya nodded. His voice was quiet but steady. "Your mother. She's a direct link to the royal family, isn't she? I know that's not a popular thing to be these days, but in

some powerful circles that stay out of the Government's radar that connection means a lot."

Intrigued, Kat slowly moved next to him. "So? What's that got to do with Adrian?"

"Have you ever heard of a group called THRUSH?" Illya's voice was strong, but Kat could tell he was very uncomfortable. He shifted and grimaced, and she could tell he held back a groan when he bit his lip.

"Well, nothing really, except I've seen folders in Adrian's office with a black and white drawing of a bird on it. Is that the THRUSH you mean?"

"Yes. Now Kat, think back. The security that surrounds you and your mother; are they the same men your father had?"

She frowned and sank back down to her knees. "Well, I only really remember Josef. He is the security chief. The others have come on since mother married Adrian."

"And all those others are members of a group called THRUSH, as is Adrian Kozlov."

"So? What does this group do?"

"Nothing good that we have found. Their goal is to rule the world, basically."

Kat laughed, but a stab of fear burned her stomach. "That's not possible. The way things are with this Cold War. . ."

". . . make it a perfect opportunity for some. The people I work for think your stepfather is setting himself up to be the major power in this part of the world. THRUSH's goal is to dominate humankind."

Kat's mouth dropped open. Eventually her brain kicked in again and she said warily, "And who exactly do you work for?"

"I work for a group called U.N.C.L.E. It's an international organization for peace."

"I've heard of UNCLE. It's on the list of groups that I'm supposed to know. If any of them contact me, I'm to tell my stepfather immediately." She grinned an impish grin. "But then again, I've always made it my rule to do the opposite of what he wishes."

"I've heard there's not much love between you two."

She laughed shortly. "I believe he wishes I were of the picture. My mother's family is still newsworthy, especially if it's news that makes the old royals look bad. My mother likes to be kept in a certain fashion and Adrian can supply that. I guess that's good for her. So tell me, what is my stepfather up to?"

Illya slowly explained while Kat tended the fire and made a strong broth from bouillon cubes. Adrian Kozlov was one of the secondary leaders of THRUSH in Russia, and climbing the ladder with impressive speed. His marriage to Kat's mother was, UNCLE felt, to make him popular to those circles that still respected and supported the royal family. Rich circles - the bourgeoisie that hoped to rule some day.

Kozlov was reported to be the main force behind several small incidents aimed at increasing the Cold War tensions nearly to the point of actual war. If he was successful and was backed by the people of Russia, his chances of being the main THRUSH leader in Russia would be excellent. He could pull together his own personal army of Russians if THRUSH ever became a problem for him. The double backup system he'd set up over the years made it a sure thing that he was on top either way. UNCLE preferred that THRUSH was out of the picture.

Exhausted and trying not to show it, Illya looked to Kat for a reaction. He cradled his left arm tightly against his side using it to stop the blood flow from the wound when

he realized it was otherwise useless. He felt his head steadily growing lighter, probably from blood loss. He took the broth she offered with his right hand, which shook slightly.

She appeared thoughtful. "And Adrian has these THRUSH guys working for him now."

"If you don't believe me, take a look in the wallet of the guy that did this to me." He pressed his side and winced. "He should have an ID card."

She choked on her broth. "Are . . . are you saying there's a dead man outside? And I walked right by him?"

"He wasn't moving much last I saw him."

"But Josef would notice him missing! It's only a matter of time before they begin a search!"

"You are probably right." Illya put the broth cup down.

Kat jumped up and began a nervous pacing of the cave. "You have to get out of here. Josef knows where this cave is. He makes the other men keep their distance, but when they discover that man missing he's going to come here first to get me."

Illya struggled to sit taller, which set off a brand new show of fireworks in his vision. "I know that. Leave me here. I can take care of myself. There's no reason for you to be involved."

"Leave? You can't even stand! Who are you fooling?" She knelt at his side again. "Look. You said your partner, Napoleon, is out there. I can contact him and he can get you out. What about that?"

"Kat, I can't allow you to . . ." He swayed.

The girl jumped to her feet. "Well, there's not much you can do about it. I need to get a little more wood for the night. Try not to bleed too much before I get back."

"Kat!"

She darted out the cave, cinching her jacket tight as she moved into the darkness. Once outside she stood a few moments to let her eyes adjust to the dark. It was still snowing, but not as heavily as before. A dot of moonlight broke from the clouds and she eyed the bumps glowing with the weak light in the riverbed with suspicion; one of them was a dead body. Carefully, she moved upstream where she knew of a small grove of trees. Wood would be plentiful. Curiosity made her a bit braver and she nudged the man-sized boulders she passed on the way.

She didn't expect to find the body on the third nudge - its softness gave it away. She let out a little squeak of surprise. It was no more than twenty feet from the cave, practically right on top of them! Momentarily rooted in fear, Kat swallowed hard and tried to stop the pounding of her heart. Unsuccessful, she decided to face her fear and carefully squatted next to the form. Nausea made her unable to find the face; she felt for an arm and was rewarded by the glint of silver in the pale light - an identity bracelet. There was only one guard - Tima - that wore one of those. She shakily stood and backed off, the vapor from her nostrils clear in the night air.

They had time, she realized. This guard, Tima, was supposed to be on vacation and not due back for two more days. No one would miss him. The guards usually parked on the public street away from the house and walked in because Adrian didn't like his house crowded with cars. That's where he was coming from when he'd run into Illya.

Slowly, the nausea left her and she smiled and turned to get the wood, a stomach tingling giddiness encouraging her feet to move. She never did like Tima. She often saw

THE MAN FROM UN.C.L.E. FANFIC BY AJB

him kick the stray dogs in the street and laugh about it when they went to town. She also heard the rumors about how he beat his wife.

Kat's self-confidence raised a notch. If she could handle a dead body without being sick or passing out, then she could handle anything. Someday, maybe she could be a secret agent, too. She smiled a bit more broadly. Wouldn't that get her mother into a tizzy!

ACT II: "You Are My Best Author!"

Napoleon left the Kozlov estate when the snowstorm and darkness covered his retreat. It must have been close to midnight. He wasn't able to find his partner anywhere, and didn't want to risk discovery by the guards. Kozlov was gone from the house and now Solo had to come up with Plan B. The first step was to get information on Kozlov's future movements from the back up team. He glanced at his watch; Mark , April Dr. Timmons, would be at the meeting place in town at 9 a.m.

The doc sure wasn't needed for Plan A anymore. Solo sighed and pulled off his bulky gloves after stowing the rifles in the trunk of the decrepit car. He tugged the driver's door which finally jerked open and slid into the confined space. At least he was out of the wind, and wondered if his partner was as lucky. He pulled out his communicator.

"Open Channel D, overseas relay." The American was safe in his warm car and driving into town, his thoughts on his missing partner. Illya had to show up sometime; Solo just hoped it wasn't during the spring thaw.



The night was long and Kat's fire was very welcome, but the injured agent was uneasy about her presence even knowing that Kozlov's security wouldn't be looking for them.

He tried to stay awake - Kat had dozed off around midnight - but Illya felt his body growing weaker and was almost afraid to sleep. He might not wake up again.

Every move was agonizing. He was sure there were broken ribs and possibly some internal damage as a result. At least the arteries and major veins were intact; he would have bled out long ago if that were not the case. His left leg continually tingled, and he couldn't feel his left arm at all. His gun was still tucked in his holster at his side but he left it there, not wanting to scare the girl. Besides, he wasn't sure he had the strength to hold on to it if he got it out.

Slowly and painfully he felt for his communicator with his good hand. It was gone, probably freezing in the snowdrifts above. The search exhausted him, which made him realize the low probabilities of getting out of this cave. Shock was beginning to take its toll.

A plan - he had to think of a plan. Hopefully, Napoleon would follow the procedures they had put together before coming here instead of hunting for him. That

means he would meet the rest of the team in town in the morning. Illya doubted very much that he would be able to get there. A message would have to be sent.

His eyes were heavy with weariness, and he blinked slowly at the girl next to him, snuggled under the shared sleeping bag. He hated to think it, but she was the only way.

“Kat,” he mumbled, fighting to keep his eyes open. “Kat!” Weakly, he reached over and shook her.

She jerked awake; her eyes wild for a moment while her sleepy brain registered her surroundings.

“What?” She said, sitting up quickly and rubbing her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“You need to listen to me. I don’t have a lot of time.”

His voice was low, scratchy and much weaker than she remembered. Whatever color had been in the agent’s face was now gone. Kat couldn’t help but compare his complexion to the skin of the dead man’s hand outside and a feeling of fear tickled her gut.

“I’m listening,” she said quietly, taking his hand in hers.



Kat’s palms were slick with sweat beneath her mittens and she had to consciously keep herself from rubbing her hands on her thighs in nervousness. As she moved among the sparse crowd of the small town, Illya’s description of Napoleon Solo ran constantly through her mind like a mantra to calm her nerves.

He would be meeting with his backup team at a tavern, he said. There should be at least four in the group, one woman and three men. Solo would be in charge and talking. One of the other men would have an British accent. The woman would be beautiful but bundled up for weather in practical cold weather gear – not the fashion plate women normally seen on these streets – but stylish in her own way. The remaining man, a doctor, would be thin and tall with dark red hair.

Painfully aware of the security men tailing her, and now aware that they probably had an allegiance to THRUSH rather than her family, appearing to be simply curious and not scared to death was not as easy as she thought it would be. Kat forced herself to walk calmly and carefully and check out each and every window on the main drive as she worked toward the tavern. It was almost nine o'clock . Kat wondered if she'd be able to pick out Illya’s partner, but Illya’s words reassured her as she ran them through her mind.

“Trust me, you will notice him. Most females do. He will find your English charming and continue to talk to you in that language because his Russian is dismal, but the woman with him is very well versed in our language. So is the doctor. Between the two of them, they will absorb everything, but may not say much to you. Just keep talking. Tell them everything I’ve told you. Fall back into Russian when you have to. You’ll do very well, Kat.”

She had noticed that the agent’s voice was getting softer. He was losing his energy and needed help fast. Kat straightened her shoulders. She would not disappoint him. She’d left the cave at first light, when his voice was only a mere whisper and wasn’t sure he even knew she’d gone.

The next place was the tavern she sought. Dark and smoky like the rest of the half-dozen taverns on this block, this one was more crowded than the others. She'd

never been inside a place like this before and she had to admit it looked cozy. The smells emanating from the open door were warm, smoky and inviting. The small purchase she had made to justify her trip to town dangled from her wrist in a bag, forgotten. She didn't think the security men were suspicious at all about her real motive.

Napoleon will try to blend in with a crowd, Illya had told her. He'll be, away from the door, but facing it.

She paused, and then leaned part way in the door for a better look.

One of the bodyguards suddenly appeared at her side. "Miss Katherine," he said lowly. "That is no place for a young girl."

"Wait." She raised her hand to quiet him. "I think I know someone in there." It was a small place and easily examined from the doorway. She looked carefully, drawn to the small cluster of people in the far corner.

Four people, and the one facing the door leaned in to the group and was doing all the talking. His motions seemed urgent. She focused on the speaker through the cigarette smoke and saw exactly what Kuryakin meant – the dark, smoldering eyes and rakish hair of the American in the meager light was, indeed, eye catching. Kat tore her eyes away and studied his small group. They were just as Illya had described - one woman and two other men barely visible in the poor lighting and smoky haze. Her heart rate shot up; it was show time.

She put on a bright expression for the guard and spoke excitedly. "I thought so! I heard he would be in town!" She took a step through the door. The guard pulled her up short.

"Your father would fire me if I let you . . ."

"Stepfather," Kat corrected firmly as she angrily met his eyes. "And if you have a problem, take it up with my mother, not him. She will approve. That man in there is an author, my favorite author, and I'm going to talk to him." The lie came out so smoothly she even surprised herself. "Now let go of me."

The guard reluctantly released her but followed closely behind as she approached Solo. Kat's nervousness lessened as she fell into her role. Her eyes locked on her target.

Solo, aware someone was coming his way, did a double take when he realized whom she was. He stopped speaking and quietly watched her approach with dark, brooding eyes.

The man's features were sharp and pleasing, just like the cut of his clothes. The girl was immediately struck by the fact that even though he was dressed for the extreme weather, Napoleon Solo managed to look sharp. "Excuse me," Kat started in careful English. "I introduce myself because you are my . . . best . . . author!" She pulled off her mitten and stuck out her hand. He took it carefully, but firmly. She could see his mind working behind his charming hazel eyes.

"I think you mean 'favorite', not 'best', but you speak English very well." His voice was low and sultry, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity. He rose gracefully to his feet and took her hand. "You have me at a disadvantage, Miss . . .?"

"Kat. Katherine Tarasov." Her grip was tight and slick with sweat. She was sure he could read the fear in her eyes and feel the tremble in her hand. "I do not mean to . . . to . . ." She wrinkled her brow. "Interr . . ." She stumbled over the word.

"Interrupt? By no means, Miss Tarasov, there is no reason to apologize." A wavy haired blond with an English accent stood quickly and reached for her hand. Kat could see his wirey frame under the bulky clothing, as well a suspicious lump on his left side.

The realization that all these people probably wore guns made the gravity of the situation sink in suddenly. "I'm Mark." She released Solo's hand and took Mark's.

As Mark spoke to her, Solo glanced at April who shrugged her shoulders in uncertainty. Always alert, April turned her eyes to give the security man with Kat a thorough look over. Then she, too, rose. Kat saw that everything Illya had said was true - she was a beauty, but at this moment it was hidden under layers of practical clothes.

"April. Pleased to meet you." She'd said every word in perfect Russian for this area. "And this is Dr. Timmons." Kat took his hand briefly and smiled. The doctor greeted her in perfect Russian also, and she inwardly sighed in a bit of relief. She then turned back to Solo.

"Um, I wanted to tell you . . ." She struggled with the English.

April smiled sympathetically. "I can translate, Miss Tarasov, if you'd like."

Kat gave her a grateful smile, and nodded. She continued in Russian but kept her eyes on the handsome American. "I just wanted to tell you that my favorite story is the one you wrote about the lost knight." She looked right in his eyes when she said it and she saw them widen slightly with the translation. "You know, the white knight on his quest."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I know the story you mean." Solo straightened his tie and offered her a seat.

Kat glanced at the security man. "Nyet, but thank you, I cannot stay. I just wanted to say how I like your writing and it has helped me with my English." She inhaled nervously. "I especially like the part where the knight gets hurt but still has the determination to finish his quest." When she held Solo's eyes, she saw one corner of his mouth lift into a smile when April finished speaking.

"Yes, he is a very determined character," Solo replied slowly. "And stubborn. Did you notice that?"

Her eyes sparkled when April translated with a chuckle. They understood! "Yes. Very . . . stubborn." She said in English. She turned to look directly at Dr. Timmons and continued in Russian. "Our knight could have used a doctor in the story, but time and place would make that difficult, I would say."

The doctor's eyes stayed with hers and remained calm. "Yes. But that would change the story, wouldn't it?"

Kat smiled. "Yes. It would have saved our hero a lot of pain, and possibly saved his life in the end, I would say." Dr. Timmons nodded in full understanding and continued to smile, but Kat noted how his fingers began to nervously tangle with his napkin.

Kat returned her attention to the senior agent and put her hand on top of Solo's. "My only regret is that the book is at my home. I would love to have you sign it. Will you be in town very long? I can go get it."

Solo digested that information for a moment and said slowly, "It depends on my business here. How far away is your home?" His eyebrows arched pleasantly. Kat realized he was asking where his partner was.

She changed to English so the guard would not understand. She hoped he didn't understand, anyway, so she still spoke carefully. "Up the main road. A river goes under a bridge before our house. This weather makes it sometimes not . . .um. . ." She rolled her wrist, indicating her search for a word. Solo turned to April.

"Not passable?" April said in Russian.

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“Yes, thank you. Not passable.” Kat leaned in closer to April in the pretense of warmly shaking her hand, and quickly whispered in Russian. “There’s a cave in the wall of the ravine about one kilometer north from the road. Look for this,” she tossed her bright scarf over her shoulder and straightened up, smiling nervously. “I could go get the book, or if you have time, perhaps you could come by for lunch or supper. My mother would love to meet you.”

“That is impossible, I’m sorry.” Solo glanced at his watch. “We will be leaving soon.” He extended his hand. “It was so very nice to meet you, Miss Tarasov. Your English is remarkable. I’m glad my books help you with my language.” Solo pulled a pen from his pocket, leaned over a cocktail napkin and scribbled a short note along with his signature. “Here you go. Press that in your book, and maybe we will meet again.” He shook her hand warmly and pressed the napkin in her palm. She stuffed it in her coat pocket without looking at it.

“Yes. Thank you. Nice to meet you all.” She smiled and made her way out the bar with the feeling that a huge weight had just been lifted from her shoulders- Illya was going to get some help.

The security man was still right on her heels. "I think I'll be going home now," she said to him with a smug smile.

ACT III: "Isn't That What Secret Agents Do?"

After the young lady departed the tavern, the small group waited until they were sure the street would be clear of guards. They returned to their rooms at a leisurely pace that belied their sense of urgency so Dr. Timmons could get his small medical bag.

"We're lucky to have you along on this one," Solo said lowly as they reassembled on the edge of town. "We have just enough time to find Illya and move on with Plan B."

"We haven't finalized Plan B yet," April said, taking his elbow like he was her date.

"Consider Plan B a sort of open ended plan," he answered. "You said Kozlov should be back later tonight. Let's see what we get from Illya first. We have the time."

"Let's go then," Mark said with a nod of his head.

Moisture condensed on the inside of the car windows within moments of the agents packing inside. It was a small Lada, barely fitting the four adults, and was a study in Russian reliability without style. The ride was blessedly obstacle free and they found the bridge Kat had described without a problem even though the road and countryside were blanketed in white. They parked the car with others just off the road in a spot that had been cleared for the residents in the area. Most of the other streets were still piled high with the white stuff.

"I hope this fresh snowfall doesn't make Kozlov cancel his plans to return home tonight." April pushed open the door and let out a small expletive when the cold air hit her.

"Well, then, we'll just have to move on the Plan C, then!" Mark said cheerfully as he unfolded himself from the back seat. He stomped his feet and stretched as he spoke.

"Right. Plan C." April rolled her eyes. Dr. Timmons let out a short laugh at her expression. "At least it's stopped snowing."

"Let's go," Solo said without humor, worry clear in his eyes. The others fell in behind as they found the creek bed and headed north.

The hike would have been a lot faster if not for the fresh snowfall. Some of the drifts were hip deep. They all had an unspoken drive to hurry, feeling that time was of the essence.

Finally they spotted Kat's bright scarf draped over a branch stuck in one wall of the ravine. Snow, blown from the top of the ravine, fluttered constantly in the air and covered any tracks Kat would have left behind.

"She said there was a cave but I can't see anything." April stopped at the edge of the creek, the scarf fluttering in the weak breeze about fifteen feet from her. Mark and Napoleon made their way to stand right under it. Mark felt the walls, Solo looked down.

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“This way,” he said quickly, barely noting the trampled path between the boulders; it was disappearing quickly under the blown snow. One by one they worked their way between the boulders.

Solo stumbled into the cave first. A quick motion at the far end immediately caught his attention and his hand automatically moved to his holster. After a second’s hesitation he dropped his hand and hustled across the open space.

The jerk of Kat’s head in his direction is what had caught his eye. She was kneeling next to a bundled up form and her eyes wide with worry. “You made it!” She blurted in Russian. “Help him!” She held tightly onto his partner’s hand.

Illya had not moved. Solo dropped next to him as Kat rattled on in Russian, choked with emotion, and told them what had happened to the wounded agent. Her hands were covered in dried blood.

“She says he’s bleeding on this side.” April immediately knelt beside the girl and gently moved her back. Solo had already removed the sleeping bag and worked on the heavy coat.

Illya mumbled something and weakly tried to bat Solo’s hands away with one arm.

“Stop it, Illya, it’s me.” The blond agent continued to struggle, but his attempts were easily circumvented and they got the coat open. “Doc, come here.”

“Lay him flat. I need to cut open the clothing.”

The three agents gently moved Illya away from the wall and pushed him flat to the cold floor. Timmons worked quickly as Solo and April spoke to the wounded agent and kept him still.

Mark moved Kat out of the way. She held his forearm tightly and he spoke slowly and calmly, telling her what the doctor was saying in his broken Russian.

“He’s been shot. Some ribs are broken and there’s some internal bleeding but it looks like it has stopped. The doctor is cleaning the wound.” The calming cadence of Mark’s voice is what soothed her.

“I can’t find the exit wound,” Timmons grunted. “Roll him on his right side. Careful!” The pair did so and Illya groaned weakly. The doctor searched the scarred back, frowned, and motioned for the agents to lay him back down. Timmons leaned in closely to the Slavic face and began to issue directions while looking for physical responses.

“Found it. The bullet angled upward, probably deflected by the ribs. I’m not sure but I think it’s managed to miss most of the major organs. The ribs may have nicked something, so we’ll have to be very careful moving him.” He checked the agent’s eyes. “Mr. Kuryakin? Can you hear me? Answer me, please.” Illya mumbled something unintelligible. His eyes were unfocused. “That’ll do,” Timmons replied. He began to apply a pressure bandage to his patient’s torso.

Not knowing what was going on was too much for the girl. “What are you doing here, anyway?” Kat asked tearfully. “Illya said my stepfather belongs to some horrible group.”

“You could call THRUSH that, yes.” Mark told her, and then he glanced to Solo, not wanting to continue.

“Are you here to kill him?” Kat’s voice was in a matter of fact tone.

Mark hesitated. “Ah, not exactly,” he replied.

April joined them to give Dr. Timmons room to work. Solo stayed by his partner's side.

"Then why are you here? Are you following him?"

April took over the questions, much to Mark's relief. "We'd like to, Kat, but he has very good security."

"Yes, I know," she snorted. "They follow me constantly."

"They follow you constantly, you say?"

Three sets of agent eyes turned to her quickly. "Do they know about this cave?" April asked.

"Yes, but I made sure they didn't follow me this time. They think I am in my room."

"We can't count on that for long. You have to go back." April put her arm around the girl's shoulders.

"No." Kat couldn't pull herself away from the drama unfolding in front of her. The dark one, Solo, was very scared for his partner; she could tell by his eyes and the way he hovered over the down man. She couldn't leave until she knew if Illya would live . . . or die. Suddenly she felt sick. "I can't go until you tell me why you're here. And I need to know if Illya will be all right."

April translated for Napoleon. The senior agent looked to them, and after a thoughtful second, nodded his head. April continued. "We are here to tag your stepfather."

Kat looked at her blankly. "Tag?"

"Yes. That's why Dr. Timmons is with us. Illya was supposed to wound your stepfather. When he went for medical treatment, Dr. Timmons was going to implant a device that would let us follow him. He's meeting with several top Thrush officials soon. We couldn't simply tag his clothes or his car because he changes them. We found a small window of time where his regular doctor was out of town and managed to slip our Dr. Timmons in there. It was supposed to happen last night, but this happened instead." April nodded to Illya.

"Yes, a guard came back unexpectedly." Kat thought about that for a moment. An idea popped into her head. "You don't have to put a tag under his skin. He wears the same jewelry all the time. A necklace and a ring. He never takes them off." She hesitated a beat. "Well, there is one time he takes the necklace off - when he showers."

April glanced at Mark, her interest piqued. "We knew about the ring, but not about the necklace."

"Yes, it's a pendant that he wears against his skin so you probably never see it. It opens up. It's about this big," she held her fingers up in a circle. She was willing to chat because it distracted her from the business going on around the blond agent.

"Really?" April said with a bright look.

"Yes." At that moment, Kat made a decision. "And I could put your tag inside for you. Is the tag small enough to fit in the pendant?"

The bright look on the woman agent's face darkened. "We can't let you get involved like that." April looked at the small group and translated what Kat had just told her.

Kat's eyes, flecked with anger, turned on April. "And you aren't going to leave until it's done, are you? Isn't that what secret agents do? Get the job done? What's going to happen to him in the meantime? He needs help now!"

April cracked a tight grin. "You're pretty smart, aren't you?"

"I've been outsmarting my stepfather's security for years. It's the same kind of thinking, I bet. It all depends where your loyalties lie."

April guffawed. "How old are you, really? 30?" She came to her and took Kat's hands. "That offer is more dangerous than you can even know. We can't allow it."

Kat's stormy eyes didn't back down. "So his life is forfeit? You're going to have a hard enough time getting him out of here unseen. And you won't risk being sighted until the job's done, right? Am I right?"

April glanced at Mark, whose head dropped in reluctance. What the girl was saying was true.

Kat continued. "I'm the best chance you have right now."

"Plan C," Mark said quietly.

April sighed. The girl was right, and she said as much to the senior agent.

The sound of the sleeping bag being tucked around Illya drew their attention. Napoleon straightened wearily, rose, and stepped away from his partner with a single backward glance. Dr. Timmons remained at Illya's side. April and Mark immediately read the sag of Solo's shoulders as bad news. Kat noticed that blood stained the cuffs of his stylish sweater.

"Something has caused Illya to lose control of his left arm. The doctor thinks the bullet is lodged near the nerve bundle and swelling has caused paralysis. The bullet has to come out, but moving him to a surgical facility may cause the bullet to move and sever the nerves." Solo rubbed his eyes.

"How do you know the nerve isn't severed already?" April's tone was matter-of-fact, but it carried a question that no one else dared to voice.

"We don't." Solo said tonelessly. Sometimes being in charge was not worth the pay; he had to be the one to make the call that may or may not paralyze his partner for life. He turned his attention to the girl. He studied her carefully as he ran the goal of their mission through his mind. He caught April's eye and nodded to the frightened but angry girl.

"Kat," Solo said thoughtfully after a while. April translated rapidly. "You are quite right. We are against the wall at the moment and running out of time. You may be what we need, but we won't use you unless we can insure your safety."

"And just how do you plan on doing that?" April asked.

Solo turned to the shapely agent and grinned, but his expression was tired. "By sending you in with her. Kat, meet your dressmaker."

"Dressmaker!" April exclaimed. "I can't even sew on a button!"

"Maybe not, but you can wield a measuring tape with the best of them. It can't be any harder than assembling a .45 blindfolded."

"That I can do." Dancer crossed her arms over her chest. She was small of stature, but the pose she struck managed to look menacing to Kat. "I always draw blood when I attempt to sew. Mine."

The worried look that crossed her face made Solo grin and it felt good. "Tell her what I said," Solo ordered. April complied with a frustrated sigh and told Kat what her boss had come up with.

"A dressmaker would be perfect." Kat replied excitedly. "There is some sort of big dinner I'm supposed to go to in two weeks, and I do need a dress. You can bring some selections to my house along with the tag."

April rolled that over in her mind. "That just may work," she said to the girl as she patted her arm. Then she turned to her boss. "Now that we have that figured out, how do you plan on getting Illya out of here?"

Silence hung in the cave as the lead agent weighed his options. "We don't. Dr. Timmons will have to do the surgery here."

"What?" Timmons barked from Illya's side. He jumped up and continued his conversation in a low tone. "I can't do that here! I don't have the supplies I need!"

"We'll get them."

Mark and April started to voice their disapproval when Solo stopped them with a sharply raised hand and a cool glare. "We have no choice," he said firmly. "First, he can't be moved until the bullet is out. Field surgery of that sort is not unheard of; I remember Korea ." He looked directly into Timmons' eyes and met skeptical optimism. "Second, if we take Illya to a medical facility around here there will be questions. Lots of them. We can't afford to be on the hot seat and risk the entire mission. When that dead guard outside is found, every bullet wound reported in this area will be investigated. And finally, we still don't know how deep THRUSH influence is in these parts."

Timmons' mouth compressed into a straight line. At the start of Solo's reasoning, he was clearly displeased. By the time the CEA had explained himself, the physician accepted the idea. "I need supplies," he said tightly.

"Those we can get. You're still able to access the hospital from our original plan. Make a list of the things you need. Mark, you stay here with Illya. Here," he pulled an UNCLE special from the back of his waistband. "I took this from him during the examination." He handed it over to the relieved looking Englishman. "You should be safe now."

Mark tucked the handgun away and said lightly. "I still plan on keeping out of his reach, you know."

Solo continued. "Meanwhile, Katherine here needs to go home and wait for you, April. Looks like you need to do some shopping. Meanwhile, I need to alter the tag so it will fit in Kozlov's pendant. Now go."

ACT IV: "Her Expense Account Must Rival Yours."

The cave was comfortably warm; the rock walls soaked up the fire's heat and radiated it back over the pair of agents. Illya lay flat on his back, his useless left arm draped over his stomach, his awareness drifting in and out. Solo got little direction from his electronics wiz partner, and worked very carefully on the tag in the dim light. The device, once removed from its protective housing, could be compressed to fit the locket but the external planting of the device increased the danger of detection. Solo hoped that Kozlov didn't open the pendant on a regular basis.

Illya rolled his head in Solo's direction and fought to keep his eyes open. "Where's the girl?" His voice was soft.

"She's shopping with April." That was all Napoleon was willing to tell his partner right now.

The resulting chortle was short and weak, and the foggy blue eyes disappeared behind suddenly heavy lids. "April is worse than you."

Solo chuckled as he worked on attaching a shortened wire. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to look good."

"Her expense account must rival yours." Illya tried to sit up, but only managed to raise his head a few inches from the floor. "I'm cold."

Napoleon immediately put down the device and checked his partner's forehead. He felt warm. "Actually, you have a fever. You need to stay covered." He made sure the bag was tucked in and couldn't help but notice Illya's shivering. Where the hell are you, Timmons? He thought. He glanced at his watch and saw he'd been gone almost three hours. Unconsciously he bit his lip and looked at Illya's face.

The poor lighting did nothing to help the shadows from looking like bruises on the pale Slavic features. Illya's hair was a ruffled mess, and his cheeks hollow. Solo checked the pulse at his friend's warm neck. It was racing.

"The doctor will be here soon." He checked the circulation in his partner's left hand and was satisfied. Solo realized Illya hadn't responded. "Illya?" He was unconscious. "Damn it," Solo spit. "Where's Timmons?" He forced his attention back on the device feeling quite useless.

It was just shy an additional hour when Timmons, Slate and April returned, ice frozen to their hair and snow covering their coats.

"It's beginning to storm again," Mark said as he brushed off. "April needs to get going. Is the tag ready?"

"I have four dresses waiting in the car. Not a whole lot to choose from in town!"

“Here,” Solo gave her the device. “Let me know when Kat’s ready to place the device. Get going.”

“Well, good afternoon to you, too.” She said grumpily as she stashed the tag inside a small metal box that also contained tailor’s pins. “How’s Illya?”

“Out cold and feverish. We need to get to work.” He made himself pause, and take a breath. Apologetically, he smiled at April. “He’ll be fine. Now can we get this over with?”

April smiled back and threw a mock salute. “Piece of cake, captain. See ya in a while.” With one lingering look in Illya’s direction, she moved away and disappeared into the elements.

“Get water boiling,” Timmons ordered as he stepped into the leading role.



Kat had been pacing her room nervously for what seemed like days. Every time she heard a door slam or footsteps, she froze and listened carefully, wondering if her stepfather or April would arrive first.

What if she got to Adrian’s room too early? Or too late? Or what if he decided not to shower at all tonight? What if he walked in on her? Kat suspected he had a violent side to him that he kept out of her sight. She’d seen an occasional security man wince when her stepfather raised his voice sometimes, and she already knew the bite of his sharp tongue. Now she wondered if he carried guns. Or knives. Or poison! You’re being silly! She scolded herself. Calm down or you’ll ruin everything!

At the point where she thought she would go mad, there was a rap on her door. She jumped and squeaked, “What? I mean, who is it?” She fought with her breathing to try and slow her heart. Lucya opened the door wide, and Kat felt herself smile crazily in relief at the sight of April standing behind her maid. “Oh! I’m so glad you made it!”

April stepped around the old woman, her arms piled high with dresses. “Hello, Miss Katherine. Shall we begin?”

“Oh, yes!” She turned her attention to the maid. “Thank you, Lucya. You may go now. Oh, wait.”

Lucya paused in the doorway. “Yes, Miss?”

“Um, is my stepfather home yet?”

“Yes, miss, he’s just arrived and is in the study.”

“Thank you,” Kat said warmly to her friend and thought, if you only knew what was going on! Lucya closed the door quietly. Kat turned to April immediately. “I thought you’d never get here!”

April laughed lightly in response. “Ah, the impatience of youth.” She dropped the dresses and motioned for Kat to be quiet. “I’ve brought four dresses, miss. Which one would you like to start with?” As she spoke, the agent walked around the room and checked ledges and behind pictures.

Kat watched her, puzzled. April motioned for her to respond. “Ah, let’s see here.” What was she doing? April pointed to the dresses, and Kat tore her eyes from the woman to the bed and picked up the top dress. “This one looks good.” She looked up and saw April rolling her hands. Keep going. “But this one is nice too.” She ruffled the entire pile. Now the agent was looking at a small device in her hand. “Um, this is a nice color selection. Not too many ruffles.”

“Okay, you can stop now.” The trim woman slipped the gadget into a pocket. “It’s clean in here.” Kat’s confused look made her laugh lightly. “Microphones,” she said softly. “We aren’t being monitored.”

“Oh, my God. I hadn’t thought of that.” Kat sank onto the bed, shaken.

“That’s why I am here.” The older woman smiled and picked up a dress. “I think this one is particularly yummy. I may take it home with me!”

“‘Yummy’?” Kat repeated slowly. She was actually talking clothes at a time like this?

“Oh, yes.” April held it up to her chest and looked into Kat’s small mirror. “This would be perfect.” She turned one way, then another and said cheerfully. “Come on, Kat. Lighten up! We have to wait until he’s in the shower anyway. When will that be, do you think?”

With a shaky hand Kat picked up one of the dresses. It felt slinky and warm and . . . wonderful. She moved to stand next to the agent and held it up to her body. I’d never pick out a dress like this, but it is wonderfully decadent! “He has a cocktail, reads mail, and then showers before dinner.”

“Creature of habit, huh? Where’s your mom?”

“She’s in the kitchen directing the cook. She’s hands on that way.” Finally her nerves felt intact again because of the chatter and self admiration, and Kat realized that was April’s plan all along. She was good. “How’s Illya?”

April’s lips pursed. “I don’t know. They were preparing to operate when I left.”

The two women regarded their reflections in the mirror as they held the dresses up to their bodies. It made the idea of what was going on in the cave seem so unreal, just like the framed reflection before them.



“How much left in the bag?” Timmons forehead was shiny with perspiration and furrowed in concentration. His eyes never left the field below him.

“About half. A little under.” Mark was holding the i.v. fluid bag at Illya’s head and watching the patient’s breathing.

The scene in the cave was straight out of a B-movie, Solo thought as he glanced nervously around. His jobs were to hand Timmons equipment and apply chloroform as needed to keep the patient unconscious. Even with the clean, white sheets over, under and around Illya glowing brightly in the light of strategically placed lanterns couldn’t cover the primitive setting of the cave. They were on their knees and the patient on the floor. There were no monitoring devices, no shiny appointments, sterile facilities or cute nurses. This was a cross between Ben Casey and Tarzan.

Timmons had not been happy about the fever, but there was nothing he could do about it except inject antibiotics into the i.v. He’d swathed Illya with iodine, unwrapped some sterile scalpels, forceps and clamps, and then talked Solo through the anesthesia. Illya had come around during preparations but wasn’t aware of his surrounds. He’d mumbled a few incomprehensible words, struggled very little at the application of the chloroform, and dropped off easily enough. Solo felt a little guilty and moved on to the next step.

The doctor continued to frown as he hunched his shoulders in concentration.

“Isn’t this taking longer than you expected?” Solo asked. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the open, bloody hole in his partner’s upper back.

“I haven’t located the bullet yet,” Timmons grunted. “It’s deeper than I thought and I have to avoid some sensitive areas. Forehead.”

Solo wiped the perspiration away before it dripped into the cavity.

“How do you know where to look? He was shot from the front.”

Timmons's attention wasn't diverted at all by the conversation. “It has to be here. It’s the only area that accounts for the paralysis. An x-ray would have been nice. Maybe we should have dragged one of those machines down here.”

“Along with either a generator or the world’s longest extension cord. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you aren’t the doctor. I knew I should have been in charge of this debacle. Clamp.”

Solo laughed. His back was killing him from bending over and he knew Timmons must be in worse shape. You wouldn’t know it to look at him, though, and a feeling of appreciation washed over the worried agent.

“I feel something.” Timmons’ fingers slowed as he searched the opening. After a moment he froze, then carefully drew out the forceps. A metallic lump was clamped between the teeth. “Got it.” He dropped the item in a shallow cup and began to close.

Solo and Slate’s shoulders relaxed and their faces brightened considerably.

“It’s about time.” Mark growled good naturedly. “My arm was falling asleep.”

Timmons had the wound closed in very short time, and was putting in the final stitches when Solo’s communicator beeped.

“Solo here.”

“Kat’s going in now, Napoleon. Kozlov’s in the shower, right on schedule.”

“It’s about time something went right. Solo out.”



Wearing the satin gown she’d first picked up Kat made her way down the hall in her bare feet to the large master bedroom while holding the front hem up off the floor with both hands. She knew her stepfather usually left the ring and pendant on his dresser when he showered, so it should be easy enough to place the tag if only her hands weren’t shaking so much. She was glad of the handful of dress; it covered her trembling.

She nodded at the sentry in the hall, now realizing that it was probably odd that someone was always posted on the upper floors. It had been this way as long as she could remember, but now that she knew the activities of Adrian Kozlov, the sentry seemed ominous and she felt practically naked in front of him.

She slipped into the room and felt that her hands were awfully sweaty. She started to wipe her hands on the gown, thought better of that, and used the curtains instead. “I always hated that material,” she mumbled to calm her nerves.

The dresser was across the room. She quickly crossed the space and picked up the pendant. She started to open it when a file on the dresser caught her eye. It was one of those black folders with the white bird symbol on the cover. Before she could stop herself, she picked it up and opened it.

It was rows and rows of total nonsense. Numbers and words mixed together with odd symbols that she didn’t recognize. She realized it was a code. Something that

needed to be in code must be important, she thought. Quickly, she took the top sheet and stuffed it down the front of her dress. She replaced the folder and turned her attention to the pendant.

The sound of the bedroom door opening made her heart stop.

“Katherine, my dear, what are you doing in here?” Viktoriya Kozlov’s voice was light and edged in curiosity.

Kat spun around in surprise. The pendant swung brightly from her hand.

“What are you doing with Adrian’s pendant?” Kat’s mother closed the door and moved toward her, smiling. “That dress is beautiful, but isn’t it a little revealing for a girl your age?”

“Huh?” Kat blinked and looked down, forgetting completely about the dress. Her mind kicked into gear. “Um, I don’t think so, mother, but I came in there to look in your full length mirrors.” Relief washed over her. It was a plausible lie for her being in here, but what about the necklace? “I, ah, was using the mirrors and I saw the pendant and it struck me that I’ve never seen what’s inside.” She dropped her head and looked at the necklace so her mother couldn’t see her eyes. She knew her eyes always gave her away to her mother.

Viktoriya laughed and took the necklace. “I suppose it’s not snooping. It’s a picture of me. See?” Kat’s mother had popped open the locket and showed Kat the photo. “I gave it to him the day we married.”

“Oh.” Kat was strangely disappointed. She’d expected something more diabolical. She gently took the necklace from her mother and turned away from her while she reached into her bra for the tag. She kept talking to distract her mother. “What’s for dinner?”

As Viktoriya recited the menu, Kat retrieved the tag, positioned it in the locket and snapped it shut. Her mother had moved to the closet to change for dinner, so replacing the necklace was easy.

“I’m going to change, too.” With the butterflies in her stomach finally gone, Kat let out a breath of relief and crossed to the door.

“Kat.” Her mother’s tone made her stop in her tracks. She turned slowly. “Please try on something else. For me?”

The girl relaxed, and smiled. “Sure, mother.” When she finally made it to her room, her knees gave out and she collapsed on the bed. “I did it!”

April smiled hugely. “Good girl,” and gave her a hug.

“And I got this.” She pulled out the paper and handed it over to the surprised agent. April took it and frowned. The THRUSH symbol in the letter head was unmistakable.

“Kat, you shouldn’t have done this. You could have been caught!” Agent Dancer was suddenly very angry, and her voice made that very clear.

Kat was stunned. “But I was helping. . .”

“You’ve done your job and we’re grateful, but this was way over the line. He’s going to miss this, and very soon I should think.” April’s eyes turned hard. She carefully slipped the slightly crinkled paper in her apron’s wide pocket. “We can’t put it back now. Kat, you have to listen to me.” Her voice softened at the struck look on the girl’s face. She put her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “You’re done. You’re out of it. You have to forget us now. When your stepfather finds this missing, you need to implicate me, understand? Tell them I was with you in the room.”

“I . . . I can't. There's a guard in the hall. He'll remember.”

“Then tell them you left me alone for awhile. Put the blame on me. DO NOT try and explain the disappearance. You don't know anything.”

“All right, all right, but what about Illya? I need to know he's okay.”

“You don't need to know anything.” April's voice was sharp-edged sympathy as she gathered up the dresses. Kat slipped out of hers and into a robe, and held the dress out for April. She was terribly shaken by the woman's anger, and it showed clearly on her face even through the defiant expression she tried to display. April sighed. “We'll try to get word to you, somehow. I have to get out of here and warn the others.” She hugged the dresses in close. “Thank you, Kat, but go back to your life. This is no business for a teenager, especially if you want to live to be an adult.”

Katherine nodded miserably as the UNCLE agent let herself out of the room. She wondered if she'd ever hear from any of them again.

ACT V: "And We Have No Shame In Flying This Particular Coop."

April Dancer didn't take the time to report in to the Solo. She dumped the dresses in the small car, quickly checked the area for sentries then moved into the riverbed, glad for the falling darkness and cloudy sky. Her breath puffed from her mouth like steam from a locomotive when she hustled into the cave, and her demeanor was just as bold with urgency.

"We have to go now," she said without preamble.

The others were gathered around the fire still stowing the remains of the 'surgical suite'. The blood on Dr. Timmons sleeves gave the female agent a moment's pause but the calm expression on everyone's faces put her at ease.

"Why? We can inform headquarters from here that they can start tracking Kozlov." Solo, struck by something in April's posture, stood and came to her side.

Meanwhile, she had pulled a paper from her pocket. "This is why. Kat got the tag planted, but took it upon herself to take this from her stepfather's dresser."

Solo took the paper and frowned. Curious, Mark moved to his side and looked over his boss' shoulder.

"That's a new code," Mark commented.

"Yes, it is." Solo pointed to the top lines. "It's a memo of some sort. This line looks like a date, followed by 'To' and 'From' lines. I think."

"New code but same old format," Mark mused, frowning. "Who can break it around here?"

Solo glanced to the still form under the sleeping bag at the far end of the cave. "Illya's the best bet here, but if we get this to the office in Berlin there's more staff."

April sighed, rubbing her tired eyes. "We have, at best, two hours before Kozlov realizes this is gone. We need to be out of here. But Napoleon, I'm worried about Katherine. She could be his first suspect, and as a result she could be in danger and he could find the tag tonight. I managed to place a bug in the main hallway of the house, so hopefully we can get a heads up if things start going south."

The new facts put a spin on their actions from this point and Solo quickly weighed what he knew with what he anticipated. Ideas came and went from his mind in quick procession as he decided on their course, which was tempered with a dash of Solo Luck.

"I am going to assume that this paper contains at least some of the information we're looking for with the tag. We are going to lay low in town and let Illya take a crack at this while we monitor Miss Tarasov and make sure she's all right. If this paper is what we need, and if the tag isn't discovered, we can remove it and insure the girl's safety."

Mark whistled. "That assumption is a big gamble."

"Not as big as the gamble I'm taking that the tag won't be found before we remove it." Solo waved the paper. "Start packing. This area will be swarming with guards as soon as this is discovered missing, and we need to be safely tucked away so Illya can start working on it."

April glanced at the unconscious agent as she started to gather their things. "That's also assuming he'll wake up soon."

"I can nag him awake. It's worked before."

Mark quickened his packing. "And I don't want to be anywhere around when you do that. Just make sure all the breakables are out of his reach."



Everyone was grateful for their Russian comrade's slight build when it came to his extractions from the cave. Snow and darkness did nothing to make it easy. Dr. Timmons had the injured agent so tightly bound that Solo was reminded of another assignment where Illya had been wrapped like a mummy. At least this time it was the good guys' doing, but the American was glad his partner was unconscious. Illya still wouldn't be too happy about the situation.

Fitting everyone in the ancient Lada was another challenge. If the situation wasn't so dire, this would be funny, Solo thought. Like stuffing college students in a phone booth. Again, the group was happy at the senseless state of the patient. Otherwise, he would never allow himself to be draped across the laps of two men with a drift of designer dresses piled on him because April wouldn't allow them to be put on the floor. The car lumbered woefully through the blinding snowfall, the four cylinders doing their best for the American agent. April was constantly wiping fog from the interior window surfaces.

"As long as his torso and neck are straight and supported, I'm happy." For a doctor, Timmons was actually quite flexible and Solo was thankful for that. In the darkness of the car the feeble, dancing glow of a flash light was all the doctor and Mark had which to study the recovered bullet. They were almost to the boarding house when Timmons announced, "There's still a piece of the bullet in Kuryakin, somewhere. Agent Slate is sure this isn't a complete slug."

"What does that mean?" April asked immediately, realizing her window wiping efforts only resulted in more fog from the exertion and was akin to sweeping sand from a beach.

"That he could still lose the use of this arm. On the positive side, I'm satisfied that any internal bleeding has stopped." The pleased sound of his voice did a little to put the others at ease.

"That's one good thing at least," Solo grumbled as the car finally jerked to a stop in the parking area and wheezed into silence. He kicked his recalcitrant door open and felt strangely triumphant.

Dancer and Timmons went ahead to prepare the room for Illya while Solo and Mark prepared to get past the clerk by using the 'drunken-and-passed-out friend' routine that was usually successful anywhere in the world. It was complicated by the one arm being snugly wrapped to Illya's torso, but they managed to slip him by the bored

clerk without a second glance and got him positioned on the better of the two small beds.

April immediately began to fiddle with a tiny receiver pressed to her ear, and nodded sharply after a few minutes. "Got it. The bug in the hallway is working fine." Meanwhile, Solo contacted Berlin to begin tracking the tag.

That left the unconscious one. Timmons was by his side monitoring his vitals and testing nerve reactions. He sighed loudly and rubbed his tired eyes. "I won't know anymore until he's awake."

"Let's do it, then," Solo decided.

"Ah, I'm going to clear out to the other room so I can hear." April got up and moved to leave.

Mark joined her immediately. "And I'm going to clean up and help her. Partners. You know."

Solo couldn't help but grin. He'd seen his own partner's reputation clear a room before. "Chickens."

"And we have no shame in flying this particular coop. Later, mates!" The door clicked shamelessly shut on Mark's heels.

Dr. Timmons faced the CEA with a professional demeanor and waited for orders. He knew what was at stake and through the years with UNCLE, knew when to back off as a doctor and give lead to an agent. "I guess it's no use to voice my objections."

Solo was well aware of the doctor's position and appreciated his tractable stance. "Not really, no. Let's wake him up. A girl's safety may depend on it."

Timmons rifled through his small doctor's bag and came up with a vial. Carefully, he drew out a small amount and injected it in the agent. "It's a stimulant which will work to counteract the anesthesia. Talk to him."

Solo sat on a tiny patch of open mattress edge and patted Illya's cheek. "Hey, Illya! Wake up! Come on, partner, we need you here."

First there was a facial twitch which morphed into a grimace, then a frown. Illya's body shifted and his right arm felt automatically for his non-existent gun before his eyes were fully open. He groaned, blinked, and groaned again before his eyes stayed open. Solo could see the confusion in the pools of fuzzy blue, which slowly cleared then shadowed again with pain and recognition.

"What did you do to me now?" He croaked, using his good arm to brush his hair from his forehead.

"Not much. Just sliced you open like a Christmas turkey. Where does it hurt?"

Illya closed his eyes and covered them with his arm. "Ask me where it doesn't hurt," he mumbled.

Solo pulled the arm down. "Illya, we need your brain. Can you see this?" He held the paper in front of his partner's face.

The blond agent scowled at the paper, tried to sit up and hissed in pain. With Solo on one side and Timmons on the other, they were able to maneuver the agent into a sitting position while he punctuated the air with Russian expletives. Solo recognized a few of the phrases, guessed at the rest and turned his eyes briefly to the doctor. "You know Russian slang?" He asked conversationally.

"Better than I wish to at the moment," Timmons grunted. "Remind me to school him on anatomy when he's all healed."

“Oh,” Solo replied between his physical efforts, “I think it’s best to let that sleeping dog lie, doc.”

With flimsy pillows and folded blankets they were able to stabilize the Russian in a sitting position. Timmons noticed immediately the fresh blood that blossomed from the bandages, but Illya was too intent on the paper in front of him to care.

“Let me get you something for the pain.”

“Aspirin. Nothing more,” Illya growled automatically.

Timmons opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it shut with the warning glance from Solo. “Aspirin it is,” he replied. He got the pills, gave them to his patient, and then motioned Solo to the side. “I need to evaluate his arm.”

“Later,” Solo shot back. “Right now I want his full attention on that paper. Your job is to make sure he does just that. All else is secondary right now.” He met the doctor’s eyes and held them. “Understand?”

The doctor pressed his lips together to keep his opinions to himself, and nodded silently. Experience had taught him when to back off, but he didn’t have to like it. He could see that his patient was doing an admirable job of concentrating on the paper through the pain he knew the man was feeling. UNCLE agents are simply a breed to themselves, he thought.

After checking in with Berlin and Headquarters the CEA stationed himself next to the bed with notepad in hand. “What do you have so far?” he asked bravely.

Illya grunted. “Optimist. I can barely see the print.” His voice was low so that only his friend would hear.

“I have faith. I see this as a date and delivery headers. Am I right?”

The two experienced agents put their heads together and worked steadily for nearly two hours. The Russian grew more pale and shaky and began to perspire, but pressed on. The American, knowing he was pushing his partner’s physical limits, kept the feeling of urgency to himself, and the doctor at bay. It was almost nine o’clock when April let herself in the room following a single knock.

“I think there’s trouble. The staff sounds restless and they seem to be searching the house. I don’t like it, Napoleon, and Mark and I have come up with a way to get Kozlov off Kat’s scent. A permanent diversion.”

The lead agent left the bedside and spoke quickly and quietly with her. “We’re on an open line with Berlin cryptology and doing all we can in that area.” He thought for a moment. “What would you need for your diversion?” His eyes brightened at the thought.

“The original code sheet, a handwritten copy and one of the dresses.”

“Easy enough. Are you going to tell me your plan?”

Her eyes sparkled in mischief. “It’s rather complicated, but in essence, meet Kozlov’s new mole in UNCLE!” She threw her arms open and smiled evilly. “Me!”

The only hitch was that the diversion couldn’t be fully implemented until Illya and Berlin broke the code. When they did so, Solo would call her on the communicator and give her the go-ahead.



Solo’s eyes were grainy and itchy from lack of sleep. He fortified himself by splashing cold water on his face then soaked a small towel to do the same for his fading partner. The task was taking its toll on Kuryakin; Solo could see his eyes growing

glassier by the minute. The surgical wound finally stopped bleeding, but the pillows and wall were stained with the Russian's blood. They had to hurry, but the CEA didn't want to pressure his partner any more. Illya knew what was at stake.

Mark and April had been sent away in the car to keep any of Kozlov's snoops from zeroing in on them for the moment. The goons would soon search the hotel based on any information gained from the shop owner where April got the dresses. Luckily, it was after hours and that information would take time to get.

Napoleon applied the cold cloth to Illya's face, and he jerked awake, embarrassed. Solo could feel the heat of the pale skin and knew the fever had not abated. Timmons gave the patient another shot of antibiotics.

"Come on, Illya, we're running out of time."

"I know, I know. I can't breathe." He began to pick dispiritedly at the wrappings and Solo helped. Dr. Timmons also pitched in; Solo knew the doctor had been eager to check the injured arm, and wasn't going to let this chance pass.

As soon as the arm was free, the doctor grabbed the hand. "Do you feel this?" Carefully, he poked the Russian's palm with his fingernail.

Illya stared at it. "No," he said slowly, and then more dangerously, "This can wait." He tore his eyes from his hand, and looked to his partner. "What did Berlin say?"

Solo could see anger and resentment growing in the hot, blue eyes and knew his partner was upset and trying to deflect attention to keep his cool. Solo doubted he would be successful for very long due to his depleted state. He repeated what the cryptologists had suggested in the last message; it was the fourth time he'd had to repeat the message, and his nerves were as tense as the air in the room. He felt like screaming. Timmons seemed oblivious to the fact that he was messing with a time bomb.

"How about this?" The doctor picked the skin on the back of the limp hand.

Illya locked his burning eyes on the doctor and gave him a look that made Solo's heart stop. The doctor must have had a death wish, because he didn't back off. In the next second, the sickly blond grabbed the doctor's collar in a blinding move and held him firmly. His breath was short and gasping, his face red. "I said, go away."

Calmly, the doctor dropped his eyes. "Are you going to hit me?" he said after a moment. "Because if you do, you risk breaking those fingers. Look."

Taken aback but still fuming, Illya followed the doctor's gaze as did Solo.

"You're making a fist!" Solo said in quiet amazement.

"I think you're going to be alright." The doctor said softly. "Can I breathe now?"

The patient looked up, surprised, and released the physician. "Certainly." The one word carried away all the tension that had charged the room. "Can I get back to work now?" Illya's voice was gruff, but the other two men could see relief in the blue eyes. "Napoleon, I have an idea. Tell Berlin to run a logarithmic progression starting with the second vowel of each grouping and apply it to the matrix they already have." Now the Russian simply looked exhausted; he let his eyes slide shut and his body sag back against the wall. Solo repeated the directions in the slim, silver pen.

The seconds dragged past and the silence was deafening. It was finally broken by electronic chatter.

"That's it, partner! They got it going. It'll take a few minutes to decode the whole page."

His words fell on deaf ears. Illya had finally given in to sleep and the doctor finally looked happy.

ACT VI: "And What If I Just Kill You Both?"

April Dancer, clad again in her dressmaker's smock and carrying a large box, didn't make it past the security at the gated driveway and hadn't even been trying. She was immediately detained, searched, cuffed and escorted to another building up the road from the property and off the beaten path. She was secured in a small, windowless room that contained only two metal chairs and a solid metal table. She waited patiently for her interrogator, and was surprised to see Kozlov himself enter the room.

His eyes were burning with anger. "We have the paper that was hidden in the dress box."

"Paper?" She said innocently while trying to appear frightened. "The dress was wrapped in paper, yes. What is wrong with that? You're scaring me!"

"Stop with the act, Miss Dancer. We know who you are as well your partner waiting at the airport. Mr. Slate, I believe? The snow storm that closed the airport must have put a crimp in your escape plans." He leaned in close to her face. "Where are the other two?"

April acted surprised. "What other two?"

"The two you were seen with in at your hotel. The owner of the dress shop gave us the address."

"Oh." She looked chastised. "Them. They left already."

"How? The airport is closed." He wrapped his meaty fist around her neck. "Tell me or you die. We still have your partner."

"They don't know anything!" April choked. "And if you kill either one of us you'll have UNCLE agents crawling all over this place!"

"When that code gets to your Headquarters, there will be agents all over this place anyway!" He yelled in her face, tightening his grip.

"No! They won't, trust me!" Her vision swam as her air was slowly cut off.

There was a visible fight in Kozlov's expression as he gained control of his anger. He released her neck with a grunt and stood quickly as if he didn't trust himself not to kill her on the spot. "Don't play with me, woman, or yours will be a slow and painful death."

April's heart raced. She coughed to get her breath back. Then she sat up straight to try and emit an air of dignity. "I have a deal to make with you, Kozlov."

"And I supposed it involves setting you free?" He snarled.

"Of course," she smiled charmingly. "I'll tell you what my mission was, and you'll gladly set me free."

“Stupid girl! Your mission was to steal the meeting plans from my room!” He leaned in again. “And you were trying to return them so Thrush wouldn’t know the code was broken.”

“Well, the second part is right. I was trying to return the plans.”

He narrowed his eyes dangerously then without warning, backhanded the agent across the cheek, almost knocking her and the chair over.

April saw stars. “B . . . but that wasn’t our mission.” Kozlov crossed his arms and glared at his captive while April adjusted her body into a comfortable position in the unyielding chair. “I was going to sell the plans, a copy, anyway, to the highest bidder outside UNCLE. THRUSH does have competition, you know, and they pay well.” She smiled confidently, her cheek throbbing painfully. “Very well.”

It took a moment for that to sink in, but Kozlov’s snarl eventually turned into a grin, and then into a hearty laugh. “You’re trying to get me to believe that you are double crossing UNCLE? I’ve never heard of such a thing! That is . . . you have quite an imagination, young lady!”

April put on a patient expression. “Oh, come on. You’ve heard of the Beldon Affair in Berlin . Everyone in Thrush has, I’m sure. Duplicity is not unknown in UNCLE.” She smiled. “Personally, I’ve discovered that UNCLE doesn’t pay enough to give me the things I really like. Clothes, for example; a girl needs to look her best, and I happen to like the best.”

“And your partner?”

“He like cars. Fast ones.”

“You’re telling me you two are in this together?”

Coyness overtook her expression. “Well. We’re in a lot of things together, but not necessarily this. I’ll make you a deal.”

He laughed again. “Deal? All you have to bargain with is your freedom! What’s in it for me?”

“The real reason I’m here, which was aimed at destroying you; that is, the reason UNCLE sent a team here to begin with. My taking the code was simply a side show for me only.” She sighed and fluttered her lashes. “You can have it back.”

His smile lessened. “You are a cocky one, aren’t you? How can you be sure I won’t break you and your partner’s necks right now and blame it on a car accident? This storm makes driving quite hazardous, you know.”

April was suddenly all business. “Here’s the deal: As a show of good faith, I’ll tell you our real mission here. In return, you set me free and agree to buy information from me in the future. Inside UNCLE information would certainly make you look good to the THRUSH Council, wouldn’t it? I’m out the sale of the code, but I get some guaranteed future income. We both win.” April could see Kozlov’s mind starting to work. Give a man a chance of power and he’ll grab for it every time, she thought happily.

“And what if I just kill you both?”

She smiled again, smugly confident. “Well, you’ll never be sure I’m telling the truth and you’ll never know why I’m really here. And that second part is what will sink you, believe me. When I tell you why I was really sent here, you’ll believe me when I say that the plans I took were merely an opportunity that presented itself to me.”

Kozlov was quiet while he weighed the information and considered the deal.

EPILOGUE : "Men Just Love Having Secrets, Don't They?"

Solo tried to get comfortable in the reception area of the Medical wing in UNCLE, Berlin . Why does every waiting room in every medical building have such lousy furniture? He thought. Fortunately, his wait was short as the surgeon appeared through a swinging door.

"He's fine. We found the shrapnel, repaired the damage and he'll live to spy again," he said shortly. "I commend Dr. Timmons on his bandaging. The broken rib could have punctured any number of internal organs. Mr. Kuryakin was lucky. " This doctor's speech was short, to the point, and left no room for discussion. He was obviously used to dealing with the many UNCLE patients as well as their partners. Solo hadn't uttered a word, but stood with his mouth partially open. He snapped it shut and wordlessly pointed at the gurney. The surgeon replied, "He's going to room 210. Good day," and disappeared through another swinging door.

Solo could see a gurney and a small group of nursing staff begin to trail through the swinging door. A very weary looking Dr. Timmons brought up the rear of the little procession, and acknowledged Solo with a tired grin and a nod. "All safe and sound. Can't say the same for the nursing staff from this point out." He offered his hand. "I'm heading back to New York in about an hour. It was . . . interesting . . . working with you.

They shook hands warmly. "Thanks, doc. It wasn't exactly what we planned, but it worked out, I'd say."

"I'd say 'anytime', but I wouldn't mean it!" He laughed. "Good bye, Mr. Solo." Timmons left the hallway, peeling off the scrubs as he went.

Solo stood back to allow the nursing staff and patient to pass. When the gurney slid past he could see that Illya's eyes were closed, and assumed he was asleep. He fell back to follow, then heard a weak voice say, "When's dinner? I'm starving." The nurse's answer faded as they moved away from the surprised CEA. Solo then chased them down the hall at a fast walk, but slowed to appreciate the nurse's swaying figure beneath the uniform as she dealt with the cranky Russian. He almost ran into April and Mark as they intercepted him at a cross-hallway.

"Napoleon! How's our patient?" April's left cheek was just beginning to bloom into full bruise colors and her eye was puffy, but it didn't keep the smile from her face.

"He's his old self again."

"Batten down the hatches, then!" Mark said cheerily. His cheek sported bruises that matched his partner's.

"You can say that again," April agreed. "Good. I told Kat he would be fine before we left."

THE PRINCESS GAMBIT AFFAIR

Mark frowned. "How did you manage that?"

"I told Kozlov that the purse that matches the dress was at the shop for Kat. The note was inside. By then, Kozlov had no reason to search the purse; I'd set myself straight with him, the greedy bastard." She shook her head slowly and laughed. "Men just love having secrets, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know." Mark said instantly.

"And I wouldn't tell you if we did," Solo followed up just as quickly.

"Relax, boys. It was a rhetorical question."

When the little troop entered the hospital room, it was immediately quite crowded. The pretty nurse managed a scowl that was somewhat believable, but they waited her out. She left with a promise to the surly patient that she would bring food as soon as possible. "Don't make him any grouchier than he already is," she snapped as she left. An appreciative smile from the handsome Solo didn't even soften her up.

"Tell me," Illya questioned from the bed. "How, exactly, did I get here? And is the girl all right? A short version. My head hurts."

April sat on the edge of the bed. "Shortly, here goes: Airplane. After the airport opened, of course. And the girl is fine, and she knows you are fine."

"And the coded paper was an itinerary for the next several months on Kozlov's secret meetings with Thrush and others. Since the tag wasn't needed anymore, April told him about it to make her look good and keep Kat off the suspects list, if she was ever there. I'll fill in all the blanks later," Solo summed up. Illya just nodded and relaxed into the pillows with a sigh and closed his eyes.

April patted Illya's hands.

"I felt that," Illya said with a very tiny smile. "In both hands."

"Good. Then we'll leave you alone." She glanced at her watch. "I have a couple hours of good shopping left."

Illya shook his head ever so slightly.

Mark rolled his eyes.

Solo grinned crookedly and shot the cuff of his rumpled shirt. "Maybe I'll join you." He offered his arm to April and she took it happily. They grabbed their coats to go.

"How long do you think it will take Kozlov to figure out the information I'm passing him is bad?" She asked the CEA. "Do you think Mr. Waverly will take into account the extra money I'm bringing in to UNCLE with I turn in my expense accounts? And how much bad information will it take before THRUSH will have nothing to do with Kozlov anymore?"

Solo sighed tiredly. "Don't talk. Just shop."

April nodded agreeably. "I like the way you think, boss. Let's go!"

FINIS