

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

### PROLOGUE

Napoleon Solo brought the sailboat about with a neat and practiced maneuver, which caused a shift in the normally sardonic expression of the dour passenger to one of amused appreciation.

“How long have you been practicing that move?” Illya Kuryakin asked amusedly. The fact that the nearest boat to them was loaded with a half dozen partying girls wasn’t lost on the attentive Russian.

“Like the Scouts say, ‘Be Prepared’.”

“Leave it to you to bend the meaning of a noble motto to the breaking point.”

A toothy, confident smile was all the fair-haired sailor received as a reply and he knew that the smile wasn’t aimed at him.

The *Pursang* split the swells smoothly and with powerful confidence, a true reflection of its captain. Illya had to admit his partner cut an eye-catching figure at the helm. They surged by the happy women, who all waved enthusiastically as the wind carried the pair by.

“What?” Illya asked, surprised. “No mid-sea rendezvous?”

Solo’s grin never faded. “I know where they’re going. We’ll meet up later, my friend, don’t you worry about that. I just want to enjoy the speed and freedom right now.”

“Trust me, worry never crossed my mind. Then again, a boat transfer in the middle of the ocean may be difficult with the cast on your leg.”

“Minor detail. It will be off in six weeks or so. For now, the call of the sea and the beckoning of the ladies make me forget my wounds.” He deeply inhaled the wind with the same appreciative smile. “We all have our own therapies.”

“Don’t you get tired of playing the game?”

“What game?”

“The game of tag you naturally dive into when faced with a member of the opposite sex.”

Solo’s smile never dimmed but Illya could tell he was, for once, seriously considering the query as the salty wind parted his brown hair like the *Pursang* parted the water. “You know, our scars tell us our history really happened. I guess it’s my way of erasing them for awhile.”

Illya was both surprised and impressed by the response. Not normally verbally reflective about his lifestyle, the depth of the comment gave the Russian pause; being out here on the ocean put his partner in another place - a place free of his everyday stresses. For the first time, Illya began to appreciate the healing powers of the open sea.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

Unable to tell his friend about the mission he had been offered and ultimately accepted, Illya Kuryakin turned his face into the wind and closed his eyes, taking the moment to appreciate the feeling of freedom and friendship.

It would be weeks before he would have those feelings again.

***ACT I: It's Just My Way***

“Mr. Kuryakin, I know that Mr. Waverly and Dr. Towers have both explained this procedure, and that you have researched the technique on your own. Before we initiate the treatment, I’d like to know if you have any questions.” The middle-aged man adjusted his thick glasses as he watched his subject. The repetitive tic of his upper lip caused his thin moustache to twitch like a rabbit’s nose, and if Illya Kuryakin hadn’t read Dr. Stubbs’ qualifications, he would wonder about his ability if he couldn’t even control his own lip.

“No questions,” the UNCLE agent replied. Even with all his knowledge, he didn’t like the idea of someone messing with his mind and this level of messing would be deep. He also knew that, compared to the stakes at risk for the rest of the world, this personality bending programming was warranted. He’d made his decision; it was time to follow through.

Dr. Stubbs rustled some papers. “Final formalities, Mr. Kuryakin, and then we will proceed. I’m to remind you that there is a trigger statement to reset your personality. It will be known only to me, Mr. Waverly and, only on a need-to-know basis, other personnel. Understand?”

“Yes.” Kuryakin settled back into the reclining chair and focused his attention on the doctor who then injected his patient with a yellow liquid. It was the first step of a days’ long program that involved coaching and sessions like this one, as well as the chemical blocking of certain receptors in his brain centers. In the end, he would project his new personality for an indefinite period of time.

Up in the viewing gantry, Alexander Waverly watched one of his top agents voluntarily fall under the influence of a powerful drug. He puffed thoughtfully on his pipe, the blue smoke making a lazy trail to the ceiling, and felt a pang of regret that this was necessary. Getting dirty was part of an UNCLE agent’s job; broken bones and visible scars were expected and accepted. It was a rare instance that this level of subterfuge was required, and he didn’t like it one bit. It made a statement about a state of the world he’d rather not dwell upon, but knew he had to. It was his job. Another part of his job was to send out the best person to change that state and he knew he had that in spades with the agent below. Kuryakin’s upbringing and background made him a perfect candidate for the assignment; they just had to alter the man a bit to fit the situation.

The role needed someone versed in science, languages and negotiations – all skills that Kuryakin mastered – but profiles of subjects in this role on the criminal side tended toward a sociopath personality. Kuryakin had a little too much loyalty and sense of fair play to be convincing. He could be successfully altered with this treatment and

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

given a brand new name to go with the new man, and then be easily reformed back into Illya Kuryakin when he was through. It was a proven technique, albeit seldom used. Waverly had confidence in both the doctor and the technique, but to risk such a man to such an assignment always made him think deeply about the responsibilities of his position. Kuryakin and the few before him that had experienced this technique put all their trust in their boss, and it was a trust he took very seriously.

Waverly rose slowly and checked his watch. He'd been here less than a day, with Napoleon Solo standing in his place in the New York office. This whole Affair and its preparations were to be overseen by Waverly from this separate location under the guise of a vacation. No one in the New York office, outside of Waverly, Dr. Towers and Dr. Stubbs, knew about this mission. That way, there was no chance of a security leak. History had proven it to be the best methodology, as well as the safest thing for the vulnerable agent.

The head of UNCLE New York simply wished that all this knowledge would make his regret vanish.

It didn't.



The black raincoat flapped around the legs of the blond man as he stepped from the small aircraft parked on the tarmac of a secluded airfield. He paused at the base of the steps and squinted into the sun. He could see a trio of dark figures moving toward him, backlit by the golden orb low in the sky. The sun's yellowness promised heat, but the promise was chased away by the biting chill of the breeze that swirled around the men.

The blond man's hand moved to pull the coat in tighter but in reality, it was a smooth motion to undo the single button that was between his hand and the gun tucked at his side. He mentally gauged the distance to the nearest cover – the landing gear of the small craft – and set his feet at a skewed angle to the approaching men in an unconscious posture that offered a smaller target. The attaché he held rested on his leading leg as a shield between them.

He waited, heart calm and mind active.

One of the dark silhouettes raised his hands in an open gesture and slowed his gait. "Mr. Keyes, we've been waiting for you. Let us show you our hospitality." The man stopped, reading the body language of the newcomer. "I must say, you don't look anything like I expected."

The blond had already fully assessed each one of the three men within seconds of appraisal. He knew where the weapons were and who would strike first. He already had his cover and retreat plotted. He also knew the speaker was not to be trusted, under any circumstances.

"What did you expect?" He asked quietly, his crystal blue eyes sharp and clear.

The dark man saw the icy eyes and immediately thought of a snake. "The contact that suggested you gave the impression of someone a bit - bigger. My name is Mr. Evans. Come with me, please. La Prima is waiting."

"La Prima? I will be working for a woman?"

Mr. Evans chuckled softly and stepped aside, motioning the blond man to walk with him. After a moment, the guest stepped forward but kept his distance. His glare

made it clear the other two men were to stay on the other side of Evans. A nod from the dark man confirmed the unspoken order and the two escorts fell to one side.

When they turned to the limo, Evans spoke. "You haven't been chosen yet, Mr. Keyes. This is merely an interview." After a few steps, the blond one tilted his head to one side and gave a grin that made Mr. Evans feel like he was about to be eaten by a wolf. He squared his shoulders to dismiss the discomfoting feeling it gave him.

"And merely a formality," Mr. Keyes stated in a matter of fact tone

Keyes' attitude was maddeningly condescending. "Rather self confidant, aren't we?" Evans bristled. It was disconcerting how this stranger put him on edge.

"If she wants the best," the visitor said with no question in his tone, "that is me." He slipped a pair of dark glasses from the coat pocket and donned them, becoming completely unreadable.

There was no more conversation on the ride to the meeting place.



Wide swaths of darkness fell across the face of the squat building from the towering cypress that surrounded it. The building appeared old and non-descript, and sat at the edge of a small township away from all other buildings. Mr. Keyes' eyes darted everywhere behind the dark glasses as he assessed the small town. He approved of the distance that separated the meeting building from the town, and instantly marked the strategic areas around it in his mind. There was a man at each of those points, and although they were dressed as townsmen, Keyes knew they were really wolves in sheep's clothing. He appreciated the feel of the place.

He followed Evans and allowed the watchdogs to tag along behind. Keyes had studied them in more detail during the ride in and dismissed them as unworthy of his attention. He also knew that although Evans was merely a mouthpiece, he would most likely be the one to watch in a conflict; the man was a coward and cowards were unpredictable in a fight.

Evans swept the front door open after flashing a small device that fit in the palm of his hand. Keyes noted when he stepped through the doorway that the building, which looked old, was actually state of the art and he mentally commended the architect. Inside, there a pair of thick and bulky men dressed in blue overalls who waited by a counter on the far side of the lobby, their role obvious at a glance. Behind the counter was a petite Asian woman with a sharp cut to her short hair that matched the angular planes of her face. Her eyes were like a cat's, dark and inscrutable; her role was less clear and Keyes focused on her as the threat in this room.

Evans motioned Keyes to stop in front of the pair of bored looking men in blue. "Please surrender your case and allow yourself to be searched. It's La Prima's standing procedure," he said.

Keyes slowly removed his glasses and slipped them in his pocket as if in thought.

"No," he said. His turned his eyes to the woman; she unblinkingly returned his stare.

One of Evans' escorts behind him laughed shortly. Evans voice was tight; he'd had enough. "No search, no meeting. Those are the rules."

The uniformed muscle men drew themselves to their full height and flexed their biceps as the seconds passed. Slowly, Keyes turned his head and locked his glacial eyes

on Evans, who mentally ordered himself to stand still. The piercing look nearly stopped his heart, but the voice sparked it into racing speed when Keyes said simply with a shrug:

“New rules.”

When the blond man’s head turned away one of the beefy guards moved in, followed closely by his uniformed twin. One of Evans’ escorts also stepped forward, eager to put this small man in his place.

The error of their ways was quickly and efficiently pointed out to them in the form of two broken arms, several broken ribs, a burst spleen and several cracked vertebrae. The second of the armed escorts lay dead on the floor, shot by his own gun still in his own grip. Evans found himself dangling in a vice-like grip around his throat and fighting for breath. Blue eyes, calm but hard as ice, held his gaze. It had all happened in a blur of seconds.

“That’s enough.” The woman’s voice was level and unflustered. Keyes had ended up with the choking man directly between him and the Asian. Evans squeaked pitifully and tried to peel away the fingers at this throat. The angled woman had a very large handgun pointed at Keyes’ head. Keyes noted that the path of the bullet went right through Evan’s skull, but with the caliber of the weapon it would still reach its target without compromise. “He’s pathetic, but La Prima is somewhat fond of him. Release him please.” Her voice was heavily tinted in an accent Keyes identified as Chinese.

Keyes moved Evans aside, dragging him in a short arc, to get a good look at her and smiled appreciatively. Just when Evans’ eyes began to roll back in his head and his clawing was reduced to ineffective paws, Keyes released him. Evans landed with a soft thud on top of a guard squirming in pain.

Keyes held his arms out to his sides and produced a lopsided grin. “I can only hope you will frisk me,” he said brightly; his expression was deceptively open. There was no sign of exertion – his breathing was even and his clothing unruffled.

The woman’s lips twitched in amusement. “Perhaps later, Mr. Keyes. Please come in.” The door to the left of the counter cracked open with a loud click. She hadn’t moved a muscle.

Keyes picked up his briefcase, one corner of which was now sticky with blood, and stepped over the bodies to the door.



“Ian Keyes. Welcome to my office.”

The woman that spoke was in a dark corner of the room but her body glowed in the sparse light. The dress was white satin and snug, her body curvaceous and well endowed. Her nails, manicured into red spikes, tapped curiously on the crystal champagne flute between her fingers. Diamonds sparkled at her wrists and bosom. She raised the glass to her lips, her face hidden in shadow.

Two men flanked her, each with a gun pointed directly at the blond man. With the barest of hesitation, Keyes smiled charmingly and raised a brow. “La Prima, I assume?”

She took her time, sipped, and lowered the glass slowly. “Yes. That was quite a show you put on in the lobby.”

Keyes dropped the attaché on an overstuffed chair upholstered in an intricate flower pattern. The entire room screamed femininity in an expensive, tasteful way. Keyes walked a small circle and took it all in as he slipped off his coat and draped it over his attaché. When he finished his examination, he stood with his hands loosely clasped in front of him. His smile never diminished and his eyes sparkled with humor. "It was not a show. It's simply my way."

A low, sensuous chuckle came from the shadowed face. She stepped forward and carefully placed her glass on a small side table. Her eyes were beautifully made up, their jade color perfectly accented. Her hair was smoldering red and swept up off her neck with diamond-encrusted combs. One corner of her red lips curled up into a knowing smile. "You will allow these men to search you, Mr. Keyes. One move and you will be shot." Her smile faded and she nodded sharply to one of the men.

The man stepped forward and stopped less than a foot from Keyes. "Put your arms up," he growled as he tucked his gun away and massaged his hands in preparation. The blond man obeyed, slowly raising his hands high with a flourish of wrist. When the guard began his pat down, Keyes puckered his lips threw a kiss at the man then smiled wolfishly and winked. Enraged, the guard swung his brass-knuckled fist up into the grinning jaw and dropped Keyes like a rock.

La Prima tiskied and shook her head as the guard dropped to his knees and roughly continued to pat down the visitor. Her perfect teeth peeked out from her full lips as her smile grew. "And it's simply my way, too, Mr. Keyes," she cooed to the unconscious man.



The world came back to him slowly and painfully; he enjoyed every second. When he finally cracked his eyes, he knew he wasn't alone; he'd listened carefully before showing signs of wakefulness. After hearing a rustle, he smelled perfume and instantly located the woman in the room. Still on a high from the jarring pain in his jaw, he carefully positioned his head so when he did open his eyes, they would fall on her first. She'd expected it, as she was sitting and staring directly into his eyes.

It was dark, the room warmly lit by lamps somewhere behind the garishly flowered couch on which he lay. The angular Asian was barely dressed in a scant black teddy, her legs crossed casually at the thigh. She reclined back on a red velvet settee with her arms stretched out to either side on the top edge. The color of the settee perfectly matched her unsmiling lips. Her crossed leg swung lazily while the silver chain that encased her ankle flashed with caught light, throwing it back into the room in a scattered, bouncing pattern. The six-inch spike heels were shiny silver metal whereas the rest of the strappy shoes were polished black leather.

Keyes didn't stir or drop his gaze. After a moment, she slowly undraped her leg and rose to her feet, uncurling like a cat. She cocked her head to one side just before she stepped to him and threw a knee over his hip. With the same expressionless face, she settled down on his crotch, straddling him comfortably. Keyes was still dressed, but his shirt was ripped open and pulled from his pants. His belt and shoes were missing and he was sorry to note that his pants were still on. He rested his hands on her hips and firmly gripped their sharp narrowness. He pushed her downward and rotated his hips, a grin pulling on one corner of his mouth. In response, she laid her hands flat on his belly and

slowly rubbed upward to his bare chest. Her eyes burned, and ever so slowly, she leaned forward and brought her pouty red lips within a hairsbreadth of his, then parted them.

In the next instant and with a surprised hiss, she found herself on the floor with the side of her face pushed firmly into the garden print carpet. The wiry blond straddled her back. She struggled and issued a noise close to a growl, but her lips were smiling. "Get off of me," she ordered.

"In time, my sweet."

She felt his hands all over her, carefully checking every crevasse and taking his time with some of them. He chuckled, and finished his tour while she panted excitedly and ceased struggling.

"Time to report in?" He asked sweetly as he rose to his feet and pulled her up by her hair. He stood behind her and let his hands feel her breasts, stomach and crotch, lingering on the more entertaining spots. He breathed warmly in her ear. "Only when it's my idea, love." He pushed her roughly toward the door. "Tell La Prima I'm ready to see her now."

The woman clenched her fists for a moment, then squared her shoulders and nodded once. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement. She turned on her heel, snatched the black robe draped on the arm of the settee and let herself out. Keyes chuckled again, and pressed his palm to his forehead, as he suddenly felt lightheaded. He sank onto the flowered couch and frowned at his sweating hands, momentarily confused.

*Who am I?* He thought briefly. Then the lightness passed and he brushed the incident off as a side effect of a concussion. Tenderly, he pressed the bruise on his jaw and reveled at the pain, then began pull his clothes back together.



La Prima watched interestedly as the blond man adjust his clothing on the small monitor. "He will have no idea what happened?" She asked, clearly happy.

"None," the other woman replied. "His mind is so tweaked he doesn't even remember his real name, let alone that he's an UNCLE agent." The speaker rose to her feet and wiggled her empty champagne flute at the guard. He jumped to fill it for her. "You are very lucky I was here to identify him, Nicole. Illya Kuryakin would have ruined your whole operation within days. Thrush would not have been happy to lose one of its up-and-coming members."

"You are right, Angelique. It was fortuitous that you were here." They clinked glasses and turned back to the monitor. "I suppose I'd better come up with a good reason why three days have passed since he got here."

Standing side by side, the two women looked like bookends. One blonde and one redheaded, they shared similar builds, features and ambitions. They could have been sisters to the casual observer.

Angelique laughed throatily. "Oh, honey, he's so centered on himself right now I don't think he's going to notice the time. According to the doctor, his ego and superego are suppressed to the point where he's full bore id." She licked her lips at the thought. "That makes him quite an interesting subject, if you ask me. I love Freudian psychology - imagine functioning on decisions made totally on what you want and how you feel, the rest of the world be damned. I bet he'd be wild in bed."

Both women laughed knowingly. “Well, since I bruise easily I will leave that adventure to Miss Fan. She likes that sort of thing.” Nicole, known as La Prima to those outside this room, studied the blond with renewed interest. “If what you and Thrush records tell me is true, he’s smart and ingenious enough to get the things we need quickly, including the blame! What shall we call him?”

Angelique leaned back and turned her glass between her fingers thoughtfully. It would be fun to make up a name and really mess the boy up. But then again, why mess up one when you can mess up two? Illya Kuryakin doing all these things under his own name would simply torture Napoleon, and he deserved it for the missions he had disrupted for her. She smiled smugly. “Why not let him do these things in the name of UNCLE? I’m sure the Committee would be tickled.”

La Prima shook her head in amazement. “You are a wonder, Angelique. Illya Kuryakin it is.” After a moment of reflection, she spoke again. “You know, this latest mission I’ve taken on will make Thrush a world wide superpower. Our negotiating position within the organization will be very powerful and Thrush may have a female Committee much sooner than we planned.” Her green eyes burned with the thought of power.

The laundry list of things Thrush needed to make its own bomb had fallen into La Prima’s hands by accident after an affair with a Committee member. She fully understood the desire for secrecy, and this opportunity was unique. Kuryakin would be perfect.

First, she had to clean up some loose ends. She sent Miss Fan out to find the middleman that had sent Kuryakin their way; she wanted it to be difficult to have him traced back to her. In the meantime, Kuryakin would be sent out to obtain the first item: a nuclear trigger. Outside sources said that there was one available in the Ukraine

Angelique’s thoughts went in a different direction. She was fascinated with what Kuryakin had become in the past few days. She’d known Kuryakin for a long time, through both research and personal contact. What she was seeing right now was well beyond what she’d expected of Thrush’s manipulations of his brain chemistry. What she’d expected was a trained agent with amnesia and a malleable ethic they could twist for a little while to embarrass UNCLE, then either dump him, useless, on UNCLE’s doorstep or dispose of him. She liked the first plan the best; the idea of upsetting Solo was what she liked most.

Things, however, had changed when Kuryakin became something quite different and unexpected. She wanted to know why. With a little more study and discussion, she came to realize that the Thrush treatment he’d been given wasn’t the only thing at work here - UNCLE had done something to him beforehand, and that thought completely astounded her. It was so Thrush-like! “I wonder if he had any say in the matter,” she mused often to herself.

Opportunity was never lost on Angelique. This could be something quite valuable to her organization and she wanted to control it. Ever fair, she’d already dismissed Kuryakin as her friend’s toy and expected a huge payback for that someday. Nicole would go far, she could tell, and to be in her good graces could only be beneficial. But, if she, Angelique, could get her hands on the UNCLE preconditioning treatment plan, she could corner the market on Thrush-loyal, amoral soldiers.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

She smiled to herself and decided to stick around to see how things worked out here. Amoral soldiers are nice, but if they weren't controllable, it could be a problem. She could learn a lot watching Kuryakin perform for La Prima.

***ACT II: Boom!***

Kuryakin attended the endless planning meetings only because he knew what followed. Today had been particularly boring. La Prima went over the plans to get the trigger device *ad nauseum*, but he did manage to whet his aggression with a work out afterwards in the small gym. Sparring had been particularly satisfying, especially when he snapped the wrist of the trainer. The man's yelp of pain had been so very satisfying, he'd felt that thrill of ecstasy. But, then, he'd been shot with that damned dart gun. Again. Whenever he began to feel that rush of pleasure when sparring, he was darted. No matter - the waking up was worth it.

He rubbed the bruise of the sleeping potion injection site and felt a prick of pain. He smiled and pushed it again. As expected, he was back in his bare room on his hard bed. He opened his eyes to see the delicious Miss Fan waiting, her black eyes burning into him. She was dressed in painted on black leather micro shorts. A wide leather band was all that covered her breasts. Her shoes were the steel and leather pair he favored. She sat facing him with her knees spread wide and her hands resting flat on the chair at her sides. She didn't move. Her face held the same flat expression as when he first saw her in the lobby days ago, but this time her eyes were on fire.

Kuryakin could feel the drive stirring in his groin and stood quickly. He stepped close enough that she had to tilt her head back and expose more of her soft and lovely neck, dotted yellow with faded bruises. He could see the rushing blood that made her carotid artery undulate and he had to touch it. He grabbed her throat with one hand, the throbbing artery beneath his thumb, and felt a thrill of power – with little effort, he could snuff the life right out of her, right here, right now.

And she got her own thrill with the idea. Miss Fan was quickly turning into the best workout in the building. She not only loved getting roughed up, she could give back just as rough, and their tangles resulted in deep bruises and screaming release. Her shrieks of rapture never failed to bring him to a powerful climax. Their robust joinings were hardly a secret; in fact, their activities came as a relief to most of the staff. At least their masochistic energies were focused on each other instead of on a hapless staff member.

La Prima not only allowed it, she encouraged it. Both of them were easier to handle as a result and she didn't have to find staff replacements as often.



## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

When the sleek black sedan slewed to a sideways stop in the isolated open area, the passenger door burst open and a man tumbled out spitting expletives. He jumped to his feet and angrily brushed off his dress pants while standing in a cloud of dust boiling from the wheels. Laughter drifted from inside the car. "You're crazy, you know that?" The man yelled through the open door. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

The dust settled and the car's engine popped with heat when the motor shut off. The driver door slowly opened. Kuryakin stepped out and wiped his eyes, trying to control his laughter. He wasn't completely successful, and his speech was peppered with guffaws. "German engineering, you know. It was made to push the envelope!"

"Push it, you asshole! Not tear it completely!" The passenger checked the elbows of his jacket for holes. As he did so, Kuryakin, still trying to control his mirth, ambled to his side. When the passenger's self inspection was over, the angry man stood up to the blond's face and glared. "I'm driving back. Give me the fucking keys."

Kuryakin's eyebrow rose curiously. He slowly drew the keys from his pocket and dangled them just out of the man's reach. After a moment's hesitation, the man turned his eyes to reach for them. A blur of motion instantly found him with one arm jacked up the middle of his back and something sharp pressed into his Adam's apple. Kuryakin had him firmly from behind, and he realized that it was the car key cutting into his neck. He gagged and struggled but abruptly stopped when he felt the key dig in. A warm trickle ran down the side of his neck, followed by hot words whispered in his ear.

"I don't think so, Simon." Kuryakin said lightly. "Maybe I get car sick when I don't drive. You wouldn't want that, would you?" He dragged the key a little further along. Pain flared blindingly.

"N. . . no. No. 'Course not," Simon choked. The pressure disappeared immediately. He grabbed his neck and fell to one knee.

Kuryakin strolled away, whistling and spinning the key ring on his finger. "I wonder where this elusive contact is? I do not like being kept waiting." He scanned the nearby countryside.

Simon held his bleeding throat tightly and wondered about the sanity of his partner. It appeared that the rumors he'd heard were true after all. The nut job called Kuryakin slept on the flight from the airport near La Prima's to Bulgaria, and kept to himself on the train to Bucharest. Simon thought all the things he'd heard about the blond man were overblown, and then he was alone with him in the car for the drive to the meeting place. The transformation had been sudden and frightful, and he didn't care to repeat the ride.

Right now Kuryakin looked like a caged lion as he paced back and forth, smoking cigarette after cigarette like he didn't know what to do with himself. Simon went over in his mind some of the rumors he had heard about this man, rubbed his throat and hoped he didn't run out of cigarettes. He was saved for the moment when a plume of dust announced the arrival of their contact, and, hopefully, new victims to take the heat off of him.

Kuryakin dropped the cigarette and ground it out with his toe while he impassively watched the arrival of the car. Simon quickly wiped his throat clean with his handkerchief and stuffed the bloody rag in his pocket just as the aged Volga stopped next to their sedan. Two people hesitantly stepped from the car and glanced around nervously.

The driver was a man dressed in plain, working man's clothes and the other was a young woman similarly dressed, her hair tucked up in a plain babushka. There was nothing notable about the pair, but Simon was alarmed to see the sparkle in Kuryakin's eye when he saw the woman. Alarms went off in his head.

"You from La Prima?" The man asked in Russian.

Kuryakin replied in kind before Simon could step up. Since his own Russian was passable but rough, Simon simply stayed close and monitored. He was impressed by the professionalism of the blond enigma and his ability to control the situation without looking like he was in control. Their contacts were to escort them to the anonymous trigger dealer after viewing the money. Simon produced a case from the trunk of the black sedan and showed them the contents. The couple indicated that they were to follow them.

"Must be the Russian equivalent to the Mafia," Simon whispered as they were lead to the Lada. Kuryakin snorted in response and climbed into the back seat with Simon, who carried the case in his lap. The woman in the front passenger seat turned around and pointed a gun at Kuryakin's chest.

The man spoke in broken English. "I am Kris, that is Torya." He slid behind the steering wheel. "And the gun is insurance."

"Of course!" Kuryakin said brightly as he settled down for the ride. They hadn't gone a mile before he was asleep. Simon was astounded.

After an hour, Torya tossed two black bags on their laps. Kuryakin woke instantly. "Put them on," Kris said shortly.

Simon didn't miss the flash of anger that crossed the blue eyes of his partner. It was squelched just as quickly. His skin crawled when he also saw the brief look the blond gave Torya just before he slipped on the black hood. Simon hesitated, more fearful of not being able to see his partner rather than the escorts. Finally, he slipped on the hood with a feeling that things were irreparably heading out of control.

They drove on for at least another hour before the car bounced to a halt. The escorts exited the vehicle and pulled open the back doors. Simon and Kuryakin stepped out, and were patted down and relieved of their weapons. Then they were lead through soft dirt and a narrow door that lead directly to a downward set of stairs.

"The hoods weren't part of the deal!" Simon complained. In response he felt a gun muzzle pushed against the back of his head and received a long litany, in a dialect he didn't understand, which lasted until they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Kuryakin chuckled. "He said, 'So?'"

Simon felt like he was in a very scary dream. The hallway smelled dank and dusty. *An underground facility?* He thought, trying to control his growing fear.

Guided through a short maze of halls, they finally were pushed into a room where a solid sounding metal door closed behind them. Simon's hood was pulled off, and he blinked at Kris and Torya standing in front of them with handguns pointed at their heads from a safe distance. Kuryakin remained hooded and stood like he was completely relaxed - his shoulders hung loose, his hands quietly clasped in front of him and his knees slightly flexed and feet a bit apart. Simon was sweating profusely and mentally cursed Kuryakin's outer cool.

Simon looked beyond the escorts and saw a figure behind a large glass window looking in on them. He wore a cowl that only revealed his eyes. After a moment, he nodded slightly to Simon. Taking the cue, Simon cracked open the case and flashed the

cash. The cowed man then gave a box to a small man next to him. The small man bowed quickly and disappeared from the window. He appeared again when he opened a metal door to one side and placed himself in front of Simon, where he opened the box. It looked like a nuclear trigger, but that's why Kuryakin was here.

"My partner needs to inspect the goods," Simon said, trying to sound firm. He could feel cold sweat rolling down his back and just wanted this to be over.

The cowl fluttered as the man nodded slightly. Kris moved forward and put the hood back on Simon. Simon hugged the money close and heard movement in Kuryakin's direction, followed by the sound of the hood being pulled off. The small box rustled open again and there was a moment of silence. Simon nervously bit his lip.

Then room suddenly exploded in chaos.

First, there was a grunt, followed by the sound of breaking glass. Then a yell preceded a flurry of gunfire. Simon dropped to the floor and pulled off the mask as bullets zinged overhead. He crawled to the wall using the case to cover his head and cowered there until the bullets stopped flying. Cautiously, he peeked out and was shocked at what he saw.

The small man and Kris were obviously dead. The cowed man was draped across the jagged edge of the broken window, where he moaned and weakly struggled as the jagged edges slowly disemboweled him; a great lake of blood gathered on the floor below him and his fingers gently brushed the surface as his struggles weakened.

Simon tore his eyes from the gruesome sight and sought Kuryakin. The blond madman had Torya's back pressed against the wall with his body and her own gun pressed to her temple. The look of fear on her face turned Simon's stomach; Kuryakin's free hand was under her clothing and roughly exploring her body as he murmured in her ear with a wolfish grin. Simon managed to pull himself to his feet and keep from vomiting at the trail of intestines that drooped to the floor from the cowed man, now definitely dead.

Simon tried to speak, choked, and managed to squeak, "You have the trigger?" He tore his eyes from the grisly site and saw that Kuryakin's hand was between the woman's legs. She was crying silently. "Hey!" Simon barked, finding his voice. "The trigger! You have it?"

Kuryakin stopped his ministrations with a sigh then tapped Torya's head with the gun butt. She dropped with a tiny sob. "Yes, Simon, I have it." He brushed off his sleeves casually.

"Then let's go, for God's sake!" Simon started for the main door but the sound of shouting and running feet in the hall stopped him. Kuryakin turned him to the room behind the glass where they found an escape from the gory scene.

They moved down the hall much too slowly for Simon's taste; Kuryakin appeared to be sightseeing as he casually shot anyone they came across. Simon counted four victims before his partner came to a stop in front of a locked metal door with large, red Cyrillic lettering on it. Kuryakin brightened with a happy grin, immediately shot off the lock and let himself in. Simon frowned at the writing and finally made out the biggest word: EXPLOSIVES.

"Ohhhhh crap," he moaned as he finally found a gun to keep their escape clear. It was a very tense several minutes before Kuryakin stepped from the room and headed down the hall at a trot without saying a word. Simon simply followed and didn't bother to ask anything because they appeared to be finally headed toward an exit. How

Kuryakin found it so directly was a mystery Simon didn't care to question; he was too happy to find an upward sloping staircase that lead to daylight.

When they popped into the daylight, they were on the edge of a large, ploughed field. Several small wooden buildings surrounded the field, and Simon realized that they housed staircases that lead to the underground facility; it was a perfect hidden compound. Simon snapped out of his reverie when he saw Kuryakin headed toward the ancient Lada, calmly picking off anyone that appeared from the buildings as if it was a target shoot. He jogged to catch up. Kuryakin's eyes looked far away in thought as he shot.

Simon tossed the money case in the car. "We don't have the keys!" He bounced nervously on his toes by the open door, eager to leave. His partner didn't respond, still distracted by something unseen. "Hey! I said we don't have the keys!"

After a second Kuryakin threw him a sideways look punctuated with a crooked grin. "Boom!" said softly.

Instantly, the ground roiled and great cracks split the field. Smoke and dust rose heavenward; the two of them were thrown to the ground as it bucked convulsively. Finally, in gut-wrenching slow motion, the field gave way and a great, smoking crater appeared. When his ears stopped ringing, Simon heard some very faint screams from underground in the sudden silence. He stared, aghast, and shakily rose to his feet. Then he heard whistling and turned to see Kuryakin spinning car keys on his finger as he slid behind the wheel of the Lada.



La Prima was thrilled at Kuryakin's talent. He'd obtained the trigger and the plutonium quite easily with only the loss of one Thrushman. Simon didn't want anything to do with a second assignment to get the plutonium, but was swayed by the promise of a cash bonus. Kuryakin had returned alone with the plutonium. No one asked any questions about what happened to Simon.

La Prima, meanwhile, had also discovered the pitfalls of having a henchman that was completely self-centered. He was talented, true, but to get that talent to work for her she had to come up with the right incentives.

"Freud says that the id consisted of amoral, irrational, driving instincts for sexual gratification, aggression, general sensual pleasure," Angelique and the Thrush doctor told her. "Use that. And remember, his impulse control is stymied, but it's still there. He should perform magnificently when enticed correctly." La Prima had found that Miss Fan topped the list of enticements.

La Prima had spotted the sultry Asian in Shanghai last year and saw potential. Miss Fan was a sado-masochist that had a penchant for torture, which came in very handy, but she also was quite difficult when bored, and she bored easily.

Miss Fan had little time for boredom now - Kuryakin and she were like fire and gunpowder when together. La Prima only fretted that Kuryakin would kill her someday, or vice versa, and then either her Thrush plans would be dashed or she'd find herself minus a good torture expert. She sighed at the thought of allowing their trysts; it was simply one of those risks she had to take to make it to the top.

It had been almost five weeks since Kuryakin had come into her possession and there was only one more part of the bomb puzzle needed. They had moved their base of

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

operation from northern Greece to Malibu , California , since the last parts were in southwestern America . Angelique had tagged along and La Prima was content to have a like-minded woman by her side. Angelique had proved to be a great source of information and was quick to locate the nuclear physicist they needed.

Curious and reluctant at the same time, La Prima decided to send Kuryakin and Fan out as a team to retrieve the man. She stressed firmly the need for the man to be unharmed, but worried until the scientist was brought to her. He was shaken, but physically intact. Miss Fan returned with a missing finger and a broken arm and was unable to take part in the turn-around mission to get the Los Alamos papers.

No one else was willing to go along with the frightening blond.

With that, Angelique saw an opportunity. She knew UNCLE should be looking for their wayward agent soon, if they weren't already, and she knew exactly who they would send: Napoleon Solo. With the right set-up she could turn Kuryakin over to him in exchange for information on the formula given to Kuryakin before his assignment to Europe. Then she could make her own amoral soldiers to order!

The trick was to keep the wild Russian in her sights. Currently, Kuryakin was an excellent retriever, but extremely untrustworthy. On a whim, he'd burned down the scientist's house and barely eluded the Las Vegas police. La Prima wanted some insurance that the files would make it into her hands in California in one piece, so Angelique volunteered to stay with Kuryakin. He was ordered to turn the papers over to her before returning to Malibu.

La Prima was glad there was a watcher for her man, but she wasn't naïve. She knew Angelique had something in mind and told Kuryakin that if Angelique tried to do anything with the papers other than deliver them to her in California, he could stop her any way he saw fit. He smiled his chilling, feral smile in response.

Women should stick together, La Prima thought, but that didn't mean they had to trust each other.

***ACT III: “My Men Are Professionals, Mr. Solo, But They Won’t Be Martyrs.”***

Kuryakin would depart from Malibu for Albuquerque the next morning. He was pleased that he was going in the field again. Blowing up the underground facility outside Bucharest, burning the scientist’s house near Las Vegas and watching Simon die a slow and painful death had been excellent job perks so far. He was somewhat disappointed that Miss Fan wasn’t going this time, but he had to admit, she was distracting. He smiled and felt warm at the thought of her fighting him, and decided to say goodbye.

He reached her tiny apartment and found the door locked. He pounded on it and there was no response. Anger rose in his throat and he broke the door open with one kick. The sultry woman was in a sheer black negligee standing at the far end of the small sitting room. One arm was in a fresh cast, the mangled hand wrapped thickly in gauze, and the other hand held a knife. Her eyes burned and her mouth twisted into a perverted smile.

Kuryakin pushed the door shut with one hand and advanced. The perverse smile grew bigger as he grew closer, and by the time she took the first swipe at him with the knife her teeth showed in a snarling grin. He knocked her hand away but she was able to follow through the motion and slice his forearm through his sleeve.

“Oh, yes,” he groaned as he stopped the hand and bent it around her back. She struggled and growled as he pushed her into the bedroom and against the wall. She tried to maneuver to hit him with her cast, but he grabbed her hair and threw her on the floor. The knife clattered away. Miss Fan grabbed his arm and attempted to bite him, but he shook her off and slammed her face down on a dainty desk, toppling a lamp and cascading files onto the floor. The lampshade shattered against the wall with a satisfying sound. She swore at him hoarsely in Chinese as he ran his hands roughly over her body.

When he was done and they both panted in exhaustion, he noticed that she’d cut her lip and blood oozed in one corner of her mouth. Just before he left, he pulled her close, bruising her bicep, and slowly drew his fingertip through the blood on her lip. Her hot breath was hard on his hand, her eyes glazed but intent on his. Then he put the finger in his mouth and sucked it clean.

Grinning, he released her and let himself out of the apartment, enjoying her smell on his body and the taste of her blood on his lips.



## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

Now that he had plenty of time to fulfill his rightful duties as Chief Enforcement Officer Napoleon Solo wondered if the extra pay was worth the hassle. True, there were the fun jobs like assigning agents to duties, directing training and setting up security details and the like, but on the flip side were the other duties: Approving reports - slogging through those written with questionable writing skills as he tried to figure out what actually happened - disciplining the occasional wayward agent and on the bottom of his list, informing the families of agents lost on duty. Fortunately, he didn't have to perform the last of those duties in the six weeks of his recovery. He did, however, have plenty of the rest and by the time his broken leg healed, he was more than ready - itchy, in fact - to get into the field again. He wondered when Illya would get back from his current assignment.

Solo had been so busy cramming nearly a year's amount of training schedules, filling Waverly's shoes and catching up on paperwork in the past six weeks he'd hardly noticed the absence of his partner. His unofficial inquires gave him vague information about an undercover Affair assigned shortly after Solo was injured. He never bothered to follow up on the details; actually, he didn't have the time and figured he'd find out eventually as he usually did. It was one of those 'eyes only' affairs that was turned over to the Berlin office. Illya would spill the details on his return.

Alexander Waverly had even taken advantage of Solo's infirmed state to take a vacation and leave the healing agent in charge. He'd only returned two days ago, but didn't seem much rested to the CEA.

It was his first day back to regular full duty. He breezed happily through the agents' entry in his normal chatty manner and informed to report to Waverly's office immediately. His first thought was that that the Old Man needed clarification or follow up on one of Solo's orders issued in his absence. The handsome agent wasn't worried, and he whistled his way to the office of New York UNCLE Section Chief in a cheery manner, greeted all he passed with a pleasant hello and arranged several day's worth of lunch dates with eligible ladies that caught his eye.

When he reached the desk of Mr. Waverly's secretary, Lisa Rogers, he paused at her serious expression.

"What's up, Lisa?" He asked brightly. "The Old Man in a mood?"

"He's in a mood, all right, Napoleon, and the cause for it is in the room. Watch yourself."

Instantly serious, he asked, "What's going on?"

She replied in a quiet tone, her brown eyes guarded. "I don't know, but it doesn't look good. I have a very bad feeling about this; there are representatives from just about every security agency in the States in there." Her statement ended as the intercom lit up. Mr. Waverly's voice boomed from the small box.

"Miss Rogers, is Mr. Solo here yet?"

"Yes, sir, he's only just arrived."

"Then send him in immediately!" They both winced at the sharp click that disconnected the box.

"I see what you mean," Solo mused as he straightened the cuffs of his dress shirt and strode to the office door.

"Good luck!" he heard Lisa whisper to his back.

The door swooshed aside and he stepped into the office that always seemed to have the slightest tang of Isle of Dogs tobacco in the air even when the boss' pipe was

unlit, as it was now. The large, circular table was attended by several men that Solo didn't know.

A pair of agents from the CIA stood out in his memory, however, and he immediately bristled. In a rare instance of an investigation that combined UNCLE with the CIA, he'd found the men to be close-minded, resentful and generally difficult to work with. Only Solo and Kuryakin's astute abilities to think on their feet and be flexible in implementing a plan had saved the missions. The CIA, however, had taken credit for the jobs. Since Waverly was the only person they cared to impress, Solo and Kuryakin let them have it. Waverly knew the details.

*And here they were again, probably wanting to make me and Illya some kind of fall guys*, he thought he took a seat, keenly noting the absence of his partner. He managed to keep his face unreadable as he nodded acknowledgement to the two men. Solo could tell that they were not happy to see him here, and he wondered why.

"Mr. Solo, let me introduce you to everyone here." Waverly's voice had a rare, tense tone. He grumbled the introductions. "Zimmerman and Hyde from the CIA I think you already know. Gene McFarthing and J.J. Bautista from NIS, François Sauvignon of INTERPOL, and finally Larry Dickerman and Steven Savage from the FBI. Gentlemen, Napoleon Solo, my Chief Enforcement Agent for the North American office of UNCLE."

Murmured greetings circled the room but no one broke a smile. Solo felt immediately on the defensive for reasons he could not pinpoint; the only people in the room that would meet his eyes were his boss and Thomas Hyde. The former's eyes were unreadable, but the latter's burned with anger that Solo could feel across the wide table.

"Mr. Solo, we seem to have a serious problem." Waverly's voice was tight. Solo wisely stayed silent. "Each of these agencies has come to the same conclusion, independent of each other and through four different investigations involving four separate incidents in the past five weeks. These two incidents occurred in Europe and involved the sale and movement of weapons grade plutonium and a nuclear trigger. Two incidents took place on American soil. One revolved around the kidnapping of a retired nuclear scientist in Nevada and the other had just occurred hours ago - the theft of top secret papers from the Los Alamos nuclear facility in New Mexico.

"Sounds like someone wants to make a bomb," Solo stated quietly.

"Damn straight, Solo," Hyde snarled. "And you know who it is."

Solo immediately bristled. Although he kept an outer cool, his fingers dug into the arms of his chair as he opened his mouth to demand an explanation. Waverly's voice stopped him.

"We know no such thing," the Old Man snapped. "You have insufficient evidence to support such accusations. We're here to get proof, Mr. Hyde, not point fingers."

"I have all the proof I need." Hyde replied sharply. His open hand swept over the papers in front of him. "All these investigations point to the same man. All we need to do is find him and arrest him."

Solo swallowed his acid comment and turned his attention to his boss, managing to ask in a flat, level tone, "Who is it all this supposedly points to?"

Waverly slid a folder to his top agent and began to chew on the stem of his unlit pipe as Solo flipped the folder open. The agent swallowed hard his initial reaction of shock. There, on the top of the thick report, was a black and white photo of his partner and friend.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

“Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin, Mr. Solo. All of their intelligence points to him.” Waverly sounded disgusted and busied his hands by organizing the papers before him.

Solo’s response was a short laugh. He looked around the table, and by the eyes now on him, knew that no one else found this the slightest bit amusing. “Then they are wrong, sir. Illya can’t be responsible . . .” He was cut off by one of the FBI men.

“Why not? His background makes it quite possible.”

“But you don’t know . . .” He was interrupted this time by the NIS officer.

“You can’t know him very well, either. You’ve only been partners, what, three years?”

“Yes, but he can’t be involved in anything like this. I know this man!” As he said that, a cold flush of fear rolled down his spine to his gut. He thought he knew Illya, anyway. His gut told him he did, but the stack of paper in front of him said otherwise.

“And that is why we are here, Mr. Solo.” The INTERPOL man’s accent was heavy French. “We need you to flush him out.”

Speechless, Solo felt his jaw drop. He turned to his boss for an explanation. Waverly gave it slowly and thoughtfully. “These men contacted me after they had conferred and agreed to approach UNCLE as a united front. I have agreed to help them. We all agree that you are the natural choice for the job of finding Mr. Kuryakin.”

*You have certainly been busy since you’ve been back,* Solo thought bitterly, feeling somewhat cornered and betrayed.

“Mr. Kuryakin has been under deep cover and incommunicado for the past four weeks. He was investigating a cell of terrorists that work in central Asia . No one has been able to locate and infiltrate the group, which is suspected of numerous attacks on foreigners and their interests in the Orient, Africa and Eastern Europe. When we picked up the rumor that they were looking to recruit a scientist, we sent Kuryakin. He was supposed to figure out the leadership structure and working routine, and report back. He was immediately contacted for a meeting and then disappeared. Which isn’t unusual for this type of deep cover assignment, I might add.”

Solo wondered what he meant by that last comment.

Waverly’s tone was level and professional, neither giving weight to the other agency’s claims nor completely disregarding it. It was a hard line to toe. “We will call him back, gentlemen, and get to the bottom of this. I will not sacrifice my agent. He deserves the chance to report in.”

“He deserves to hang,” Hyde growled.

Waverly snapped right back. “And may I remind you that all of you are here at the request of your superiors *as their representatives*. Keep that in mind, gentlemen. We have agreed to work together.”

*The old fox sure knows how to command respect,* Solo admitted, satisfied that the others would keep their mouths shut in this office, at least.

Waverly continued. “You all may go while I bring Mr. Solo up to speed. Dismissed.”

After a few moments of grumbling and shuffling feet, the others left the room. As soon as the door closed Solo was on his feet. “Sir, I . . .”

“Don’t start, Mr. Solo. I’ve been monitoring Mr. Kuryakin’s movements since he was given this assignment. We lost contact with him after a meeting was set up by a known terrorist. The terrorist showed up dead within days of the meeting, and we still do not know who Mr. Kuryakin spoke with, or where the meeting took place. I’ve been

following these escapades,” Waverly tapped the fat folder presented by INTERPOL, “but did not confirm that our agent was responsible until shortly before INTERPOL did. I have to admit, they have a legitimate concern.”

“You don’t believe Illya did all this, do you?”

Suddenly, Alexander Waverly looked weary. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, then began unconsciously searching his vest for tobacco. After a few thoughtful moments, he said, “I don’t want to believe it, but what I believe doesn’t matter. What matters is proof of his innocence and we are sorely shy of that right now.” He gave up his tobacco search, and laid the pipe down on the table. Bushy eyebrows framed darkly serious eyes when he turned to Solo. “This assignment is very important to the future of this organization and Mr. Kuryakin. It needs to be cleared up as soon as possible. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you go, you need to know what Mr. Kuryakin’s assignment is. It is classified ‘eyes only’ and ‘need to know’.” He slipped a sealed folder out from a drawer in the desk and spun it around to his lead agent. “Most of the information in here is top secret and confidential. None of the other agencies need to know any of this, but you need to know what you are going to get into.” He stood slowly and absently searched for the pipe with his fingertips. “You leave for Los Alamos within the hour. It’s the location of the last incident, the report thefts, which occurred less than two hours ago. The FBI is investigating and the two representative agents will be traveling with you. I suggest you start reading. That folder must stay here. It explains exactly what was done to Mr. Kuryakin, and what to expect.”

The words gave Solo a chill. Waverly moved away from his chair to leave the office and paused behind Solo. For a moment, he rested his hand on the agent’s shoulder. His voice was low but strong. “I want you to bring him home, Mr. Solo. Alive.”



Solo’s head swam with the information he’d absorbed from the file. Illya Kuryakin had been changed into a new person, Ian Keyes, via a level of conditioning deeper and more involved than anything he’d seen before. The false identity of Ian Keyes was intricately documented in all pertinent records, as if he’d been around for years.

Solo forced his seat back into a reclined position just after take off and turned over in his mind what he knew. He’d gotten little from his FBI traveling companions and could tell that they didn’t really trust him. The scope of the thefts pointed to Thrush, but there weren’t enough facts to point fingers at any particular Thrush operative.

His fellow investigators were convinced Illya was working for another government, namely Russia . Solo would have to find his own proof in the form of his wayward partner.

Deep undercover was always risky. UNCLE did it rarely but successfully by taking the agent’s natural traits and tweaking them ever so slightly. Between Waverly’s coaching and the staff psychiatrist’s suggestions, the new persona could exist indefinitely - theoretically, that is. There was always an escape trigger embedded, usually a phrase, that would set all the original traits back in order. It was a science way over Solo’s head, and he knew that, but he understood the gist of the technique and

again hoped he'd never have to be the recipient of such a treatment. Deep cover assignments were always voluntary and the stakes always high.

In this case, UNCLE had received information from two separate sources that persons unknown were shopping for the elements to make a bomb. It was assumed to be nuclear, but not confirmed. The shopping list included a person that had the scientific know how and the experience of international relations willing to pull together the various components. Known terrorist groups had been contacted for help in locating such a person. With an implanted history of international smuggling, Kuryakin as Keyes was the best bet for the list.

Finding out who was heading up the project had been impossible; several cases were stymied with the discovery of the bodies of their informants throughout Europe.

Illya reported in saying that he'd been contacted by a terrorist negotiator, and told UNCLE that a meeting with the project leader had been set up. It was the last report he made and the negotiator was found tortured to death two days later.

Shortly thereafter is when the various thefts occurred. The other national and international agencies realized that they all pointed to one man of similar description, but couldn't find a name. A fuzzy photo from a Las Vegas tourist's camera and a partial fingerprint from the plutonium theft in China allowed INTERPOL to eventually put two names to the face. They immediately contacted UNCLE to find out which name was real: Ian Keyes or Illya Kuryakin.

Waverly had not been pleased. With the detailed reports from the other agencies it was clear that Kuryakin had gone too far, but his reputation gave weight to Waverly that there must be more to the situation than met the eye. That's why Solo was drawn into the equation.

The last incident, the theft from the Los Alamos facility, resulted in a security net tight enough to narrow his location down to a particular area around the facility. A normal thief would have a difficult time escaping, but Solo knew his partner. Illya only needed time to slip the perimeter. This is where Solo and the other agents were going, and he hoped they would get there in time.

For Solo, the assignment was a tough one. If Kuryakin was beyond repair, it would be impossible to replace him as a partner. He also had to admit that it would be devastating to lose him as a friend, too. That thought turned his insides to ice.

The three of them touched down at Los Alamos and hit the ground running. The FBI agents took lead and drove Solo to the secured perimeter on the edge of a national forest. They met with the head of the Command Center for a briefing.

"We've narrowed the perimeter to this two square mile area," a man in camouflaged clothing reported. He pointed to a map pinned on the tent wall. "He's in there somewhere. It's thick forest, as you can see." He poked several areas. "There are hunting lodges scattered around - old, new, private and commercial. They are flagged on this map. The occupied ones have been assigned armed guards. There's only one source of water, this river, and vertical rock cliffs here, here and here. The closest airport is fifteen miles this direction and there are two major roads, all are covered by our men. He's trapped. It's simply a matter of time before he's forced to come out or be discovered."

"Any guesses where he's holed up?" Special Agent McFarthing asked.

Camouflage man regarded the map. "Taking into account the direction he left the facility, the time of day and various tracking clues, I'd say here." He pointed to a rocky

area near one of the main roads. "It would be the quickest way out, and the dogs have picked up fairly fresh signs in that area." The speaker turned to face the newcomers, his eyes stern. "He's already taken out two of my best men. My crew is anxious to get their hands on him."

"You tell your men to control themselves," Solo returned sharply. "We need that man alive."

"They are professionals, Mr. Solo, but they won't be martyrs. They will defend themselves."

Solo could see he protests were pointless and realized that he was alone in the idea of bring Kuryakin in alive.

The three of them integrated into the established squads and joined the search. Solo took the time to study the terrain before darkness fell and tried to put himself in his partner's shoes. Nightfall would bring action, this much he knew. He just had to make sure he was in the right place.

The agent found that he was drawn to one particular area of forest that encircled the scattered, crumbling foundations of several buildings grouped together. When he saw it, he noticed that vines crawled up the rock, which was scorched black from a long past forest fire, and the forest surrounding it was thick with rejuvenated greenery. The placement on the ruined site seemed particularly strategic - both a road and the river were close, but not that close. It was a good place to hide and bide your time.

Solo tried to get there without attracting attention, but the FBI made it clear that he was under their scrutiny. They followed him everywhere; to shake them off would only raise alarms. Solo moved to the general area in a casual manner, the compass in his head always pointing in the direction he needed to go.

It was about an hour after sunset when the dogs went wild. The pursuing teams fell back behind the snarling animals focused in one area near the largest of the burnt and crumbling foundations. When they felt they had a secure line to back them, they let the dogs go. They went howling into the night - away from the ruins.

With the help of the darkness and the teams' focus on the dogs, the UNCLE agent faded back, unnoticed, in the opposite direction and found himself among the dead remains of largest building of the site.

The trees grew in close to this building. Solo knew there were still agents out there patrolling in the cover of the trees, and moved with stealth. He studied the site in the bare light of the rising moon.

The crumbling walls were no higher than Solo's hip. It was a dark and foreboding night, and the ground between the walls was a maze of intertwining ruts caused by water erosion. Some of the foundation had already collapsed into these ruts, some of which were quite deep, and another whole area was at risk. These valleys also created tunnels under the walls that were in imminent danger of collapse; they were also an excellent place to hide. Ever cautious, he began to explore the crevasse that started at his feet and appeared to run under the largest of the ruins.



When he heard the dogs lead the men away, he knew his distraction would work for a short while. It was time to move.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

He was exhausted, filthy with mud, blood and sweat and was ready to put this behind him. There was a certain thrill about outmaneuvering all those highly trained agents, but the whole game was getting tiresome. He checked the flow of blood from his shoulder; setting the decoy had been tricky. They almost got him, but the blood had proved to be an excellent addition to the dogs' distraction. The wound would just have to wait to be tended so he packed it with a section of dirty cloth to stem the flow. Then he pulled a gun from his waistband and listened to the night.

Satisfied, he carefully made his way out of the dirt hollow at the base of the mossy stone foundation. The sound of footsteps stopped him and anger flared. *Who was that?* Quickly, he melted into the shadows and froze, gun at ready. When the vague outline of a man moved against the trunks of the surrounding trees, he dismissed use of the gun, as it would draw more men. He tucked it away instead and flexed his fingers, imagining the feel of the man's soft throat in his hands. The shooting thrill of anticipation was abruptly cut short when something in the shadowy profile stirred his mind.

Suddenly, images flashed before his eyes - images that invoked feelings that confused him. The name came immediately - Napoleon Solo. Then an odd and bewildering idea came forth - *who am I?* - followed by the dull thrum of a blossoming headache.

***ACT IV: The Spider and The Fly***

The darkness slowly receded with the early rise of the moon. It wasn't full, but the small amount of light was enough for Solo to discern solid ground from shadow. He moved carefully around the site, keeping to the edge of the forest. His feeling that Illya was here never faltered, and when he heard the very faint shuffle among the crumbling rock, he knew he was right.

"Illya? I know you're here. It's me, Napoleon." He called quietly. "Illya? Where are you?"

The shuffling noise sounded again and Solo moved in. The noise drew him into the eerie shadows of old building's foundation. It cast a quivering shadow in the weak moonlight.

Ragged breathing pinpointed his location. In the secluded darkness, the noise was deafening. Solo made a motion to come close, but was cut off by a sharp order.

"Don't. Don't move."

Solo stopped immediately. Something in the tone set alarms off in his mind.

"I'm alone, Illya. I think there are sentries in the woods, but I haven't seen any yet." He spoke softly, letting the darkness carry his words. His eyes constantly scanned the pockets of black, looking for the tiniest motion.

"Stay where you are."

The response allowed Solo to focus on the darkest corner just beyond the deepest crevasse. The chasm between was more than physical, Solo realized. It was something in his partner's voice that tipped him off.

"Illya, what have you gotten into?" Solo asked desperately, keeping low against the rock.

"Illya?" He replied, sounding perplexed, then after a short, hoarse laugh answered him. "More than I bargained I guess. Keep away from us."

"Us?" Solo questioned. There was no reply, and Solo's gut instincts were making him queasy. "Illya, Waverly sent me to bring you home."

There was a slight hesitation in his friend's reply. "Our scars tell us our history really happened." He said, barely audible.

"What?" The American wasn't sure he heard correctly, and reluctantly came to a dire decision about his friend's mental state. "Let me bring you home, tovarisch."

A grinding noise that ended in a thump told Solo that his partner had just sat down at the base of the crumbling wall. There was no immediate reply and, concerned, risked a tight beam of light from his tiny flashlight. What he saw in the small circle of light alarmed him.

Illya's face was barely discernible in the light. It was black with an unknown substance, and his hair unkempt and dark with dirt and sweat. He couldn't clearly make out the clothing, but he did see a flash of red on his friend's fingers as they gripped his upper arm in a tight hug. Then he saw the muzzle of a handgun raise and take aim, backed by icy blue eyes squinting into the beam. "Turn it off!" The Russian ordered hysterically. "Turn it off!"

Solo snapped the light off. "What have they done to you?" He said softly, his voice flat. He didn't dare move, fearing that his partner would bolt.

After a few long moments of panicked breathing, Illya's voice was barely audible. "Who?" he said, sounding genuinely confused as well as angry. "UNCLE or Thrush? I don't know me anymore. I . . ." The last was edged in pain.

Solo spoke slowly. "Illya, I'm going to say the retrieval code. You have been compromised. You need to come home. We can clear this all up."

"No!" His partner's voice was edged in panic. Rattling loose rock told Solo that he was trying to get away, and the dark haired agent knew he couldn't allow that.

"Illya, listen: 'There's a long way to go before you sleep.'" Solo's voice was strong and firm in the darkness. Illya had to have heard it, but he repeated it again, slowly and clearly. The rustling of rock across the chasm had lessened. He could also hear voices outside the crumbling walls - sentries. Time was running out and Solo had to move. He stepped away from the wall. "Illya, did you hear me?"

At the sound of the phrase, Illya's legs wobbled and his knees sagged. His temples began to throb, and he sharply caught his breath. Somehow, he managed to back deeper into the angles of the remaining foundation. At the same time, stirred memories came faster and a parallel person appeared in his mind. The shock of it stopped him cold; the other person looked just like him and threw a long, black shadow across his mind..

The next thing he knew, the imposter was taking over and putting the images in order.

He had to be stopped . . .

After several tense moments, Solo risked the light again. The beam found his partner on his feet, the palms of his hands pressed against his temples and his face in a grimace of agony. "Illya?"

The dirty blond head snapped around and wild blue eyes caught Solo's. One of Illya's hands dropped; a gun then pointed directly at Solo's heart. Solo instinctively threw himself back against the wall just as a bullet sizzled inches from his chest.

"Hey!" he yelled in surprise as he dropped in the dirt behind a large stone. "Illya, don't shoot!" When his heart was back in his chest where it belonged, he peeked around the rock. Illya was gone. With a sharp curse, he pelted into the darkness after his friend, winding through the crumbling foundations just before he plunged into the surrounding forest. He'd only taken a dozen or so steps when he ran into a small contingency of FBI agents drawn by the gunfire.

The Feds read instantly what was going on and called in for back up, much to Solo's dismay. Movement on both sides focused in the direction Solo had been headed, but he didn't join them. Instead, he dropped back until they were well ahead, reversed course and circled around to the other side of the ruins. He picked a spot that had the best view of the perimeter and crouched down. "Come on, Illya. Be predictable for once in your life." The whispered words helped to bolster his instinct as he waited with crossed fingers.

The sparse moon light did little to help separate shadow from reality. The quiet that settled over the scene as the other agents moved off sharpened his hearing. Weak, erratic breezes rustled the leaves and swayed the shadows as the agent waited patiently. With each passing second, his eyes adjusted to the lay of the land and finally, he saw movement that went against the wind - slight and fleeting with no discernable shape, but it was the right size. Solo aimed carefully ahead of the movement, which melted away under his gaze. When it felt right, he pulled the trigger and with the 'poof!' of a silenced report, the sleep dart was away. He followed instantly.

The silent shadow eluding him was now less careful. The pursuing agent could hear twigs cracking and brush rustle just ahead. Several long seconds brought a crash that seemed deafening in the dark and quiet. Solo closed in and practically fell over his drugged partner, now a collapsed heap in the darkness. Instantly and without another thought, Solo slung Illya over his shoulder and made for the secrecy of the woods.

The maps from the tent were still clear in his mind and Solo managed to take his load to a spot he was sure would be safe for a little while. He was bone weary and physically exhausted. Solo knew he'd be no match for Illya right now if he decided to fight, especially since Illya had the advantage of forced sleep for the last few hours. With a slight feeling of guilt, he handcuffed his partner around a stout tree and collapsed a safe distance away. After catching his breath, he pulled out his communicator and hoped the signal would find its way out of the surrounding mountains.

"Open Channel D, priority." He spoke lowly, his breath slow in returning. He adjusted the signal against the static and tried again.

"Napoleon?" A woman's voice inquired. "Mr. Waverly has been waiting for you. I'll patch you through."

"Thanks, Wanda." He grinned at the friendly voice. He needed one right now.

"Mr. Solo? Have you located Mr. Kuryakin?" Mr. Waverly's voice sounded as close to anxious as Solo had ever heard it.

"Yes, sir, I have. He's with me now. Physically, any way."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I had to dart him, sir. He's very disoriented and not himself. Something's definitely wrong."

"Well, that would certainly explain things if you are correct. How soon can you get him back to New York?"

Solo bit his lip. "That may be a bit of a problem, sir. The others don't know I have him and they are a bit hostile. We're in a wilderness area outside Los Alamos. The closest place for a pick up that I can recall is about 5 miles to the west - an open field on the other side of the road. Notify the local office to be on standby for an air pick up; I'll call in when I get there."

"Done, Mr. Solo. And please make haste. The longer you are out there, the more chance you'll be located by who knows who. And keep me apprised of your progress."

"Yes, sir. Solo out." When he closed up the communicator and slipped it in his pocket, he spared a glance in his partner's direction and was startled to see two blue eyes studying him. He returned the stare, unable to read the look. It was carefully neutral. "Well, look who's awake." He said brightly.

"Why am I locked to a tree?" The very slight spark of anger that dissipated quickly in the pale blue orbs wasn't lost on Solo. Illya's eyes followed him as he moved in the darkness and Solo felt like he was under the gaze of a predator.

“Because I don’t think you’re thinking straight right now.”

Surprisingly the blond agent smiled, his teeth - like fangs - white against the darkness of his face. “Oh, well, I suppose I was . . . confused.”

“Confused about what?”

Illya’s cocky smile disappeared and the blue eyes went stormy when he was unable to stop the same thoughts that had come over him when Solo had said that damn phrase. He turned his attention to his situation and tugged at the cuffs - the pain in his wrists allowed him to regain control of his thoughts.

Solo saw a brief glimpse of panic, barely controlled, and Illya’s skin had become shiny with sweat even in the coolness of the night. His shaking hands rattled the links of the cuffs, and the panic vanished. “Release me,” he snapped. “I’m a sitting target like this.”

The American settled down in a crouch just out of kicking range, his calm exterior in direct contrast to what he felt inside. Illya was like something - wild. “We’re safe here for awhile,” his voice soothed.

The Russian laughed a short, bitter laugh. “I’m not safe anywhere.”

”You are, when you are with me.” That wiped the smile from the Slavic features, which was replaced with a hard stare. Solo couldn’t remember the last time, if ever, he’d seen such a parade of emotion cross his partner’s face in such a short period of time; it was unnerving. “You don’t believe me?”

“I only believe in myself.”

Those words coming from that person stung, but Solo didn’t flinch. “You seem quite paranoid, so this line of discussion is obviously useless. So let’s change it.” He looked directly into Illya’s face. “Where are the things you took from the facility?”

Blue eyes sparked again, partnered with that same predator smile. “I have no idea what you mean, Napoleon.”

The use of his name sounded perverted coming from that tongue. “If you give the papers to me it will insure safe passage from here.”

“For me or you?”

“For both of us. And believe me when I say that. I’m not exactly on the FBI’s most loved list right now, thanks to you. They wouldn’t think twice about going through me to get to you.”

“My savior,” the blond captive cooed sarcastically.

Solo had enough. He stood and looked down on the figure that should be his friend. He spoke slowly and darkly. “And don’t you forget it. Where are the files?”

Seeing the anger in his captor sent a thrill up Kuryakin’s spine, and he smiled broadly as he kept his eyes intent on Solo’s. “I burned them,” he said gleefully.

“What?” Napoleon hadn’t expected that, but something whispered to him that it was the truth.

“I burned them. I needed a distraction to get out of the building so I set them on fire in a closet.”

Solo stared, horrified. He’d heard there had been a fire in the most populated building of the facility just before it was closed, but didn’t get the details. He didn’t think anyone had died, but he knew there were injuries. Intentional injuries that could be interpreted as attempted murder.

Spurred on by Solo’s sicken expression, the cuffed man continued. “You should have seen the flames, Napoleon. It was so beautiful I almost forgot to escape.” The

personality in Kuryakin's body was ecstatic at Solo's shock. "I wanted to see the destruction, but I had to go, you see. Tell me, did anyone die? Were they burned to a crisp?" His body had the wonderful tingling of a lightning bolt as he pushed the description and rose to his feet, the cuff chain scoring the tree as he stood. "Did it smell like a Sunday barbeque?"

"Shut up," Solo growled, locking eyes with the madman in order to get control of the situation. It was just so eerie to hear Illya Kuryakin talk like that and realize the depth of the situation he had on his hands.

"Why?" Kuryakin laughed shortly. "What else do I have to do?"

Solo pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger without a second thought. Sorrow cut deep but he managed to keep his face blank as his partner eventually dropped with a snarled curse.

"Sleep. That's what you can do." He looked at the slumped figure for several minutes, surprised that the man could still look so innocent while asleep.

Napoleon Solo was not a sentimental fool. He knew his friend was gone for now, replaced with this . . . thing . . . and it was up to him to set his partner straight again. He also knew that if Kuryakin was sent in to get files, he had them somewhere. The originals probably were ash, which meant that he was packing film, a microdot or some other kind of copy. The agent set his jaw, holstered his gun and knelt down to search his prisoner. As suspected, he found a roll of film in a pocket and confiscated it.



When Kuryakin woke, he was still cuffed but in a different location. Instantly he gauged that Solo must be getting very tired. In fact, the dark haired man was sleeping right now; Kuryakin could hear him breathing and see his vague outline in the poor light.

Out from under the microscope, Kuryakin took a moment to assess what he'd experienced earlier. Since Solo had said that phrase about being a long way to go, there had been another person in his mind, constantly watching. At first, this shadow person had tried to force his way to the forefront of his mind, but he'd managed to turn his back on him and continue. He was always there, however, and he could feel him at his back.

He had to figure out how to get rid of it. The annoyance was a distraction, and he needed to concentrate on getting out of this situation and get to Angelique. The thought of the blonde woman made him grin with appreciation. Getting his hands on her would be enjoyable to say the least, but he knew he had to wait for the opportunity. He also knew she was crafty and oh so dangerous. He felt a stirring in his groin at that thought and before he could focus on a satisfying image that involved her, a searing pain split his head like a lightning bolt, throwing him backward against his shackles in surprise.

His mind spun, disoriented, and a white-hot pain grew as he tried to find its source.

He wanted to squeeze his temples or at least hold his head to keep it from splitting wide open. With his hands still cuffed around the solid tree, all he could do was pound his forehead against the rough bark. A guttural growl grew from his chest and exploded from his throat; the pain refused control and ran wild.

"Illya!"

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

The voice pierced the waves of agony that bordered on ecstasy - it was simply too much. Depthless voids of black sliced through the hot whiteness.

“Illya! Stop it!”

He fell into the growing darkness and tumbled, lost and terrified, for ages.

Then he found his feet. In his mind’s eye the ground was solid and the pain gone. He stood, panting, and looked around in confusion. His eyes were drawn to a shadowy figure just out of his visual range; he squinted and tried to focus.

“Illya, open your eyes!”

The voice came from behind. Strangely drawn to the distant figure, the words weren’t clear at first.

“Open your eyes! What happened?”

Finally, the words clear, he was forced to turn to the voice.

The first thing he felt when he tried to crack his eyes open was the thick substance on his lashes that caused them to stick together. He could feel his eyeballs rolling in their sockets, refusing to cooperate as he forced his lids to separate.

Then he felt his head rolled uncomfortably back, but when he tried to straighten it, his forehead pounded unmercifully - but it didn’t come close to the searing white that had preceded it.

“Hey! You alright?”

Illya got control of his neck muscles and managed to face the voice. It took several moments for his eyes to focus but when they did, the first thing he saw were the worried hazel eyes of . . .

“Napoleon.” His own voice sounded far away, and he cleared his throat to make it stronger. “What . . .” he started, unable to put together a question from the feelings tumbling around in his mind.

His friend’s eyes studied him carefully for several moments before speaking again. “Illya?” he questioned softly. “How do you feel?”

Illya’s mind was now focused enough to hear the wary concern in his partner’s voice. He tried to raise his hand to wipe what he now realized was blood from his eyes, but found his hands restrained. He looked down at the cuffs, confused, and felt the drying blood on his throbbing forehead crack as he frowned at his situation.

“I . . . uh . . .” A flash of violence crossed his mind. “What did I do?”

A watchful pause was followed up with a softly spoken comment. “Well, for one, you tried to shoot me.”

Illya thought for a moment. “Again?”

Illya saw Solo’s shoulders drop and his entire posture relax as a chuckle washed over his frame. Obviously, his partner had suffered a very rough time of things lately and Illya couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he himself was the reason. He bit his lip, unable to share the relief.

“What have I done?” The question was quiet and intended to be redundant; visions were now flashing in his mind and a dark spot - a shadow - lurking in the corner of his mind would not be shaken or ignored.

“Well, you’ve been busy, that much I’ll say.” Solo pulled the handcuff key from his pocket and made the motion to put it in the keyhole.

Illya jerked back hard as he felt the tendrils of panic shoot from his gut. “Don’t!” His voice sounded pleading as the parade of vile visions quickened their pace and the

shadow presence grew alarmingly. It was trying to swallow him, and he couldn't allow it to swallow his partner, too.

Solo paused, instantly noting the growing confusion in the cool grayness of his partner's eyes. "What? Don't uncuff you?" He drew back slowly, the key still gripped between his fingers.

In the plagued agent's mind, the shadow shaped itself into a figure, a carbon copy of himself, except for the eyes - they remained inky pools that drew him in like a vacuum. His head exploded in a flash of white as he lost himself in the eyes. In the next instant, he was watching the ebony eyed doppelganger from a distance.

Before Solo's eyes, Kuryakin stiffened and pulled hard on the cuffs. He gasped, then worked his feet under him until he was squatting, his eyes all the while locked on some unseen thing before him as he reared back on the cuffs. A tiny spot of blood blossomed on one wrist from the pressure.

Solo didn't move, didn't breathe. Illya shuddered and stilled, panting, and then swallowed hard and blinked. The corner of his mouth twitched. After a few seconds, cloudy blue-grey eyes turned mournfully to him. "No, I want you to uncuff me." His low, even tone gave the impression of weariness. "It was just a little pain in my head, that's all."

Solo cocked his head and studied his friend, looking for any explanation as to what just happened. Now clear, the pale eyes were wide, unblinkingly calm, and evenly returned the scrutiny.

Illya raised his arms a little, notching the soft bark of the tree. "Please?" he asked with a timid smile.

There was nothing in Illya's demeanor to justify the caution Solo suddenly felt. The little hairs on the nape of his neck, when standing at attention like they were now, were seldom wrong. He hesitated; they would certainly make better time if Illya walked on his own, and also knowing that the longer they were out here increased the chance that they would get caught.

He really had very little choice.

"All right," he agreed slowly, deciding to keep his reservations to himself. He removed the cuffs and tucked them in the small of his back.

Kuryakin stood and rubbed his wrists. "Thank you," he said softly. The words, however, did little relax the hairs of Solo's instinct.

In fact, it made them tingle with fear.



Angelique relaxed in the back seat of her chauffeur driven sedan with a freshly filled flute of chilled champagne and fiddled with the dial on silver box next to her. The monotonous beeping of the infernal device had changed pitch.

"Driver," she said sharply. "Let's reposition the car. Our quarry is on the move again."

As the driver started the engine and obeyed, the woman, bored with surveillance, looked out the window at the darkness of the surrounding wilderness. "How could anybody live out here?" She mumbled disgustedly to herself. "The nearest nightclub must be a hundred miles away."

After several minutes the beeping became clear again strong once again. “Stop here. This will do.” She carefully twisted another dial on the box and a steady stream of faint static added background to the beeps, which had increased slightly in frequency. Angelique studied the small gage between the two dials.

She stepped out into the cool night and began to walk up the road.

“Halt!” The voice came from a boulder-strewn ravine to her right. “What are you doing here?”

A man clad in black rose in front of the lighter colored boulders. Angelique saw that his rifle was aimed at the ground, away from her. He didn’t perceive her as a threat. That would be his last mistake.

“We have car trouble. The engine needs to cool.” She sounded convincing as a damsel in distress, a role she enjoyed playing frequently.

“You can’t stay here.” The man moved toward her and held out a canteen. “Use this water and turn around. This road is closed.”

“Really?” She acted surprised. “I didn’t see a road closure signs.”

“It’s been closed for nearly two hours.”

“Oh. We were sitting in the car for awhile.” She accepted the canteen. “Are you out here by yourself? Isn’t that dangerous.”

“My partner is a mile up the road, ma'm.”

She smiled. “Really? Isn’t that fortuitous!”

A puzzled expression crossed the soldier’s face as Angelique drew a silenced weapon and shot him at point blank range. He dropped next to the road without a sound and she returned to the car to grab her small backpack and the small silver box. “We’re close. Lets’ go.”



The running men made good time, even with the weak moonlight that barely pierced the forest canopy. Solo kept a sharp ear on his partner’s breathing; it was an accurate way to keep track of his exact location. When he could, he watched the hands of the smaller man. As an agent, he knew that’s where attack generally showed itself first.

He simply couldn’t and wouldn’t ignore the wariness he felt about Illya right now. Although he’d shown no signs of aggression or subterfuge, something was definitely wrong and Solo made sure he wouldn’t be surprised.

When the road he recalled from the maps showed itself in the darkness as a silver ribbon weaving between the trees, he hissed a warning and both men dropped in the first available cover. Crossing the open pavement would be a huge risk; the road was patrolled regularly and closely watched.

“The pickup point is just across the road.” He pulled out his communicator and his Special. “I’m calling our taxi and we’ll cross the road when we hear it coming.”

Breathing hard next to him, Illya nodded his golden head in response. Solo opened the silver pen and spoke into it as he kept a visual on his partner out of the corner of his eye. He could see the light colored eyes in the black of the night watching him in return as he finished his pick up request, and it took a moment for something to register: Illya should be watching the road.

All nerves now screaming he calmly closed the pen and slipped it away. Without warning, he moved quickly and rolled away from his watcher as he brought up his gun.

Illya was on him in an instant and the dart went wide. They crashed through the brush to the shoulder of the road where they fought for possession of the weapon. Napoleon felt his hand pounded against a rock, and the gun skittered from his grip and across the hard packed dirt.

With the gun gone, Illya turned his attention to Napoleon's neck where he gripped it with one powerful hand and blocked his victim's attacks with the other.

The look in Illya's eyes made Solo's blood run cold. He'd never seen fury like that in the normally cool blue eyes, and it was frightful. A surge of renewed energy enabled him to push away and free his throat, as well as deliver a well placed kick to his attacker. Illya grunted and doubled over, giving the American agent a precious few seconds to regroup.

He was completely shocked and surprised to suddenly feel a needle's sting, and looked down to see one of his own sleep darts dangling from his thigh. He sank to his knees, and looked up long enough to see a second form standing over his partner, gun in hand.

"Angelique," he managed to whisper before he blacked out.

"It's so nice to be noticed," she replied with a spider-to-the-fly smile.

***ACT V: "He Tends To Get A Little Out Of Control."***

Solo woke up on a small plane. He was lured into consciousness by a deft, feminine hand gently stroking his cheek.

"Come on, Napoleon, I know you're awake, darling."

The perfume that he connected with Angelique tickled his nose and he wrinkled it for relief. His hands were bound behind him, and he was unable to relieve the itch. He opened his eyes and found her smiling face looking down on him. "Could you be so kind and scratch my nose for me? I seem to be tied up at the moment."

She laughed lightly and complied, then bent over and kissed the tip of his nose. "Well, I thought the saying went 'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours', but I'm flexible."

"Somehow, I knew back scratching would come into this." He looked around as he tried his ropes and saw that he was lying down and secured to a couch with his female nemesis sitting next to him.

"Oh, you're trussed up quite nicely, my dear. Your friend knows what he's doing. But I'm sure you realize that." She cocked her head and began to straighten his hair with her fingers. She noticed his searching eyes. "He's over there." A nod of her head told him which way to look.

Illya was sound asleep on a small couch across the aisle. The plane was dark and the only thing he could really see was his partner's white blond hair sticking out from under a blanket.

Angelique sighed. "He's like that a lot, you know. We have to dart him constantly." She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "He tends to get a little out of control." Satisfied with her ministrations to Solo's hair, she settled back in the couch next to his head.

"'We'?" Solo noted.

"I did say that, didn't I? Nothing gets by you, Napoleon. That's why you're the best."

Solo smiled warily, a common expression when he was with this particular woman. "Softening me up with flattery, I see. What is it you want, Angelique?"

Her eyes went wide. "Me? Why would you think that?" After a moment, her innocent look faded to amusement. "You know me well, don't you?"

"Better than is good for me, or so I'm told. What's the deal?"

"Before I continue, let me make you aware of where you stand, my love." She held up a small canister. "I have the film our little tow-headed friend was sent to obtain. I'm willing give it back to you and release you before we get to La Prima's."

“La Prima? From Greece?”

“You know her? My, it’s amazing how our circles cross sometimes, isn’t it?” She rolled the film canister in her fingers.

“It’s my job to know the up and coming Thrushes. I do my homework.” He smiled again as he thought. “What’s my part of this proposition?”

Angelique slipped to the floor so she could look at his eyes on the same level. “Your part is simple. All I want is the formula UNCLE uses to precondition their agents for deep cover work. The same formula they gave your friend there.” She indicated Illya with a sideways nod. “I’ll give you the film as a show of good faith. You get me the formula.”

Solo held her eyes for several long moments. “What makes you think I’ll come back with what you want?”

She traced his cheekbone with her fingertip. “Two things, actually. First, I know you’re a gentleman and will keep your word.”

He knew she didn’t mean that. “And the second?”

“I’ll get your partner back to you.”

“Alive?”

“I can’t promise that.”

“Then no deal.”

“Oh, Napoleon, don’t be so disagreeable. It’s a good offer, and you know it.”

“Let’s just say I prefer to keep my options open a bit longer. I’d like to know what was done to him, however.” He indicated Illya with a nod.

Angelique laugh grated like fingernails on a black board. “Doesn’t UNCLE keep you up to date on those things?”

“That’s not UNCLE conditioning. There’s something else going on.”

She continued to smile and studied the roll of film as she thought. “You are quite right, my dear. Trust me when I say that we didn’t expect UNCLE to fiddle with their agents in such a Thrush-like way! It seems that what we injected tangled with what was there. It’s sort of like we came up with a wild new martini recipe without knowing the ingredients!”

Solo watched her closely and finally realized what she wanted. “And you’d like that recipe all for yourself, wouldn’t you?”

She ignored the question. “I can’t promise the offer will stay on the table, love. La Prima has her own plans, I have mine.” She held up the film canister again. “This completes her plans, you know. It will make Thrush a super power.”

“We’ll just have to see how it plays out, then.”

Angelique’s face turned sour. “You can be so difficult.”

“I know. I can be a real burden sometimes.”

Angelique stood with a huff. “Well, darling, we’ll see if you change your mind after you meet Miss Fan.” She wrinkled her nose in distaste again. “She’s so crude, but I have to admit, she gets the job done.”

“Miss Fan?”

Her face brightened in a smile, and she winked at him as she slipped the film into her impressive cleavage. “Ask your partner about her. They have quite a relationship!” She laughed shortly and patted his cheek. “Hang tight, my love. We’re almost home.”

Solo watched her disappear into the cockpit and wondered what he’d gotten himself into.



When the small plane touched down, it took awhile for Solo to figure out where they were. Even though the darkness concealed most of the landmarks of the rolling hills, he recognized the flora typical of California . The faint saltiness on the wind told him he was near the coast. His knowledge of La Prima and Angelique narrowed the choice down to either San Francisco or Los Angeles . It was the windy drive up a dark road in order to get to La Prima's estate that clinched it in his mind: Los Angeles, and, most likely, Malibu.

They traveled in a dark limo with smoked glass, Solo trussed up like a spider treat and Illya sleeping the entire way. Angelique reported in to La Prima on a small silver box, and snapped it off when she was finished.

She patted the box. "This is how I found you, you know. Illya's got a transmitter in his tooth. I also monitored your call to bring in the helicopter."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want to prove to you that I want to help you."

"Ah. We've returned to back scratching."

"Napoleon," she pouted. "Don't be so negative. I'm just giving you a last chance to accept my offer."

"Pass."

"Fine," Angelique snapped. She pulled out a cigarette and gazed out the window for the rest of the ride.

When they finally pulled into a stark garage, the back doors were opened and Solo was unceremoniously hauled out of the car like luggage.

"I think the chamber is the best spot for now, boys. Strap him to the table and stay with him. He can be a slippery one." Angelique bent down and whispered in his ear as two sizeable goons hitched him up for relocation. "Time's running out!" Then she kissed him on the temple as he was dragged away.

Just before Napoleon was removed from the garage, he heard Angelique chastise two more goons. "Oh, for God's sake he can't hurt you. He's unconscious! Take him to his room. I'll be with La Prima."



The world came back in the same manner as it always did after being darted with a nauseating swirl that seemed to be getting worse with each wakening. Kuryakin felt the pounding of a splitting headache, too - a new complication. The throbbing in his temples was somewhat soothing, though, and he took a moment to savor it as he tried to catch the expected familiar scent with his nose.

She was here.

It was now part of the game for him to find her before opening his eyes. He zeroed in on her location and turned his face to her. Just before opening his eyes, the shadowy doppelganger that had been haunting him in his mind made his appearance sharp and clear.

Kuryakin sat bolt upright and his eyes flew open in anger. The other was still there, trying to push to the forefront. In an instant, he felt a body straddle him and he threw it to the floor. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't the mind-man, but Miss

Fan, sprawled on the floor at his feet. She looked up at him through her long, dark lashes in expectation, her red leather-strapped bosom twitching with the beat of her heart.

The past bruises on her neck had faded to a sickening yellow and the gash on her lip a crusty apostrophe on the corner of her mouth. The stump of her wrist was still heavily bandaged, the cast on her arm spotted with blood.

Kuryakin felt a sensual stirring in his groin, but then the headache swelled and his mind clouded. Infuriated, he grabbed woman's hair and dragged her to her feet. "You're doing this!" he yelled in her face. "Stop it!" He slapped her hard and she dangled in his grip, grinning in erotic pleasure, which infuriated him more. He threw her onto the red settee.

He took a step back and left her draped on there, suddenly exhausted. The mirror image figure in his mind was gone and left behind a brief sense of confusion at the emptiness. Angry at the strange feeling, he reached over and grabbed the woman by the hair and half dragged her to the door.

He didn't like the feeling of loss at the disappearance of the man in his mind and he surely didn't want this woman to see him confused. He threw her in the hall, her red leather outfit still askew, and slammed the door.

Kuryakin stood in the middle of his small room, panting, as he clenched his hands with rising panic and frustration.

*Who am I?* He thought fearfully.



The variety of torture tables Solo had come across in his career were too many in number. This one served its purpose well, as did the others, and after a thorough examination of the room and its contents other than the table, he grimly concluded that the next hours probably wouldn't be pleasant. This room was designed for torture from the steel cabinets and tile walls, all the way to the concrete floor. A single drain was visible in the middle of the floor, and the room was cool. He was bound with the rope and strapped to the table. His hands were numb from being under his back, and he couldn't move them enough to get to any of his devices.

Solo was surprised Angelique didn't take any of the destructive toys. Was that another show of good faith?

He didn't have a lot going for him right now with Illya being a variable either way. When Solo had uttered the UNCLE trigger phrase to his partner, he knew he'd bollixed up the works in his partner's head somehow. Solo only hoped that he could swing his friend back to his side.

The two goons watching him didn't utter a word or change their expression even when the agent attempted to engage or enrage them. With a sigh, he finally gave up and began to imagine what was in each of the two shiny metallic cabinets at the side of his table when the door cracked open and he heard the staccato tacka-tacka-tacka of a woman's heels on the bare floor. He turned his head and saw the stunning figure of a redheaded woman in a snug forest green dress sashay to his side.

He smiled dashingly. She tilted her head and studied him with a critical eye.

"He's smaller than I thought he'd be," she said to her companion.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

“Well, you know the saying. Good things come in small packages.” Angelique lit a cigarette. She stood to the side and slightly behind the redhead.

“La Prima, I presume?” Solo inquired.

The redhead nodded slightly. “Napoleon Solo, Number One, Section Two, UNCLE New York. Quite an unexpected bonus, I’d say.”

“Thank you. I think.”

A tight smile pulled on La Prima’s full mouth. “Save the suaveness for some other weakling,” she replied sharply. Angelique raised an eyebrow at that comment, and quietly puffed her ciggy. “So where’s the film, Mr. Solo?”

Napoleon’s face kept the same pleasant expression as his eyes darted to Angelique. She stayed quiet and casually raised her wrist to look at her diamond encrusted watch. Solo realized she was playing a dangerous game. *Have to give her points for audacity*, he thought. He had a way to buy time now.

“Film?” He replied innocently.

La Prima’s face turned stormy. “You are a fool, Mr. Solo. Can’t you see that the tide has turned against UNCLE? Thrush is one step away from ruling the world because of me. You won’t stand in my way. Search him.” She motioned for the goons to get to work, and called for more.

Four musclemen managed to remove Solo’s clothing down to his boxers and search him thoroughly without removing his bonds. It was rough and very unpleasant and the sour expression on La Prima’s face evolved to one of barely repressed fury. She puffed, agitated, on a thin cigarette holder. Angelique, looking bored, quietly smoked in one corner and kept her eyes downcast.

Finally, the head man shook his head mutely and the four waited for further instructions. La Prima plucked the cigarette stub from the holder and threw it on the ground in disgust, and ground it out angrily with her toe. “You will regret this, Mr. Solo. Gentlemen, free his hands and strap them to the table. Miss Fan likes to play with fingers. Make sure the table straps are tight. You,” she jabbed the empty cigarette holder at the lead goon. “Get Miss Fan. Two of you stay here. You,” she indicated the final man. “Come with me.”

She spun on her heel and marched out, the men following her like ducklings.

Angelique lingered behind. When the door closed she put out the remains of her cigarette and came to Solo’s side and dragged her manicured nails up his bare chest. One glare at the guards sent them to the far side of the room and out of earshot. She leaned down and spoke lowly in his ear.

“There’s still time, darling. Tell you what - I’ll up the stakes. All the components for the bomb are here, in this house. The scientist, the trigger and even the plutonium! La Prima is not a trusting sort and wants to keep them close. I’ll still free you if you hold up your end of the deal.”

He had to admit it was tempting, but he wasn’t about to enter a pact with this one. “Why don’t you want this bomb built? It would put Thrush on top.”

“But not *me*. I know Nicole, oops, I mean La Prima.” She smiled at her intentional slip. “There’s no place for me anywhere near her in her plans. She’s rather . . . self-centered.”

“I’m sure you know what that’s like.”

She stood up again with pursed lips. “Oh, Napoleon. You do disappoint me sometimes.” She stepped back at the sound of the doorknob turning. “Well, let’s play it your way and see what happens, then.”

They both looked to the sound of the opening door as a darkly dressed Asian woman entered the room. Her face was set and bland. One cheek looked red under a fresh black eye and there were signs of faded bruises on her neck that peeked out from a sleeveless black turtleneck sweater. Fingertip sized bruises tattooed her upper arms. Long, finely muscled legs, clad in snug black Capri pants, were capped with silver and black stiletto heels.

But the most striking detail was the bandaged stump of a finger at the end of a scruffy looking cast.

Angelique demurely cleared her throat. “If you’ll excuse me, darling.” She slipped out of the door as Miss Fan studied her specimen from the middle of the room.

Solo noticed the thugs shift uncomfortably against the wall and knew that an unpleasant party was about to begin.

***ACT VI: "I Think They're Afraid Of Me."***

Kuryakin paced his room until he thought he would go mad.

There was two of him in his mind. One had the wide black eyes of inky night and the other had cool grey orbs that calmly held their own against the dark vacuum.

At first, they simply stared at each other and Kuryakin felt like an impotent onlooker. Now there were whispers - constant whispers that were low and edgy and felt like a breeze on his cheek demanding attention, but not there when you looked for the source. The actual words were unclear, but the buzzing put him on edge.

He'd had enough.

Setting his jaw, he slammed from his room and headed determinedly to the only place he knew where he could force the whispers to stop and he would have control again. Her door stood splintered around the doorknob, the adjacent frame cracked. It opened without resistance at his touch and his heart began to race in anticipation.

Miss Fan's apartment was empty. The surge of anger washed out the whispers, but not for long. They were in full force again and growing louder when he spun on his heel and stalked from the room to hunt her down.

Instinct drove him to the utility rooms where he found a pair of guards outside one door. The guards gave him a classic double take and they parted instantly for the slight figure. Kuryakin didn't notice that the pair paled slightly on his approach, and kept just out of his reach as he forcefully opened the metal door.

As soon as the door shut behind him, unwanted visions began an assault that overrode the whispers; it was a cacophony that sent him reeling, and it originated after one glance of the room's contents. He steadied his feet and tried to sort the visions.

Napoleon Solo was strapped to a table and web of electrodes and wires trailed to a bank of gages inside a metal cabinet. Scene after scene played in his head of the cool-eyed doppelganger wearing a military uniform with the letter 'N' on the cap, standing at the head of another electrode entangled Solo.

*Scream!* He heard himself say in his vision. *Scream!*

Kuryakin's head began to throb.

Miss Fan straightened from her ministrations to the captured agent to see who had interrupted her session. Her eyes burned brightly, but Kuryakin had the passing thought that she didn't immediately recognize him being so involved with her 'subject'. A twist of her wrist applied more current as her eyes registered recognition along with a spark of interest.

*Scream!*

Solo twitched and gurgled. The smell of burnt flesh permeated the air.

*Scream! Scream louder!*

The uniformed man in his mind turned to the black-eyed clone and the whispers grew to a deafening pitch. Illya sagged against the wall, holding his head so keep it from exploding.

*Scream!*

The twins began to merge; first their eyes ran together, inky black and cool blue, and then their outstretched arms blended in a queasy embrace. The colors swirled together and the uniform disappeared in a puddle of grey as their bodies became a nauseating swirl in his mind. The whispers grew to a banshee shriek. The smell of burning flesh made him gag. He felt the wall support him.

Then Napoleon screamed.

*There's a long way to go before you sleep!*

Illya awoke with a violet start. His eyes snapped open, and his mind was instantly clear. The first thing he saw was the Asian woman bent over his partner. Napoleon spasmed and Miss Fan gasped in joy. Illya could see her eyes glazed in ecstasy.

Instantly, Illya felt for his Special and was momentarily disoriented when it wasn't at his side. He looked down at his hands and saw Napoleon's clothes on the floor beyond. He instantly dropped and pawed through them with shaky hands. The smell of Napoleon's burning skin and his moans of pain focused his thoughts into a plan. He found and plucked a pair of buttons from the discarded shirt.

He straightened and centered his sights on the nervous looking pair of goons against the wall at the foot of Solo's torture table. He flicked one button in their direction and ducked down, covering his ears. It hit the floor between them with a satisfying explosion and they went down instantly.

In the seconds it took for Illya to straighten up and the smoke to clear Miss Fan had managed to regain her balance. As Illya moved to the table, he saw her flick her intact hand in his direction. His instinctive dodge saved a scalpel from piercing his throat, but it did graze his cheek as it burned past him.

She quickly rearmed herself with an ugly serrated knife from her tray as he leaped over the table. She managed a swipe at him that tore his shirt and left a stinging red line across his chest before he barreled into her. They both fell hard to the concrete floor along with the clanging metal tray.

Chinese curses peppered the air as Miss Fan struggled against him. He tried to subdue her by her wrists, which seemed to infuriate her more. He was surprised at her strength and by the look in her eyes, which was one of unfocused rapture. She fixed her bright eyes on his and he involuntarily jerked back at the intensity.

Furious at his lack of response, Miss Fan bucked beneath him, the curses replaced with a guttural growl. She swung her cast at him and he blocked it. She raked at his face with the claw-like red nails of her other hand and he barely dodged them. She twisted sideways and grabbed a nasty looking sharpened hook, one the tools from the tray, and slashed at his throat. Illya felt the icy cool of the metal as it skimmed his neck; he automatically responded with a right cross that probably shattered her cheekbone. The hook clattered to the floor. She finally lay still with a final jerk.

Completely unnerved Illya rose to his wobbly feet and mechanically began the motions to release his partner. Even in his groggy state, Solo noticed the ashen complexion of his friend. He glanced at the body, blood oozing from her nostril.

“Looks like she could dish it out but not take it,” Solo mumbled.

“Oh, she could take it, all right.” Illya’s voice was low. He didn’t elaborate.

“It’s good to see you, partner,” Solo replied. “Are you all right?”

Illya nodded shakily and glanced at his Napoleon’s face. “I think you have that reversed. You were the one being tortured.”

Solo’s chuckle turned into a groan as he sat up. “I think we both have had our turn at the screws, so to speak.” Illya stood back while Solo steadied himself on his feet. Napoleon read the tenseness in his partner as well as the questions in his eyes. “What do you remember?” The older agent asked lowly.

Two blond eyebrows knitted together for a moment. “Not much. I think I blew something up. And I tried to shoot you?”

“Sounds like a typically normal day.” Solo got to his feet and gently patted his friend’s cheek. “Just as long as you remember enough to write the report. Let’s get going. We have a treasure hunt to complete.” He grimaced with the pain of his burns and tenderly touched the raw spots on his temples.

A wry smile replaced the nervous tenseness in the younger agent’s face. “Do you plan on doing this hunt half naked, or would you like to get dressed first?”

Solo looked indignant. “There are some here that would appreciate my technique, but I’ll humor you.” Illya noted he moved stiffly to his clothes. Before dressing, Solo curiously investigated the burn marks on his chest.

“We need to take care of the guards outside,” Illya stated.

Solo looked surprised. “There are guards outside? Why haven’t they come in yet?”

A slightly sheepish look crossed the Slavic features. “I think they’re afraid of me.”

The American snorted as he slipped on his shoes. “Honestly. Thrush’s hiring standards have really dropped.”

A tight smile crossed Illya’s face as he waited for his partner to finish dressing. He couldn’t help but note the American’s slow and obviously painful movements. Blue eyes drifted to the body of the woman on the floor. A shiver ran through his body; it could have been worse - a lot worse.

As Solo shakily tied his shoes, Illya motioned Solo to one side of the door. “I’ll get them in here. You ready?”

Solo wrapped the ends of his belt around his knuckles. “Anytime, partner.” He placed himself on the opposite side of the doorway and gave a terse nod of readiness. The shaking was gone and he appeared to be under control and ready for action.

Illya briefly wondered if he appeared so confident. He swallowed hard and with a violent pull, jerked the door open and glared at the two men outside. “Get in here,” he snapped. “Now!”

The men sidled in like a pair of crabs, careful to keep a healthy distance and not to turn their backs to the smaller man. This was fortunate for Solo, who jumped the first one from behind and wrapped his belt around his thick neck in a smooth, quick motion. Illya took care of the second one with a chop to the Adam’s apple. They both went down with gagged grunts and rendered unconscious almost immediately. The agents relieved them of their handguns, exchanged relieved grins, and stepped from the room in pursuit of Thrush’s bomb making elements.



The hallway outside was empty. Shattered memories peppered with vivid scenes flashed their way into Illya's mind as he lead the way down the hall. He could recall how to get to his room, and the small apartment belonging to Miss Fan, but the rest of the layout was vague.

He knew they were currently in a block walled basement of sorts, built back into the side of a Malibu mountain. The front opened into the garages and the outside, whereas the back rooms, wedged into the mountain itself, held the torture area the just escaped and a pair of other rooms. Across the hall from the torture room was a large door with a small window in the center. Solo peeked through it to the garage and saw a lone sentry posted on the down sloping driveway outside the open garage door. Darkness concealed what was beyond the sentry.

He moved to the end of the hall and carefully peered out a small window. He saw lighted windows in a bunkhouse style, guest house and an impressive wall, illuminated by generously spaced floodlights, that probably surrounded the property

"Looks like the hired help lives next door," he commented.

Illya nodded stiffly. "I couldn't imagine La Prima mingling with the staff."

"Where do you suppose Angelique's quarters are?" Illya shot him a glance. "Well, she does have something we want." Solo explained. When he saw the suspicious look cross his partner's face he added, "The film. You remember the film, don't you?"

A puzzled expression crossed Illya's face before it lit up with recall. "Oh. Yes. The film. At least we know where one component of the list is. Now we just have to find her."

"I think we need to find the trigger and the plutonium first. It's possible they're in the same place."

Illya stopped suddenly, Solo nearly running into him. "There's a safe," he thought out loud. "It's somewhere on the top level."

"How do you know that? Are you remembering things?"

The thoughtful frown deepened on Illya's face. "I received instructions about the nuclear scientist, Dr. Zandberg up there. La Prima had a file on him. After I read it and she gave me the photo, she told the guard to stay with us while she put it back in the safe."

"Us?" Solo's voice didn't hide the fact that he wondered what his partner meant by the term.

"Angelique was with me." He saw the relief plainly on Solo's face. Illya frowned. "I still don't understand your relationship with that . . . woman."

A cocky smile made Solo's eyes sparkle. "Neither do I. That's why it's so interesting. And you aren't in the position to throw stones." He nodded mutely at the closed door of the torture room. Illya blushed immediately, a rare sight for Solo. "I don't suppose you'll tell me . . ."

"Never," Illya interrupted. His tone said the subject was closed. "There will be a sentry in the hall of the next level, and another at the elevator and stairway doors on the top floor."

"Who else will be up there with our hostess?"

"Since it's the middle of the night, no one. The servant resides one floor below," he pointed to the ceiling above them, "along with the guests and other higher level employees. That's where I stayed. La Prima prefers to be alone on the top floor."

"Not very trusting, I'd say."

Illya continued to tell what he remembered. "The elevator only goes from the garage to the top floor. The stairs go to all levels. I think Dr. Zandberg will be in the apartments above us, guarded, and the plutonium and the trigger are probably in the safe on the top floor."

"And the film with Angelique just above us makes the party complete. Shall we split up? You go for the safe and I'll get the rest?"

"We'll have to take out the two hallway sentries simultaneously. They are in radio contact with each other between floors." The agents sketched out their plan. They divided the various devices still in Solo's clothing. Illya got a pair of explosive collar stays and a sleep dart. Solo got a knockout gas capsule and a length of cord.

The agents quietly made their way up the stairs. Solo stopped at the middle level door and counted down the time for Illya to get to the top level. When he reached zero, he stood up straight, straightened his jacket and hair, and stepped confidently through the door.

There was one guard in the hallway as expected, and who spun around immediately, his hand darting for his waistband. He hesitated when Solo smiled and spoke in a stage whisper.

"Sorry to startle you! I'm just looking for Angelique. She called me." The bluff gave the agent time to get closer. He also noted the glance the guard gave one room, which gave away the Thrush woman's location. *Well, I now know where the film is*, he noted. By the time Solo was close enough for the guard to see his burns and disheveled state, it was too late.

A snap of the capsule delivered the tranquilizer gas right under the guard's nose, but not before the beefy man was able to knock the agent down with a single sweep of his meaty hand. The gun he pointed at Solo looked like a toy in the ape's grip; then the ape blinked, swayed, and dropped.

"Sleeping Beauty you aren't," Solo whispered in his ear. Convinced the massive bundle of muscles under him was in a drugged sleep, Solo stood stiffly, feeling every ache in his body as he examined the hallway. Six doors lined the hall, dormitory style. Which one held Dr. Zandberg? He fished a ring of keys from the guard's pocket and sighed. *I sure hope everyone's a sound sleeper*, he thought.

He started at the end of the hall. The first door appeared to be broken, the lock useless in a splintered door frame. A peek inside revealed a room that looked like it had been ransacked. The whips and knives hanging on the wall and the feminine feel to the room defined Miss Fan. "Lively woman," Solo mused to himself as he moved down the hall to the next room. It was unlocked, dark and empty. The next room was locked, but opened with the second key he tried. The familiar perfume told him immediately who occupied this suite - Angelique. He made sure the door was unlocked when he backed out.

The door furthest away from the elevator opened to a dimly lit room that smelled sour. A nervous voice squeaked from the dark bedroom.

"Who's there? What do you want now?"

Solo took a guess. "Dr. Zandberg?"

A thin, disheveled man with wild eyebrows and a frightened expression peered around the corner into the living area. He clutched a bedspread to his chest with quivering hands. "What do you want? What are you going to do to me?" He squinted

nearsightedly. “Oh. I thought you were that crazy blond man. Who are you? His owner?” Relief relaxed his shoulders but didn’t stop the shaking.

“Um, no. I’m here to get you out. I’m from UNCLE. You need to get dressed, quickly.”

“UNCLE? That crazy guy was UNCLE, too!” Dr. Zandberg tightened in fear once again and looked around frantically.

“Well, yes, but he wasn’t working for UNCLE then. He was . . . well, it’s complicated, but I assure you that you are safe with me. We need to leave.” When Solo moved to him, the scientist warily backed away.

Dr. Zandberg’s eyes narrowed suspiciously and he pulled the spread closer to his chin. “How do I know you won’t try to kill me like that other guy?”

“Dr. Zandberg, please. You have to trust me.” Solo made a note to get the details on the man’s abduction; his curiosity was definitely piqued. “I’m not like, ah, the other guy. Get dressed.”

The man studied Solo with a critical eye then began to feel for his clothes. “Well, you certainly are more polite than he was. Can I see your identification?”

Solo showed him his gold card and the man sighed. “Who am I kidding? I can’t trust anyone here. But since you have the keys to the door, I may as well get out of the horrible room while I can.”

“Solid reasoning, Doc. Now hurry. We have to make one more stop on our way out.”

Dr. Zandberg bounced on one leg as he pulled on his pants. “One stop?” he whined. “Are we shopping? I just want out of here!”

“So do I, trust me, but we can’t leave the bomb components here or this will happen all over again.”

“The components are here?” Zandberg hurriedly put on his glasses. One lens was cracked. The scientist’s eyes doubled in size between the magnifying effect of the lenses and his fear.

“I’m afraid so. We’re getting them now.”

“We?”

Solo hesitated at the door. “Um, yes. My partner is currently upstairs and will join us eventually. In the mean time, we have to visit a lady.”

*ACT VII : "Tag!"*

Meanwhile, Illya had no problem with the guard in the upper level. He stepped into the room as if he belonged there and his reputation did the rest. The guard nervously stood his ground while the much smaller man walked right up to him and jabbed him with the sleep dart. Illya took his gun easily and pointed it between his eyes until he fell, in wide-eyed surprise, with a muffled thud. Illya was surprised by the sudden feeling of pleasure he felt when the man dropped. He swallowed hard and pushed it aside.

The penthouse floor was open and lavishly furnished with a sweeping view of the California coast. Glittering lights outlined the curved coastline like a diamond necklace on black velvet. The living area had only one small night light that shed yellow shadows on an empty room. What Illya wanted was at the other end of the floor plan. He turned his back on the peaceful scene and moved quietly down a hall. A thin line of golden light edged the bottom of the door that indicated La Prima's room and the fact that she was awake. Not knowing if the safe he sought was in La Prima's boudoir or another room in the same area, Illya decided to check the two other doors first.

Holding his breath, he took a chance and opened the farthest door in the hall, directly across from the lighted bedroom. It appeared to be a private parlor, complete with wet bar, baby grand piano and collectable art. A large glass door leading to a small balcony let in enough moonlight for him to search efficiently. He found that going through La Prima's things gave him an unfamiliar thrill; the pleasure of violating someone else's private space was hard to ignore and a mental battle for control only ended when he finished the search. Shaken but satisfied, he stepped out and moved to the next door.

A smaller window meant less moonlight, but Illya read the room instantly as an office. He quickly closed the door and turned on the desk lamp. To his relief, the previous thrill of violation did not come. After a quick sweep with his eyes, he got down to the business at hand and began a methodical search of the room.

The safe was tucked behind a gilded mirror, a location that seemed somewhat apropos for the narcissistic woman. Illya's fingers tingled with excitement when he touched the large dial and he mentally cursed the unfamiliar emotion - it was a distraction. It took a lot of effort, but he managed to push them all aside before he carefully tucked the magnesium collar stays in the correct spots to burn through the inner throw bolts. A small flame would get the process going and he could leave this place.

He pulled a scratched Zippo from his pocket and flipped the lid open with a flick of his thumb. The movement drew his attention to the etching on the side of the device - the initials 'SJC'. He hesitated, staring.

Where did this lighter come from? He didn't smoke. The initials were age-worn. And then it came to him in the flash of a grisly scene: Simon, burning alive in an alley somewhere in Hong Kong, his mouth open in silent scream as he collapsed to the dirty litter strewn pavement. His immolation caused quite a fire and the Russian ashamedly recalled the thrill he got watching the ill-prepared locals battle the flames.

Suddenly back in the here and now, Illya dropped the lighter as if it were a snake. His hands were instantly sweaty as he recalled some of the details of the plutonium venture. His heart raced and he felt sick; he - his altered ego, actually - had started the fire.

It took several moments of forced focus to get back in control. The anger he felt toward La Prima for doing this to him was swept aside like the rest of it; he had a job to do. In measured movement, he retrieved the lighter, struck a flame, and touched it to the magnesium. It flared brightly with a whispered hiss. The smoke of the burning metal stung his nostrils and he was glad for the physical discomfort; it gave him something to think about while he waited for the metal to melt.

It didn't take long for the bolts to surrender to the heat. Illya plucked a metal letter opener from the desk and pried the still hot door open. The safe was very large, but it didn't take long to find the box containing the trigger. No sign of the plutonium, or where it was stored, was found.

A gentle swoosh was the only warning Illya got when the room door was opened. He wheeled around to find the stormy looking redhead clad in a flower strewn lounging dress scowling at him. A formidable gun pointed at him from her determined fist. The desk lamp light drew unflattering shadows on her face.

"I'm not going to ask what you're doing. That's obvious," she growled, tightening her grip on the gun. "You are talented, aren't you? Angelique will be pleased."

Illya kept still and let the darker side of his mind take lead. La Prima had no idea that things were happening one floor below; if she thought he was still the perverted Keyes persona, he might buy some time. The amused grin that curled his lips felt inappropriate. "Ah, the fair Angelique. She would be quite a treat, but other opportunities have risen."

La Prima blinked. "What do you mean?" She raised the gun a little higher. "She's the one that sent you up here. I knew you two collaborating was possible when I sent her with you to Albuquerque. She's as opportunistic as I am." Her green eyes glimmered in the dark.

"I've had another offer." Illya stated lightly, tossing the switch between his hands. The lie left his mouth easily as he slipped into the persona without a second thought

"Stop that," the woman growled.

"What?" Illya asked innocently. "This?" He arched the trigger higher and La Prima's lips tightened into a tense line. Her eyes nervously shot between her antagonist's blue eyes and the trigger at its highest arc. "Precision devices like this one are delicate, don't you agree? A miss," he feigned a missed grab at the device and the woman gasped and took a step forward. Illya caught the device deftly with the other hand and let out a low laugh when he continued, "would knock it out of alignment and then it's just a paperweight."

He continued to juggle the box; La Prima's eyes flared in anger, brilliant emeralds set in her dark expression. Illya waited a few seconds longer. When he saw her eyes harden, he knew she'd made a decision; he launched the box at her before she could act on it.

The woman growled audibly and lunged for the box. Illya lunged for the gun. They both ended up in a tangle on the floor with the agent on top and the box sandwiched between them. He pressed her gun under her chin and grinned menacingly.

"Tag!" he murmured cheerily, inches from her glowering face.



Solo and Dr. Zandberg entered Angelique's room quiet as a whisper. The agent motioned for the scientist to sit in the living area.

Solo carefully crept into the bedroom. The familiar perfume, stronger in here, marked her location in the darkness and he moved like a shadow to her side. Gently, he placed his hand over her mouth and the gun at her temple simultaneously, and then kissed her forehead. She awoke with a start.

"Now, now, Angelique. It's just the tooth fairy!"

Her struggling ceased and eyes cleared, but then they were instantly stormy with anger.

"Are you going to behave yourself?" Solo whispered. She nodded. He released her mouth.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting the film. Pardon me." He unceremoniously stuck his hand down the front of her lacy panties and pulled out the roll of film. "I knew it would be on you somewhere. You're just like La Prima; you like to keep your things close."

Angelique's expression was sour. "You are supposed to be dead, or at least gloriously maimed. Miss Fan is slipping."

"She simply couldn't keep up with me, I guess. Get up." Solo tucked the film away in his pocket and stood back, the gun still aimed at her head.

Angelique rose slowly and slipped her feathery robe on. "How do you plan on getting out of here, love? I assume that's the next step."

Solo grinned. "Maybe. Come on, I need to tie you up."

She smiled coyly. "Oh, Napoleon. We haven't explored that realm yet!"

Angelique walked into the living room and didn't give Zandberg a second glance. She settled down on a comfortable chair.

Zandberg, however, couldn't take his eyes off the scantily dressed woman. She crossed her legs and bounced the top leg in annoyance as she inspected her nails. Napoleon had grabbed her nylon stockings to bind her hands. She tisked in disapproval.

"What a poor use of French silk," she pouted as Solo tied her hands behind the chair. Then he sat next to Zandberg. "What are we waiting for?" She asked disgustedly. "The caterer for this party?"

Zandberg fiddled nervously. "Where's this partner of yours?" He asked.

Angelique brightened. "Partner?" She laughed. "Napoleon, dear, he doesn't mean that mentally unbalanced Russian of yours, does he?"

Zandberg leaped to his feet. "What? We're waiting for the same crazy guy that brought me here? Are you out of your mind?" He wrung his hands and shifted his weight as he spoke, wanting to run but having no idea where.

Angelique chuckled. Solo stood and tried to calm his charge. "It's all right, doc, really. He's better now."

"Better?" He said incredulously. "At what? Arson or torture?!"

"Um," Solo stuttered. Angelique giggled softly, enjoying his predicament.

Zandberg was on a roll. "You expect me to leave with that . . . that . . . lunatic? He burned down my house!"

"Ah, that was unfortunate, yes." The agent laid his hand on Zandberg's shoulder as he tried to placate him. "But he wasn't himself at the time. He's fine now."

Dr. Zandberg was in serious danger of hyperventilating. Solo spoke soothingly, explaining what he knew about collision of processes that had affected his partner. Angelique stopped laughing when she learned that Kuryakin was back to himself.

"I thought you'd struck a bargain with the little psychopath! You mean the process can be reversed?" Angelique sounded disappointed. "That's useless to me!" She sank back into the chair with a huff, which seemed to reassure Zandberg enough to calm him down.

Solo moved to the door and pressed his ear against the cool wood, listening for his partner. It wasn't long before he heard the faint pad of footsteps in the hallway. He cracked the door and waved the blond man inside.

Illya gave Angelique a double take. Zandberg squelched a squeak of fear. Solo checked the hall and closed the door.

"Your fan club is all here," Solo mumbled to his partner.

Illya frowned, and then turned back to his friend. "I have the trigger."

"I have the film and the scientist," Solo summed up. "Now we just need the plutonium."

He turned to Angelique. "You wouldn't happen to know where it is, would you?"

She smiled cagily. "If I did, why would I tell you?"

Illya answered immediately. "Because we can get you out of here. La Prima thinks you and I double crossed her."

Surprise was quickly squelched in Angelique's eyes. Her lips compressed into an angry line as her mind worked.

It was Solo's turn to smile at Angelique's predicament. "Time to pick the lesser of two evils, my dear."

She glared at him. "Fine," she spat. "Let me get dressed and I'll show you where it is."

Solo moved to untie her hands but was unable to undo the knot. "Illya? Do you have a knife?"

"As a matter of fact," he pulled a slim stiletto from his sleeve. Zandberg yipped and scurried behind the sofa. Illya regarded him apologetically for a moment. "I obviously didn't leave a favorable impression at our first meeting, Dr. Zandberg." The scientist nodded a nervous acknowledgement and kept his distance as Illya walked to Solo and handed over the dagger. "Courtesy of La Prima's, um, private collection."

The silk split cleanly at the touch of the knife. "Have a little run in?" Solo inquired.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

"Yes." Illya kept his voice low to keep from alarming Zandberg even more. "It's only a matter of time until things fall apart here. It's time to go."

"I agree." Solo helped Angelique to her feet. She rubbed her wrists and walked to the bedroom, closely escorted by Solo. She looked at him with a frown. He smiled back and wiggled the gun in her face. "Don't worry, love, I have protection."

Dr. Zandberg kept the sofa between him and the blond agent while the woman and Solo were in the bedroom. He shifted from foot to foot. Illya stood patiently by the door, his ear pressed to the wood for signs of pursuit. Finally, they were ready to go and assembled by the door.

"Where are we going?" Solo asked the Thrush woman.

"The garage. I'll show you when we get there."

"Glad to know we trust each other so much," he mused. "Let's go."

***ACT VIII: "We are going to play Russian roulette."***

Creeping stealthily down to the lowest level, the foursome huddled together in the hall near the garage. Solo peeked through the small window in the door.

"There are two cars and one visible sentry. The garage door is open, so we have to be very quiet."

"And darling, don't forget the two at the gate and the two roving teams outside. You probably didn't notice them on our arrival." Angelique whispered. "What about the tracking device in blondie's tooth? We won't get far with that in working order."

Illya's eyes widened and he put his hand on his cheek. Solo turned to him apologetically. "I meant to tell you about that . . ."

"What ever happened to trust?" The stoic Russian mumbled as he worked his tongue around his teeth. Using La Prima's slim stiletto he carefully pried the offending cap from his tooth.

Solo gave him a quick glance. "Well, now we know you can be a dentist when you retire."

Illya rolled the device around in his palm for a second, and then pocketed it. "When I retire, I'm not giving anyone the opportunity to bite me."

"What a shame," Angelique growled.

"Can we go now?" Dr. Zandberg was growing more fidgety with each passing second.

"Come, come children. Time to leave. Plan, anyone?" When no one responded, Solo smiled smoothly. "OK, then, it's mine by default." He handed Angelique a gun, and she brightened. "Sorry, hon, it's not loaded. The Doctor and I will be your prisoners. Which car?"

Angelique visibly deflated with a disappointed pout. "I don't know. The plutonium is in the trunk of one of them."

Illya rolled his eyes. "And here I forgot my X-ray glasses."

"Look here, Mr. Smarty Pants . . ." Angelique raised the gun to smack the Russian, but Solo quickly intervened and stepped between them, gently lowering the angry woman's arm. Illya's cool blues never flickered as he regarded her.

"Illya, pick the trunks and peek inside. We'll wait here."

The cars were backed into the garage, both trunks next to the door. When the outside sentry's back was turned, Illya slipped out and worked on the first trunk. He had the lock picked in a matter of seconds. Solo saw him glance inside, then reach into the trunk. *What the hell is he doing?* Solo thought. Illya then quietly closed the trunk and slunk back through the door.

“Lucky pick. It’s there. Shall we?”

Solo dragged Zandberg next to him and raised his hands. The scientist blinked at him then nervously copied the motion. Solo then nodded to Illya, then said to Angelique, “Take us to your leader.”

Illya paused with his hand on the doorknob. Solo could see his friend’s body language subtly change as Illya let the alternate personality come out; his eyes became icy orbs with pinpoint pupils and a crazy, frightening smile formed on his lips.

Zandberg noticed, too, as his respiration increased geometrically with the size of his eyes. “How does he do that?” The man whispered, his voice jittery. Sweat beaded above the scratched and cracked glasses.

Solo raised his brows in interest. “I don’t know, but I hope it goes away just as quickly.”

Illya pulled the door open with gusto and Angelique poked the gun in Solo’s back. “Showtime, gentlemen.”

Solo put on a tortured face. Zandberg’s terror wasn’t an act.

The pair followed Kuryakin into the garage with Angelique bringing up the rear, the empty gun trained on her ‘prisoners’.

Illya flung open the back door of the car.

“Hey!” The sentry spun around so quickly his tie flipped back over his shoulder. He wasn’t so quick with the gun, but he still got it trained on the bantam blond in a respectable time. “Hold it!”

Illya paused at the open car door, and then slowly drew himself to his full height. His eyes sought out the interfering voice and locked onto him with razor sharpness. Solo could see the flicker of uncertainty in the sentry’s expression. The other three escapees stopped in the frame of the open car door. Illya stepped away from the car, his motions fluid but tight, like a leopard getting ready to pounce. The Russian’s hands hung loosely at his sides. His voice was as icy as his stare. “Are you addressing me?” Four steps nearly closed the gap between them.

The sentry was a full foot taller than Kuryakin but body language told everything; the man was scared. He nervously squared his shoulders. “Yes. Sir. Yes, sir. Are you, um, leaving?”

Illya moved like a shadow on silk, and in another two steps his chest was pressed against the muzzle of the sentry’s gun. The sentry stood fast, but the nervous blink of his eyes was unmistakable. After a moment, Illya leaned slightly forward. The sentry automatically responded by leaning forward, too. Solo saw his partner’s lips move as he spoke quietly. The sentry jerked straight, and backed up two steps. The gun disappeared in his jacket, and he moved aside. Illya’s feral grin was a chilling when he turned back to the group under the sentry’s watchful, but very respectful, gaze.

Zandberg yelped and jumped into the back seat. Without a word, Illya grabbed a surprised Solo by the collar, dragged him around to the front door, opened it, and flung him inside. “You get to drive,” Illya growled as he followed. Solo scooted quickly behind the steering wheel. The sentry almost looked sympathetic.

Angelique got in beside Zandberg. Illya had taken a gun from his waistband and pressed it against Solo’s temple.

“Hey!” Angelique purred in glee. “Your gun is loaded!”

Illya’s predator grin never faltered. “I know.”

Zandberg moaned softly and cowered lower in the back seat.

The keys were in the ignition. Solo fumbled and started the car. Illya's act was so convincing he felt his own heart race. "Um, did I mention that dinner's on me when this is all over? The catch is that I have to be alive."

"Is that before or after you write the report?" Illya suggested with a twinkle in his frightening eyes.

"Don't push it," Solo replied, dropping the heavy sedan into drive.

The driveway was a long, gentle curve slightly downhill to an impressive wrought iron gate. Small lights lined the cement, illuminating the path clearly. They also illuminated the pair of well-armed guards that flanked the gate.

"Is there a secret password or something?" Solo asked quietly. "Why aren't they opening the gate?"

Angelique spoke through her fake smile. "They will, darling. They just have to flaunt their testosterone a bit. You know how it is."

Solo stopped the car. Obviously pre-warned as to who was in charge, the one on Illya's side approached the window whereas Solo's sentry stayed put. Solo rolled down the electric passenger window, the gun still pressed to his temple. The crazy grin still played on Illya's lips, and he kept his eyes on Solo. The guard leaned down and looked inside.

"Going somewhere, sir?"

"Yes." Illya replied immediately. "We're off to play a game."

The guard blinked in surprise. He didn't expect that answer. "A game?"

"We are going to play Russian roulette. You've heard of that game, haven't you?"

Zandberg hiccupped in fear in the back seat.

There was a slight hesitation before the guard replied. "Yes. I know the . . . aren't you suppose to play that game with a revolver? You have an automatic, there." He sounded generally confused as he waved a finger at the weapon.

The motion was so smooth and so fast, no one in the car was sure they even saw it, but in the next second, the muzzle was pressed against the guard's forehead. Solo had to give the Thrush man credit for not dropping dead of a heart attack on the spot.

"That must be the Americanized version." Illya said menacingly. "This way, I always win. Want to play?" The eerie smile returned. The guard took a slow and cautious step back and straightened up, careful not to make any threatening gestures.

"N. . . no, sir. I . . . I don't think so. Open the gate!" He quickly signaled the other man, and the gate began to swing open.

Illya trained the gun back on Solo. "So you finally admit that you cheat at games," the dark haired agent said lowly. "I'll remember that next time we play canasta."

When the phone rang at the guard post, the gate wasn't quite open enough for the car to fit. The sentry answered it, then dropped the receiver as he spun around and brought up the Thrush rifle.

"Get down!" Solo barked. The engine roared as he punched the accelerator, and Illya twisted and fired out his window.

Amazingly, the heavy sedan did not budge the gates on contact. The tattoo of bullets on metal accented the smell of burning rubber as Solo applied more power. The boxy car surged again, and the iron gates squealed in protest. Windows on the left side shattered, and the guard on Illya's side dropped without firing a shot. Icy cool, the Russian turned and looked behind.

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

“Incoming at six o’clock , Napoleon.” His voice was loud but completely in control. He then twisted to the left and took out the second guard with two tight shots right under Solo’s nose.

“I hear you!” The older agent waggled the steering wheel, applied more gas, and the car pushed through the gates with a spine tingling shriek of metal on metal. They lurched down onto the narrow, winding road that lead out of the Malibu hills to the sea. One headlight was all they had left to show the way.

“The second car was pulling from the garage. We should have company soon.” Illya checked the rounds in his gun and held up one extra clip. “This is all I have.”

“I only have what’s in the weapon,” Solo added, keeping his eyes on the twisting road. “And I think the engine’s been hit. I have red lights all over the place, here.”

Illya turned to find their pursuers out the back window. He ignored Zandberg cowering on the floor and glanced briefly at Angelique, who was patting her hair in place as she braced her feet to keep from lurching sideways in the turns.

She glared at Illya, gripping the back of the front seat in an effort to keep from being thrown to the side. “Give me a gun. I’m in this up to my earrings, too, you know.”

His eyes flicked to hers for a fraction of a second, then back to the pursuing headlights. “I am going to pretend you never said that.”

***ACT IX: The End Approaches***

The headlights behind them flailed about in the darkness and caught up to them quickly. Illya emptied his gun out the back window in an effort to break the lights; driving on this winding road at that speed without them would take care of the problems.

“Either that driver is very good or very lucky,” Solo grumbled as he manhandled the steering wheel. The smell of hot engine coolant and oil permeated the air.

After looking out the back for a few seconds, Illya calmly said, “I’d go with aggressive.” He then reached over and pulled Solo’s gun from his jacket and braced himself for a rough ride.

Angelique frowned at the comment, and turned to look at their pursuers. They were coming to a short straightaway, and the roar of the engine behind them grew louder as it leaped closer.

“Oh my God, that crazy Chinese woman is driving!” Angelique turned on Illya immediately. “Do something! She’ll kill us all!”

The sentence had barely passed her lips when they were rammed from behind. Solo swore and wrestled the wheel; Miss Fan nosed her vehicle between the rear fender and the guardrail. Her profile was even with Angelique’s window and she was grinning like a kid on a roller coaster. Next to her, the glaring eyes of La Prima were barely visible as glowing cat eyes in the dark.

“Can’t you go any faster?” Angelique snapped.

Miss Fan turned into them and Solo swerved across both lanes and bounced off the guard rail - sparks flew.

Illya leaned out his window and fired. The pursuing car dropped back slightly and shimmied, giving Solo time enough to straighten out. They plunged into the turn at the end of the straightaway, tires squealing. Miss Fan rammed them again from behind, but Solo’s grip was fast and he held steady. Illya leaned across the back of the seat and held the his gun in a two handed grip. Angelique and Zandberg covered their ears and ducked. Illya snapped off several rounds, and the windshield in front of La Prima broke into a spider web pattern. Miss Fan backed off to a respectful distance.

Illya twisted forward and ejected the clip. “I’m empty,” he said. Smoke was coming in through the vents now. They all coughed and tried to ignore it.

“That’s it for bullets,” Solo said grimly. “We have to outdistance them.”

The road leveled out quickly and merged with the main highway. Solo tromped on the gas and the car leaped ahead. The smoke became thicker, and the engine

stuttered. The wounded sedan gamely took each curve of the highway with dogged spirit. Each of them knew their getaway car was mortally wounded.

The headlights behind them blinked back into existence as tiny pinpoints of light, and grew bigger by the second.

“We have to make a stand. What about a diversion so we can get set up?” Solo said from gritted teeth; the steering wheel was getting tougher to manage.

“How about throwing her out?” Illya offered helpfully, pointing to Angelique in the back.

“I knew there was a reason I disliked you,” she growled back, holding on the seatback tightly.

“They’re catching up,” Zandberg said in a small voice after a quick glance backward.

The coast highway was a two-lane affair, winding up the western edge of California like a black ribbon. Coastal mountains pushed the eastern edge of the pavement, and where the road was not edged on the west side by the Pacific or a cliff, it was open, sandy areas. The occasional house with stilted balcony over the beach popped up in the darkness of the night.

“Let them,” Illya said after a moment, his eyes brightening.

“You have a plan?” Solo asked.

“I guess you could call it that.” Illya turned to Angelique. “Give me your gun.”

She handed it over disgustedly. “You do remember I have no ammo.”

“Are you going to lob it at them?” Solo asked lightly.

A smile flashed in the dark. “The question is, what will they lob at me? Slow down, and pull off in the next open area. Make some dust.”

Solo’s forehead furrowed as he tried to see where his partner was going. “I just hope I don’t pull off over a cliff. Have you noticed how dark it is out there?”

Illya was busy stuffing the guns securely in his waistband. “As a matter of fact, I have. Here, pull over.”

When they bumped off the roadway, the headlights of their pursuers were uncomfortably close. Illya jumped out of the car, caught Solo’s eye, and made a circling motion with his hand in the air. Solo nodded, acknowledging the direction to circle around his partner. The black night swallowed the tense form when Illya took a few steps backward.

By the time Solo had circled his partner three times, it was dangerously dusty. Solo doused the headlight, and the pursuing cruiser’s headlights sped past. He positioned the car as far from the road as he dared. With the moonless night, the blackness of the sea blended with the blackness of the land. He knew they must be on a cliff as he couldn’t see the phosphorescent foam of the waves but could smell the saltiness of the beach.

“Where’s Kuryakin?” Zandberg whispered, squinting into the dusty blackness. “All I can see are the taillights of that crazy woman’s car! She’s stopped just past where we pulled off! Are we just going to sit here?”

“Like ducks,” Solo said lowly, letting the engine idle as he tried to part the black with his scrutiny.

“I say it’s time to switch partners and hit the road,” Angelique purred. She leaned forward and traced her finger along his neck just above the collar. “We could do well together, Napoleon, if you’d only drop the goody-goody conscious.”

Solo laughed lowly. "Always the opportunist, Angelique. That's one thing that makes you so interesting." He flicked his eyes in her direction for a second. They sparkled like dark stars. "That, and your amazing . . . assets."

"Oh, Napoleon." She sighed. "Such a waste." Turning to follow his gaze out the window, she found the red taillights of their pursuers with ease. "I hope this isn't goodbye forever."

Solo also found the red dots through the dust. They flared white as the car began to race backward. "Me too," he mumbled.



"There they are!" La Prima growled. The powerful sedan lurched to a stop just beyond a cloud of dust where their quarry had left the road. The headlights winked out and there was nothing but darkness and swirling dust. "Quick, before they escape! There's nowhere to go!"

The cool Asian threw the car in reverse. The only thing that gave away her fury was the brightness of her ebony eyes.

Miss Fan didn't like being deceived, and that's exactly what Kuryakin had done. She did not like to look like a fool. As she began to imagine what she would do to the slight blond in revenge, she felt the familiar thrill deep in the pit of her belly that was the precursor to a rush of ecstasy. To reach the peak of the thrill would require killing Kuryakin - preferably with her hands, but the bloody image of a car mangled blond body caused a small gasp of pleasure.

"Down there! That turn off! They're trapped!" La Prima's voice was that of a lioness going in for the kill.

Miss Fan's heart raced and she threw the car into drive and urged the powerful machine down the narrow path illuminated in the reach of headlights. The more tightly she gripped the wheel, the hotter she felt between her legs. They plunged into the dust, which scattered the white headlights of their speeding car.

"Where are they? Where are they?" La Prima snarled, gripping the dashboard with both hands. "Do you see them?"

The goon in the back poked his rifle out the window and squinted. "No, ma'm! Not yet!"

Then suddenly there was a blur of inky movement in the thick dust. The blond hair was a flash in the brilliant headlights before disappearing in the swirling storm. Miss Fan cranked the wheel automatically in hot pursuit.

"No, wait!" The redhead suddenly realized the possible danger in the dark. "Slow down!"

Miss Fan had found her prey in the headlights again; her eyes glazed and her mouth pulled back into a rictus smile. Illya ran ahead, keeping just to the edge of the lights in a zig-zag course. More dust cut the line of sight.

La Prima could peg a cat-and-mouse ploy in an instant; she'd played that game enough times herself. "Stop the car, you crazy bitch! Can't you see he's . . ." The sedan hit a clump of something and the car bounced crazily. "Stop!"

Miss Fan screeched a curse when she spotted Kuryakin just outside the dust cloud. He was breathing heavily and reaching for his waistband. Miss Fan's curses

drowned out any other orders. When La Prima tried to take the steering wheel, red nails clawed her face and she pulled back with a hysterical scream.

Illya pulled out the guns and raised them defiantly to egg her on; it looked like the last act of a desperate man, and the rocket ride of the ultimate thrill began in Miss Fan's crotch as she floored the accelerator.

La Prima screamed and scrambled for her door, as did the goon in the back.

Illya leaped, nearly too late. The thud of his body against the car was merely glancing, not loud enough to fulfill the gory hopes of Miss Fan; she shrieked with the realization, and the exclamation was deafening in the quietness of the car, now airborne as it sailed off the cliff toward the dark and thundering ocean below.

A shrill trailed from the vehicle as it plunged into the night. The fireball of impact on the seaside rocks clearly outlined the edge of the cliff in the settling dust as Solo, Angelique and Zandberg ran to the scene.

"Where's Illya?" Solo puffed, scanning darkness that flickered with orange fire. He cupped his hands on either side of his mouth and shouted toward the ocean. "Illya!"

"Here!" Zandberg dropped to his knees and extended his arm over the crumbling edge. His profile was orange and black in the night when his body jerked with extra weight. A blond mop appeared. Solo ran over and helped pull the grimacing Russian to their level. They lay in a panting heap for several moments, the source of the smoky light out of sight below them.

"Are you all right?" Solo panted.

"The car clipped my leg. And I'm very grateful for the native shrubbery on the slope." Illya sat up painfully and held his left thigh with both hands. A hiss was followed by quiet litany of Russian curses. The shadow man in his mind that would thoroughly enjoy the pain was nowhere to be found; a small satisfaction, but noted none the less.

Then they heard another car start up. Their battle wounded sedan slewed crazily on the dirt, a silvery plume of dust marking its progress. When tires hit asphalt the headlights flicked on and the engine roared. Two red taillights compressed quickly into one and faded away along with the sound of the engine as the car disappeared into the night.

The three men simply stared, panting.

"I don't suppose she went to get help." Dr. Zandberg adjusted his cracked, dirty glasses as he watched Angelique vanish on the horizon.

Solo turned back to his partner. "No, I don't suppose she did."

Illya grit his teeth as he gripped his leg. "I'm surprised she didn't finish the job and flatten us all."

"Now, now." Solo chided. "You can thank her for leaving us as loose ends when next we meet."

"Which will be much too soon," Illya grumbled.

The trio was quite relieved when the sound of sirens caught their ears and grew louder as they approached. Solo moved around to sit back-to-back with his partner; he gazed tiredly at the inferno below. Dr. Zandberg flopped down and lay on the dirt, exhausted. Illya tried to collect himself and not to pass out from the pain.

## *EPILOGUE*

As Solo and Kuryakin made their way down the hallway of UNCLE Los Angeles , Illya tightly gripping a walking cane and limping while Solo tried not to scratch the healing burns on his temples, passers by parted respectfully. They had been here less than a day and the recent exploits of the pair had already reached legendary proportions.

The conference room door swooshed open. Dr. Zandberg, now cleaned up and rested, waved weakly from a seat at the opposite side of the large table. The tentative look he gave Illya was not lost on either agent.

“Don’t worry, Doc, he’s hobbled.” Solo indicated the cane with a nod. Illya gave his partner a surly glare. They settled into the seats closest to the door. Mr. Waverly was on a video screen at the front of the room and the Chief Enforcement Agent of the Los Angeles office, Darren Savage, sat at the head of the table.

“We found the receiver you described, Mr. Solo.” Savage tapped a silver box on the table. “It was at the La Prima estate. Quite a spread, there. I can’t believe she was under our radar for so long. It’s kind of embarrassing, really.”

“Did you find the plutonium?” Illya asked.

“Yes. The tooth transmitter was jammed in the canister’s locking mechanism, as you described Mr. Kuryakin, and this receiver zeroed in on it immediately. It was still in the trunk of the car.” He paused to grin. “I don’t see how you escaped anyone in that thing.”

“Where was the car?” Solo inquired curiously.

“The airport. We’re assuming the Thrush woman,” he glanced at a paper. “Uh, Angelique, figured it was too hot to handle and she hopped the first flight out before being caught with it.”

“Graceful retreat,” Solo mused.

“Self preservation,” Illya corrected.

Solo opened his mouth for a riposte but Waverly’s voice cut him off. “Dr. Zandberg has gracefully offered to accompany the plutonium to a proper storage facility. Thank you, sir.”

Dr. Zandberg nodded tightly. “I’ll be very happy to get back to my work. I’m not cut out for this spy business.” He nervously glanced at the two agents.

Waverly agreed. “We’ll arrange for an escort . . .” The instant look of fear on the scientist’s face was not lost on the old man. “. . . from the Los Angeles office. Mr. Savage?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve already put a team together and they can leave anytime.”

## THE RUNNING MAN AFFAIR

Zandberg visibly relaxed with an apologetic glance at the pair across the table. Solo smiled back. Illya ignored him.

“Mr. Kuryakin? We would like you to return as soon as possible so we can begin the process of debriefing.” Solo thought he heard a touch of regret in Mr. Waverly’s tone.

“Yes, sir,” Illya replied sourly.

“Mr. Solo? You will accompany Mr. Kuryakin and keep an eye out for any further symptoms.”

Solo wasn’t sure if he should enjoy that assignment or not. Illya’s disgusted expression definitely raised the bar a bit. “Um, yes sir. Permission to shoot at will?”

Illya threw him a dirty look.

“Definitely not, Mr. Solo. Mr. Kuryakin is a valuable asset. Try to make sure he gets here unscathed so we can set things right.”

Illya perked up at that comment and his sour face turned smug. Solo rolled his eyes.

“Gentlemen.” All eyes were on the video screen again. “Try to remember that this connection is two way,” Waverly chided, but his tone was light. The agents looked properly chastised. “Yes, well, and let me congratulate you on the successful closure of this case. I believe that all the loose ends are taken care of?”

“Yes, sir.” Solo answered.

“Then good day. I will see you tomorrow, Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin. Mr. Savage, please inform me when the plutonium is properly stored.”

“Yes, sir.” Savage closed his file and rose to go. “Good bye, sir.”

The screen went blank. Zandberg leaped to his feet when Savage moved to the door. The L.A. CEO gave the scientist a funny look and then said his goodbyes to the New York agents. Once they left, Solo stood and stretched.

“Ready to leave this coast, partner?” he asked.

Illya followed suite, a bit more slowly and painfully. They made their way down the hall to the travel office to get their tickets. “I wonder if there’s a special section on the plane for ‘valuable assets’,” Solo wondered out loud in a teasing tone.

“Hopefully, it’s far enough from you as to not hear your latest stewardess pick up lines,” Illya replied lightly.

“The luggage level far enough for you?”

Unaware of the respectful and admiring looks cast their direction as UNCLE’s finest, the pair traded barbs all the way to the travel office.

***FINIS***