

## THE STARLING AFFAIR

### PROLOGUE

“He’s saturated now. Any more, and the damage is irreversible.”

Balanced expertly on impossibly delicate heels, the woman in the dark tailored suit paused and touched the nape of her neck with a gloved hand pressing a loose curl into submission. She swiveled slowly, her eyes falling on the subject strapped in the metal chair beside her. A small nod in the direction of the medical technician relayed her satisfaction. She bent at her trim waist just enough to bring her lips close to the ear of her subject.

“Let us see if you are worth keeping alive, then.”

With a smirk of satisfaction the woman moved to stand in front of the subdued man. His eyes were glazed and unfocused; his bare chest affixed with two electrodes, as were his temples. An intravenous line dripped the mind altering chemicals at a measured rate.

“Tell me,” the woman cooed softly. “How did you find me?”

Time and memory were a blur. Great voids opened in his mind and his thoughts, once ordered and deep, tumbled in like sand through a funnel. He groped for words as awareness of time vanished.

The explosions that surrounded him were barely discernable from the chaos in his mind. The tumble of thoughts faded away until there was simply the now. Then the brown eyes of a man, looking very concerned, came into focus.

“Illya? Come on, wake up. We have to leave.”

The man’s arms were suddenly free. He looked at them like they were foreign appendages.

The brown eyed man shook his shoulder impatiently.

“Are you hurt? Can you move?” His voice sounded tense.

“Move?”

With an exasperated grunt, the brown eyed man firmly gripped his bicep and jerked him to his feet. “We don’t have time for this. Take this and let’s go.”

The dark man’s voice was firm but sympathetic. Something cold and metallic was forced into the confused man’s hand. He looked at it with a frown. A gun?

“Come on, Illya. Shoot at anything I tell you to.” The dark man unceremoniously propelled him out of the room.

Chaos reigned in the hall. Distant explosions made the walls shudder and the ceiling rain down. As he cowered against the wall not knowing where to turn, the frightened and confused man tried to bring up any memory, any feeling of familiarity that he could latch on to that would guide him.

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All he had was the dark haired man, dressed in a dark military-like jumpsuit that was criss-crossed with weapons and other devices; the man should instill fear but didn't. A body fell over him, knocking him to the floor and protecting him from shrapnel. It was the dark one again, and amidst the cacophony surrounding him he knew that he could follow this man.

There was a pause in the explosions and the dark man instantly dragged him to his feet and led him down the hall by his elbow, weaving between the bloodied fallen bodies and collapsed sections of ceiling. Choking smoke blurred his vision. He swiped at his eyes and coughed. They made several turns and the human and building debris thinned, but there were still sounds of distant explosions. The air vibrated with the thunder.

"Down here."

He was roughly guided down a dark stair case and was almost to the bottom when an inky motion in the darkness caught his eye and he hesitated. Instantly, his guide sensed the hesitation and raised his gun to the ready.

"What do you see?" The dark one asked lowly.

Mouth agape, he couldn't find the words. What had he seen? In the next second he was shoved to the floor again and the darkness erupted with muzzle flash. Panic clutched he heart; his companion fell next to him.

"SHOOT!"

He raised his gun at the order. It shook crazily, his breath fast with fear. The barrel twitched as he fired at the first moving shadow he saw. A heavy thump marked his success; he dropped the gun in horror and rose shakily to his feet.

All was quiet. The dark man sat and clutched an injured upper arm. "Illya, are you all right? Are you hit?"

He blinked, trying to process all he'd experienced in the past few minutes. All the blood, all the explosions, all the violence.

"Illya! Are you all right?"

He turned his confused blue eyes to the sound of the voice that had led him through the chaos.

Their eyes met, and he wrapped his arms around himself as he sank to the floor.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" He asked in a frightened voice.

***ACT I: Rescue Run***

Pulling his recalcitrant partner out of the smoking remains of the crumbling building took much longer than Solo expected; of course, he was anticipating either some enthusiasm for the rescue, or the retrieval of a body. Having his partner alive and well but reluctant to move was not in his plan.

Solo didn't have time to wonder what happened or try and get Illya to see his point. They had to be out of the area pronto. They weren't the only ones getting away; the surrounding woods were filled with Thrush and not the truly feathered kind.

"But where are we going?" The fear that tinged Illya's question was as foreign to Solo's ear as his partner's thickening accent. It was getting difficult to keep a grip on the small man's arm; he seemed to be hanging back harder with each step.

"I told you. We're going to be picked up by some friends." Solo had decided that details were probably best kept at a minimum. Every time he'd tried to detail the escape plan, the panic increased in the blue eyes.

"I . . . I don't want to get picked up! Just leave me alone, will you?" Illya dug his feet into the soft forest soil and left short, parallel gouges from his dragging heels. Finally, he shook off the hand of the dark man and lost his balance with the sudden freedom. He toppled into a tree trunk, slid to a sit and hugged his knees to his chest. "I have to think."

Time was counting down quickly in Solo's mind. It took all he had to keep from exploding and physically dragging Illya to the pick up point. Instead, he took a deep breath and tried to look patient. It wasn't an easy task. "Fine. We'll rest for a few minutes, but we really can't stay here too long or we'll both end up back in the predicament I just rescued you from."

Illya's blue eyes were foggy with confusion. "Predicament? Rescue? Someone is chasing us?" He'd wiggled his way to his feet, his back firmly pressed against the tree trunk.

A slow lungful of air expressed from Solo's cheeks as he forced himself to remain calm. "Yes. Someone is chasing us. And they are bad people. Look what they did to you; the bruises on your chest and arms. Look!" He motioned with his extended finger at the bewildered blond's body, still exposed to the elements beneath the light jacket Solo had thrown over him.

Illya slowly looked down at himself and touched a raw spot over his heart lightly with his shaking hand. "I don't remember," he whispered, his voice edged with sadness. "I don't . . ."

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“I know you don’t. That’s why you have to trust me. I’m your friend.” The lost tone of his partner tore at his heart, but Solo knew there was no time for this. He bent down slightly to catch Illya’s eyes. “Trust me, all right?”

Reluctantly, Illya’s eyes met the brown eyes of his escort, and held them for a moment. After a few moments, a small nod caused his unruly blond bangs to fall across his forehead and he unconsciously swiped it aside with a damp hand.

His motion was interrupted by the whine of a bullet that nearly parted Solo’s hair, followed by another that winged off the tree and showered them with woodchips. Solo grabbed Illya’s arm and forced him to drop next to him. “Get behind the tree!”

Illya scrambled and Solo returned fire. After a few shots he pushed his partner in the direction of some thick brush and scrambled into them on his heels. The gunfire was growing heavy; the opposition had regrouped enough to charge and Solo knew they were in trouble if they didn’t move. Now.

He pushed Illya through the thick stand of brush and grabbed his collar when they rolled out, ignored the multiple scratches, scrapes and thorns that adorned their bodies, and dragged his astonished friend into motion. Solo zigged and zagged both of them through the thickening forest, all the time keeping the time and map of where they had to be in his mind.

Their breathing became ragged and their sweat was a surreal pink color from blending with the blood from their various wounds. The gunshots that dogged them began to lessen, but he didn’t allow their pace to slow; they were almost at the clearing. It would be close - he could hear the whirring of the helicopter blades in the distance over his raspy breathing.

When they fell into the clearing, the chopper had just dropped into a hesitant hover. It was obvious that they didn’t expect to find anyone, and were just about to swoop away ahead of the pursuing gunfire. As the pair cleared the trees, the aircraft dropped quickly and the side door slid open.

“Hurry up!” The uniformed man yelled, waving his arm madly.

“Come on!” Solo yelled as he pulled on his partner’s elbow. They were almost to the aircraft when their pursuers burst from the trees. The man in the aircraft returned fire over Solo’s head as he reached down and yanked Solo onto the skid. Solo rolled inside.

“Hey!” The crewman yelled. “Where’s he going?”

Solo, instant realization in his heart, glanced aside just in time to see the blond head of his partner disappear into the woods. He started to jump from the fuselage but was pulled unceremoniously back into the craft by two sets of arms. The traded gunfire grew heavier as the craft lifted. Solo was barely inside.

“We can’t go!”

“We have to!” The crewman at the door fell backward into the helo, his arm spattered red.

The helicopter rose like a feather in the wind and they were away.

*ACT II: A Walk In The Woods*

The pilot doggedly ignored Solo's requests to drop him. Twenty minutes later they touched down at the field command center.

As lead agent in this raid, Solo knew that the next step was to debrief, reassign and await further orders. He wouldn't shirk his duties; the debriefing, however, would be on the fly as he prepared to reassign himself to find his partner. Awaiting new orders would simply have to be put aside for now. There was enough clean up here to keep his team busy.

Trading in his assault gear for items more practical for reconnaissance of enemy territory, Solo quickly briefed his second on the result of the raid. He delicately maneuvered around the state of his partner and implied that he had simply escaped and was awaiting contact. Clean up crews for the Thrush satrap and surrounding area were quickly assigned and deployed, and all non-essential personnel dismissed.

Solo joined the team that would be searching the forest for any Thrush that had escaped containment in the forest. His second, Agent Takeshta, realized that he would be left to close down the command center.

"What about Waverly? He'll want a verbal report."

Solo hopped on the waiting chopper. "You can handle it, Jon," he yelled over the noise of the spinning rotors. "It's about time you learned to deal with the Old Man."

Jon Takeshta sputtered something unheard over the revved up engine noise of the helicopter. He backed off and scowled at the retreating Chief Enforcement Agent. It had been a ten minute turn around. Solo calculated that Illya would have nearly an hour's head start; the good thing was that Solo felt he could predict his partner well enough to find him. The bad thing was that if it wasn't Illya, as his partner had oddly stated, then Solo would be searching for a stranger.

The CEA held the hope that Illya was still in there, somewhere, and unconsciously making decisions. If not, this would be a long clean-up.



The heavily armed aircraft, noise and shooting had simply been too much. Yielding to the urge to run, he'd done so without once looking back. All he could think to do was to get away from the noise and confusion. He had to think.

Illya crashed through the brush at first just to put some distance between himself and the clearing. With spent breath came more level thinking, and he began to enact some stealth into his escape. In the past few minutes, he realized that the sounds of

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pursuit and gunfire were falling farther behind and took a moment to stop and catch his breath.

He was surrounded by thick stands of trees and the air was very still. A few gnats pestered his ears so he shakily got to his feet again and walked with the hope the gnats would be left behind. The buggy distraction allowed his mind to wander.

East, he thought. Travel eastward. He glanced skyward for the sun, which was starting its long drop into night. He wasn't surprised, really, to find the sunset would be behind him. He was already heading east. That realization made him come to an abrupt stop.

"What am I doing?" He said out loud to himself. Waves of self doubt immediately washed over his thoughts. Visions of what he'd just escaped from paraded through his mind and he felt the rise of panic begin again. Was this what he did for a living? What kind of person was he?

He began to walk again, eastward, but more slowly. People in this direction knew him; he would be safe.

Or would he?

His mind a whirl, he stopped again and tried to sort his thoughts. Should he trust his inner voice? His stomach growled in response, and he laughed at the timing.

"It's time to think of survival," he said to himself. "Maybe things will come to me after a meal."

An inspection of his person did not yield much to catch prey with. The jacket the dark man had covered him with had a roll of wire in the pocket. Illya fingered the compact grips at the ends of the wire when he unrolled it. A flash in his mind showed him the proper use of the garroting wire, and he broke out in a sweat.

"Oh my God," he whispered. More memories pelted him; ones he knew were from his youth. "What kind of person am I?" He dropped the wire, shaken, and attempted to control his breathing. It took several minutes, but he was finally able to look at the wire and not feel repulsed. He needed the wire to snare food - the way to do it came to him instantly.<

He retrieved the wire carefully and looked around for signs of a rabbit's path knowing they would come out with the dusk. He sighed. "I guess I'm a practical person at least," he mumbled as he began his search in earnest.

***ACT III: "Tell Me About Myself."***

The woods were still hot in the area of the clearing so Solo's pilot obligingly did a touch and go for the agent to leap from the craft. His arm wound was minor and not causing any problems as he trotted briskly in the direction he last saw his partner.

The path was rather easy to follow; Illya had plunged through the brush throwing stealth to the winds. Napoleon hoped that Thrush hadn't reached this path first as he doggedly followed. As the trail lead on, it became more difficult to find his way. It seemed that his wily partner eventually gathered his wits after all and became stealthier. Part of him was pleased, and part of him hoped he could find him at all; the path eventually disappeared. No amount of careful searching told the agent which way to go next.

"You must have some mountain man blood in you I don't know about," Solo said to himself, panting and wiping sweat from his brow.

"I wouldn't know," a voice said out of nowhere.

Solo twitched in surprise but managed to stay his gun hand as he turned to the direction of the voice. He'd recognized it the instant his body had reacted, and found his friend's eyes in the deepening shadows.

Illya's blue eyes studied him from a discreet distance, motionless, from behind the large trunk of an oak tree. One hand lay flat on the trunk and part of his body took refuge behind the solid barrier. His expression was one of cautious curiosity - a poised readiness to either spring away or offer friendship. "I don't seem to remember much. The things I do remember are rather - disturbing."

Instantly reading his friend's body language Solo knew better than to push his luck. He concentrated on relaxing his body, and smiled. "I imagine so. Do you want to talk?"

The blond agent looked at him thoughtfully, the effort of decision making quite clear in his eyes. Solo kept his relaxed demeanor but his mind raced. How far could Illya be pushed right now?

The older agent sniffed the air. "Dinner?" Illya nodded after a moment, and then seemed to make a decision.

"Join me," he said more than asked as he took a step back. He kept his eyes on the dark man, and the blue orbs made it clear that this was a test of sorts.

Solo carefully kept his distance as he followed his partner through the brush. He was amazed at the silent way the Russian moved, like part of the night falling over them. After a few minutes they broke out into a small open area near the overhang of a rock

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cliff. A small fire was licking the skinned body of a rabbit on a spit. The smell caused Solo's mouth to water. Illya squatted next to the small blaze and adjusted the spit.

"Just a few more minutes. Have some blueberries." He indicated a tidy collection of fresh berries piled on a large leaf with a slight nod of his head, looking thoughtful. "It seems I have done this before."

Solo sank down next to the berries and picked out a few. "From what I know, you were rather self reliant from a very young age," he said softly, his attention on the offering.

Illya paused. "So you have known me for a long time." His voice was tentative.

The brief temptation to win the trust of his friend with lies teased the American, but he immediately rejected the idea. Illya would read lies in an instant. Solo regarded him for a moment and then concentrated on the food. "It only seems like it," he laughed. "And you are rather close mouthed about your past. What I know has been pieced together from many conversations."

The blond agent looked a little defeated, then nodded mutely as he tended the meat. He split the fare in efficient silence, and then settled down to eat. Solo thought it was a good sign that his friend trusted him enough to sit as they both ate.

As he ate, Solo kept a sharp ear for sounds of scouts without appearing on edge. The darker it got, the better he felt; Illya was letting the fire die a natural death with the falling of night. No one could find them once the sun was totally gone and night fell completely.

With the last of the berries and rabbit consumed, Illya offered a small amount of water in a hollowed out chunk of wood to clean up. The night was total and the moon was on the rise in the sky when the fire burned down to embers. They cleaned the campsite together, burying of the bones and other foodstuffs a fair distance from the small clearing.

The blond man had been unusually quiet the entire time, but they worked together well in the silence. Each move the other made was anticipated and acted on, like two horses who had worked in tandem for years. When they finally settled down against the cliff face for the night, Illya looked more disturbed than ever. His forehead was deeply entrenched with a thoughtful crease.

Solo waited for him to speak first, and he did.

"So," the shaken agent said softly. "My name is Illya. Tell me about myself."



***ACT IV: Friend or Foe?***

Napoleon dropped his eyes to the fire pit his eyebrows arched with the challenge just thrown his way. Describe his partner? Where should he start? And how much should he say? There was the real danger that this skeptical man before him would bolt with too much information, and if he did that, he could run right into the arms of Thrush.

Solo sat with legs bent, forearms crossed on top of his knees. He leaned forward, contemplating the hot glow as his mind raced. “Well,” he said slowly. “He’s – you are – a very good friend of mine for starters. Your whole name is Illya Kuryakin.” He knew his enigmatic friend probably noted the hesitation. A quick glance aside revealed a pair of blue eyes flickering with firelight and fully focused on him; eyes, he knew, that would pick up lies or deception in a heartbeat.

“How long have we known each other?”

“We’ve been partners for nearly five years now.”

Illya blinked in obvious surprise. “Five years? I’ve lost five years?”

Solo looked for fear or panic, but could only pick up heavy trepidation. Illya was suspicious – apparently his personality was still intact.

“Yes, and possibly more. You came to our office from London, where you worked for two years.”

Blue eyes narrowed, but Solo still felt the power of them as they bore into his own. “But that’s not where I’m originally from, is it?”

Cocking his head, Solo took on a curious expression. Now wasn’t the time to be forceful – he could feel it. “No,” he said slowly. “How did you decide that?”

“It simply does not feel right. And there’s my name – Kuryakin. That’s Russian, isn’t it?”

Nodding in approval, Solo gave him a cockeyed grin. “Yes. And that fact alone has made our working relationship interesting. Do you remember anything of UNCLE or our office in New York?”

The name of the city caused the wary blond to sit up a bit straighter and turn his attention to the fire. His voice took on a distant tone. “New York. Silver hallways. A closet?” He frowned, thinking hard as his fingertips unconsciously touched his temple.

“There’s a secret entrance to the building through a closet, yes. You use it just about every day you are in New York.” Illya gave him a sideways glare. “Our work takes us all over the world. That’s why we’re here. You were abducted while we were on assignment here.”

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“Where, exactly, is ‘here’?”

“South America. Specifically, just outside Buenos Aires. We were looking for someone.”

Immediately, Illya’s eyes shuttered.



‘How did you find me?’ The question sprang into his mind in a female’s voice and instantly made his palms sweat. Without thought, he immediately suppressed any outward surprise and shifted uncomfortably. The inner battle for fight-or-flight began – Illya had enough control of his wits to realize it wasn’t this man triggering that response, but the person he spoke of. “A woman,” he stated flatly, keeping his eyes on the dying fire.

“Yes,” Solo said softly. “You found her. Or I should say, she found you.”

“Why?” Illya blurted, nervously wiping his hands together. “Why were we looking for her?”

The brown eyes that met the question were clear and confident – he detected no lies. “Because she’s a bad guy. Because she has hurt a lot of people, and will hurt a lot more. Because, tovarish, it’s our job to stop her before she does.”

Electricity shot through his extremities at the sound of that word – tovarish. That meant something – friend. It meant ‘friend’. But was this man in front of him truly a friend? Should he trust his gut instinct or had that been tampered with, too? Tiredly, he rubbed his forehead. Double and triple guessing everything his eyes and ears told him was taking its toll. It was time to take a stand – somewhere.

“I see. And did we stop her?”

“We stopped her operation, but she is still about with her minions and most importantly, the cure for what she did to you. You are still in great danger out here, Illya.”

“And I suppose you’re the only one who can protect me.”

Slowly, and amused smile softened the dark man’s mouth which made his eyes sparkle. “Trust me, you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself when you are yourself. Look what you’ve done here, for instance. You just need some company to guide you, that’s all.” The observation was carefully worded to circumvent pressure; at least the man wasn’t forcing him into anything. After a moment, Solo spoke again. “So,” he said in a conversational tone. “Where is your instinct telling you to go?” He picked up a stick and rolled over a glowing ember in the circle of scorched rocks.

Illya took a moment to consider. He looked up to the open line of sky above him, between the rocky cliff and forest’s edge. Stars had begun to appear with the arrival of night. Constellation names came to mind immediately, the direction and angle of them marking up with a mental map that coincided with what his companion had told him. “East,” he said after a moment.

“That is the direction for the fastest way out of here, yes. There’s a small airstrip there.”

Illya could feel that there was more to be said. Solo was holding back. “And she could possibly be there, too, couldn’t she?” he said after a few seconds of thought.

Hooded brown eyes met his gaze and held it. “Yes,” Solo said simply. “She could. We’ve yet to establish a perimeter around here, but we have set up enough to slow her escape. And she has every reason to want you out of the picture before she departs.”

“Why?” The smaller man ignored the zing of fear that stung his gut.

“Because you are the only one that knows what she looks or sounds like. No one in UNCLE has any idea who Belinda Starling really is. We came here on circumstantial evidence and a huge educated guess of yours.”

Unable to come up with a reply and not really trusting his voice at this time, Illya turned his concentration on the coal black and shimmering red of the fire pit. Silently, he picked up a small pebble and rubbed it with his thumb a few times before flipping it into the pit. Sparking embers jumped and crackled in the cool night air. “Do you think it’s best for me to leave?”

“Yes.”

“But if I do, she will get away.”

“It looks that way, yes.”

He felt a tug at the corner of his mouth as he decidedly found the brown eyes again in the darkness. “But that’s not like me, is it? To let the bad guy get away?”

A short chuff of laughter broke the tension. “No, it’s not. But it is the best way to keep you safe.”

Illya stood and began to cover the darkened pit with earth. “Then let’s head out and find a Starling.”

***ACT V: "And You're Still Hard To Shop For."***

Hiking in companionable silence and with a nearly full moon, the pair of agents made good time. They both moved silently through the trees, a constant light wind rippling the shadows and covering their movement. At one point, a small plane passed overhead heading toward the airstrip.

"We must be close. That plane is low," Illya commented.

"Which means we need to be careful. We have a perimeter around the airstrip, and I'm sure there's Thrushmen out here looking to get through."

"Thrushmen?"

"The bad guys with Starling."

"I see."

They slowed a bit, alert to any disturbances around them. Illya felt himself growing more tense as he wondered what he was getting into. Hoping that if he acted "normally" his memory would return, he forced himself to concentrate on pushing ahead. It was getting to be more and more difficult to ignore his racing heart.

Solo slowed then stopped in front of him. He turned slightly, his forefinger against his lips, and then focused his attention ahead. Then he carefully sank down to a squat, taking full advantage of the brushy concealment. Illya mirrored the movement. Solo leaned toward him and Illya offered his ear.

"UNCLE only has enough agents to hold the perimeter at the moment. You need to get inside the perimeter to see if Starling has made it through. If she hasn't, then we can come back out here and look around."

"And I assume you want to keep my arrival quiet so Starling doesn't know I'm here?"

Again, that low, short chuckle. "You still have it where it counts, partner. Come on, let's make you look like a prisoner."

A warm wave swept over Illya at the sound of the word 'partner'. That was the moment he decided to accept that this man next to him was trustworthy. The decision felt right, and his mind a bit quieter.

The dark haired agent led him sharply to the right for about twenty five yards before signaling him to stop, finger again pressed to his lips. Solo motioned Illya to stay low next to a large boulder then melted into the shadows.

It seemed like forever that his heart hammered against his ribs. Illya listened hard and tried to will away the nervous sweat of his hands as he listened to the shifting noises of the woods. Was that a thump? Illya cocked his head, straining to separate the

sounds of the intermittent breeze and the possible sounds of Solo's stealth. Finally, he heard the faint but somewhat regular sound of footfall on forest thatch and one of the shadows solidified into a human form.

"Here," Solo panted, handing the blond a dark pile of clothing. "Make yourself into a Thrushman."

Illya quietly shook out the jumpsuit and began to slip it on without a second thought. It fit amazingly well. "I see you know my size," he whispered as they stood to move.

"And you're still hard to shop for. Come on." He took Illya's elbow and began to steer him in the direction of the airstrip. Just before they cleared the edge of the trees Illya felt a jab in his side. He looked down to find the barrel of Solo's gun in his side. "Keep your head ducked down," Solo ordered quietly. "I don't want the guards to tip off who you are." Illya nodded and ducked his head. Solo yanked a dark, billed cap from his jacket pocket and pulled it down tight over the blond mane. "Sorry it's a little tight. You do have a fat head, you know."

Tempted to toss back a sarcastic retort, Illya managed to hold his tongue and allow himself to be propelled toward the pair of well-armed guards. Two gun barrels immediately drew a bead on them as soon as they stepped from the trees.

"Mr. Solo!" the taller of the guards greeted. The gun barrels angled away. "We were told to keep an eye out for you."

"Mr. Nelson," Solo greeted shortly. "I need to question this prisoner. The airstrip secure?"

"Yes sir. It has been for a couple of hours now. We're about to let the civilians take off. There's just a small group of them, and we figured they would be safer out of the area."

"They've been cleared?" Solo asked as he maneuvered his partner past the pair.

"Yes. Lorenz is in charge of that. There should be a clear room for questioning."

"Thanks." Solo's step quickened with a glance at a small passenger plane near the solitary terminal building. "You need to look at those people before they are released."

Illya nodded numbly. He'd felt his anxiety rising with each step toward the building and was desperately trying to ignore it. Apparently, his guide must have felt his growing nervousness, too, because Solo let the gun muzzle drop away and gave him a reassuring smile.

"You'll be fine."

"What if I don't recognize her?"

"You will."

***ACT VI: Coffee, Tea, Or Incarceration?***

The man's confidence was reassuring and a majority of his anxiety slipped away. What was left was just enough to keep him alert and ready to react. As they approached the building entrance, Illya again dropped his head to hide behind the bill of the cap.

"Solo," a deep voice greeted. "Get that one in the woods?"

"Yes, and there's more out there, so stay alert."

"Always. Lorenz is expecting you." The man pushed open the door, and the pair of them stepped inside.

Illya felt himself get pulled to a gentle stop. "All right. There's a group off to our left. I'll speak with Lorenz and give you time to study the group."

With a quick nod, Illya allowed himself to be steered in the right direction. They crossed the small room and Solo pulled him to a stop as he greeted another man and began a low conversation. Illya took the opportunity to raise his eyes and survey the group.

There were about a dozen civilians in casual dress. The three young children were easily dismissed as was the stooped old couple leaning into each other for support as they sat on ragged folding chairs. Illya carefully examined the rest, trying to see their eyes. One of the three nuns sitting tiredly on the floor next to the old couple caught his attention; she was studying him curiously, but she did not seem familiar. Was that her? Illya nervously began to wonder if he would recognize Starling at all.

Several obvious males were soon mentally dismissed after astute examination, and Illya swallowed his growing doubt before refocusing on the remaining four. All women, all about the right size, all of various ages and all dark skinned. He turned his attention their hands; he recalled long, soft fingers and carefully manicured nails. None of them had that, but it was a detail that is easily altered.

His frustration grew. Solo noticed.

"She may not be here, remember," he said lowly in Illya's ear. "Do you need to get closer?"

He gave a quick nod. Solo and Lorenz moved in the direction of the group, heading for a door off to one side. Illya felt eyes on him, and shifted his glance to the nun right next to the old woman. Could that be her? When the nun's hands moved, Illya tensed.

"What?" Solo asked, bringing his gun up.

He was just about to say something when he saw that the nun had retrieved her rosary from her waistband. He let out a breath and his shoulders dropped, "It's nothing. I thought I saw . . ."

Then the old woman's hand caught his eye. There was a momentary flash of long, red nails just before they were again buried in the sleeve of her old companion's elbow. Illya's eyes flicked immediately to hers and they connected with a purposeful stare.

Recognition hit him instantly. He opened his mouth to speak, but froze when he saw the gun in Starling's hand. It was shoved hard into the side of the old man before disappearing again under her shawl. Illya's look shifted to the old man and he saw that although his eyes were clouded and blind, fear clearly reflected from them. Starling's eyes narrowed in warning. The slight smile was smug under the age-adding makeup just before she ducked her head, falling again into character. The whole encounter had taken just a few seconds.

"You see her?" Solo asked, immediately alerted by his partner's aborted reaction. He scanned the small group. None of them seemed to be upset about Illya being there.

"N . . . no. No," Illya repeated with more determination as his stomach fluttered. "She's not there."

What was he going to do? He couldn't let that old man die because of him, but he couldn't let Starling slip away either. Illya barely heard Solo give a short order to Lorenz, who then left them to address the civilians. Illya heard Lorenz telling the small gathering that they could start filing toward the exit and the waiting plane.

Illya pulled off the cap and turned to his partner. "I can't do this," he said quickly. He could feel sweat starting to gather at his hairline.

Solo scowled, holding his elbow firmly. "What? What do you mean?"

"I want to leave. Like you said. It's safer if I leave." The nervousness he felt was very real and he hoped it added to his plea to make it believable. Solo's eyes bore into him as if he were trying to read his mind. Illya made a conscious effort to make his eyes unreadable. "I want to go."

Shuffling feet dusted the ancient linoleum floor of the tiny terminal as the dozen civilians formed a line for the exit. The stooped couple brought up the rear. The brief glance thrown his way by Starling made it clear that he was expected to follow. Visions of the old man dying dozens of horrible deaths crossed the Russian's mind. Determined, he jerked his elbow from Solo's hand and gave him a level stare.

"I said I can't do this. I want to go."

"Fine," Solo said in a flat voice. His eyes, however, reflected deep thought. "But not alone. Lorenz," he called, finally releasing the blond from his stare to turn his attention on the other agent. "Get someone to accompany Illya. I can't leave yet."

Lorenz waved another agent over as Solo faced his partner. "I'm calling ahead to have you met by agents who will escort you back to New York."

"Fine." Illya tried to hold Solo's stare, but nervously dropped his eyes after a few seconds. "I'll be fine. Sorry I couldn't help here."

Solo's hand on his shoulder was surprisingly sympathetic. "It's all right. You'll be fine." With a nod to Lorenz, the lead agent strode off without looking back and disappeared through the main doors.

Before his resolve collapsed, Illya turned on his heel and brought up the end of the line. A young agent fell in beside him after a quick briefing from Lorenz.

## THE STARLING AFFAIR

“So you’re Kuryakin,” the agent said, his voice tinged with annoyance. “Who’d a thought I’d be pulled from a manhunt to baby-sit UNCLE’s finest?”

“It’s nice of you to hold my hand,” Illya replied acidly, turning his back to the arrogant young man. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the nape of the ‘old’ woman’s neck in front of him wishing he could snap it like a dry twig with a thought. He’d already ascertained that her gun was well hidden and still pressed firmly against the old man’s ribs under the convincingly tattered shawl. Mentally dismissing his own escort, Illya began to look for an opening – any opening – to safely take the advantage from Starling.

Waiting tensely for several long minutes, the signal was given that they could start boarding the waiting craft. The small group stepped into the humid darkness of the outdoors and moved toward the steps rolled up to the plane, keeping to their loose line formation. Time dragged as each person ascended the stairs and entered the plane. Soon it was just the four of them left – Illya, the visibly annoyed young agent, the old man hostage and Starling. Just as Illya decided he’d have to take a chance, Starling spoke to Illya’s escort.

“Would you help my husband, young man? I’m afraid my legs aren’t up to the task.” The breathy tremble to the woman’s words was perfectly done, Illya thought, as she spoke to the younger agent. In a motion that belied her aged appearance, Starling maneuvered her hostage into the brassy young agent’s arms and immediately latched herself onto the blond agent. With a wicked glare, she hooked Illya’s eyes with her own as she spoke. “I’m sure this nice man will be happy to help me.” Illya felt a chill ice his bones. Without giving the young agent a chance to protest, Starling dropped back behind the two men as they started up the steps. Illya tensed, considering making a move. “Don’t,” the Thrushwoman snarled softly. “I’ll shoot the head off the little darling in front of us if you do anything, and the old man knows that. I proved it with his son a little earlier. He won’t tell your escort anything.”

Grimly, Illya stayed at the woman’s side and tried to control the rising nausea in his gut.

A sole stewardess of sorts met them just inside the door, her hair as ruffled and unkempt as her uniform. Nervously, she directed the last four passengers. “The first rows are available,” she said distractedly. “Well be taking off as soon as the rest of the crew is on board.”

With firm direction, Illya was maneuvered into the third row window seat. Starling’s gun was still hidden, but definitely pointed in his direction. The Russian’s brain raced, looking to assemble some sort of plan that would keep the rest of the passengers safe. The grumpy UNCLE escort had ended up directly in front of him, and the old man in front of Starling made an easy target for the Thrushwoman. There was no way to let the escort know what was going on; he was on his own.

“Buckle up, honey,” Starling’s growling purr demanded. “I can’t have you free to move about, now can I?”

Illya did what he was told. “What are you going to do?”

Starling reached over and tugged the belt uncomfortably tight. “This is just a short hop to the international airport. I will dispense with your burly friend before we land. You and I will walk right through the terminal and into the city before they discover he’s dead. Then I plan on taking you to Thrush Headquarters. There’s some interest in you, my little Russian.”

“Even if I don’t remember anything?”



“I can take care of that.” Starling gently patted the small purse in her lap just before tightening her grip on her weapon.

Illya was so focused on the gun in the woman’s hand that it took a moment for a particular background voice to register. He fought the urge to find the speaker with his eyes, and instead, opted to appear defeated to his captor.

“I’m glad to see that you have accepted the situation. Just sit tight.” Starling settled back in her seat. “When is this blasted plane leaving? Ah, I’ll ask him.”

The plane’s pilot was walking down the aisle greeting the passengers. From his seat, Illya could see the pilot’s hat bobbing as he spoke, and although he couldn’t yet see his face, the Russian knew it was Solo. Backup had arrived.

As soon as the uniform clad ‘pilot’ stepped up to his row, Illya was able to catch the familiar brown eyes for a fraction of a second before he moved.

Starling was facing the captain when Illya grabbed her gun hand. She yelped, and the gun went off into the ceiling. Solo was on her in the following second. The other passengers screamed and panic was inevitable, but the suave agent was able to get the gun before a second shot. Illya released himself from his seatbelt, and the young escort agent was on his feet and totally confused.

Solo let Illya handle Starling. “It’s all right, folks. Everything is under control. This is . . . uh . . . your captain speaking.” He fingered his tie nervously for a moment before breaking into his easy smile. The passengers quieted after a moment. “We just need to remove this passenger before taking off. She . . . ah . . . doesn’t have a ticket.”

Illya pulled the snarling Starling to her feet and confiscated her bag and the antidote. Between the two of them, they dragged her from the plane. The young escort agent, frozen in confusion, finally fell in behind several seconds later. “I can’t believe I missed the whole thing!” he griped.

Solo and Kuryakin ignored him and released their wriggling captive to Lorenz at the bottom of the stairs.

“How did you know?” Illya softly asked as he fingered Starling’s beaded bag.

“Simple, partner,” Solo replied with a glance and a grin. “You may not know yourself right now, but I do. You’d never leave a job unfinished.”

Illya grinned lopsidedly and held the bag aloft. “I guess it’s time to get to know myself again, then, isn’t it?”

**EPILOGUE**

“Medical has cleared you for full duty, Mr. Kuryakin. I’m sure you’ve had enough rest?” The head of UNCLE North America held a glowing match to the bowl of his pipe as he eyed the agent.

“Definitely,” Illya replied instantly with a mild tone of disgust in the word.

“The doctors are concerned you may still have some memory loss?”

“They only suspect that, sir. There was nothing to prove that fact.”

“Wait a minute,” Solo interrupted. “I wrote the report because you said you didn’t remember the details.”

Blue eyes sparkled with mischief and the smug grin was poorly concealed. “I did?” he said with mock surprise.

Solo shook a warning finger at him. “I will get even, my friend.”

“Gentlemen, can we move on, please? This affair is successfully closed. We have obtained a valuable formula and antidote. Starling’s finally been captured and her facility is under our control. Good work. Now, it seems that things are heating up in the Baltic. Your plane leaves in two hours.”

With a dismissive spin of the circular conference table, the agents’ tickets and necessary files stopped in front of them as Waverly disappeared into his private office. The pair of agents plucked the files from the table as they stood and moved to the door.

“Illya?” Solo asked nonchalantly as they perused the files on their walk down the halls of UNCLE.

“Hmmm?” the blond responded distractedly.

“You do remember how to do your job, right?” The American playfully nudged his partner with an elbow.

Blue eyes slid sideways and the corner of Illya’s mouth curled up into a playful grin. “I’m not sure. Trust me?”

“Only if I do the driving, you crazy Russian. That’s risky on a good day. And by the way, it’s good to have you back.”

**FINIS**