

THE FORMULA-T AFFAIR

Prologue : "That's The Last Time I Help A Damsel In Distress!"

Illya Kuryakin paused as he stepped from the downtown building onto the unusually quiet street. Well, quiet for New York. True, it was late in the night, midweek, and the average working person was probably at home sleeping or watching the late news. Illya, however, was the type that usually made the late news. Being an U.N.C.L.E. agent was a far cry from the normal 8 to 5 crowd, and the result of doing his job was most often covered up and made to look like a run of the mill mugging or other nasty deed reported by the local news teams. Illya and his partner Napoleon Solo dealt with international secrets and played spy games that only those with the best survival skills and instincts could deal with successfully; and they were successful. The pair was known throughout U.N.C.L.E. and their nemesis Thrush as being at the top of the game.

And that is what Illya reflected about as he paused on the stoop. It was a glorious autumn night with a bracing bite in the air that reminded him of his Mother Russia. He took precious few moments to simply enjoy the feeling of peace and dropped his guard. This simple legwork assignment did afford less stress for once.

After a minute or two he began to feel uncomfortable with the brief reflection and put his guard back up. Glancing up and down the empty street, he stepped to the sidewalk and started walking briskly north, thinking about the interview he had just completed. Already, he was drafting his report to Waverly in his head as he walked. The meeting with Dr. Engleberg, a scientist requesting asylum, seemed odd for some reason he could not pinpoint. The man had said all the right things to make him valuable to U.N.C.L.E. and had even given him some formulae he had developed, but Illya had gotten the feeling that there was something else going on; the man was more guarded than nervous. Something didn't ring true, and Illya was sure that he and Napoleon would find out what was the problem was with a bit more research and observation.

As he walked he could hear the sounds of traffic several blocks over. The occasional car that drove slowly by him did not escape his scrutiny. What also caught his attention was a sound ahead that seemed to come from the thick hedge next to the sidewalk, and it put the Russian instantly on alert.

His eyes swept the surrounding area. A van and a sports car were parked on the street alongside the walkway and appeared to be empty. The hedge bordered a large, old brownstone with dark windows; Illya couldn't tell if it was occupied or not. Most of the buildings on this street were commercial storehouses and rather run down. It was rare to see foot traffic this time of night. Other than himself, Illya didn't sense another living soul. The sound, however, made him both curious and suspiciously alert for any trap.

When he got closer, he realized it was moaning. And it sounded like a woman. Illya slowed at the hedge trying to zero in on the noise when he saw a delicate pump amongst the branches adjacent to the battered van. Next to it was a divot in the greenery

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the size of a person, and within the thick brush he saw a leg. Then another. And they were both quite shapely, albeit a bit scratched.

"Miss?" Illya questioned. *This is definitely Napoleon's arena*, the Russian thought, instantly suspicious. But then again, everything made him suspicious, much to his partner's amusement.

Glancing around once more, Illya parted the branches and saw a lovely woman sitting within the hedge. It was hard to ignore the skirt forced up her firm thighs, the rumpled blouse that was clinging to her bosom, and her frazzled auburn hair. Her hand raised daintily as if to shake hands with the agent as her sad eyes caught his.

"Oh, please!" she whimpered. "Help me! They just pushed me in here and took my purse and...and..." her lower lip quivered as she tried not to cry.

"Um, here. Give me your..." before he even finished his sentence she had a grip on his hand and struggled to get out of the shrub. "Ah ... hand!" he finished, pulling her to her feet. She leaned heavily on his arm, nearly pulling him off balance.

"Oh, my shoe!" she lamented, tugging at the pump hanging in the branches as she hopped on one shod foot while using Illya as support.

"Hold on, Miss. Why don't you sit?" Illya was finding it difficult to dislodge his arm from her grip.

"It was horrible!" she cried, tears hanging on her eyelashes. "They grabbed my purse, then pawed at me then simply shoved me in the bushes!" Her lower lip quivered as she rescued her shoe and hobbled to the curb, towing Illya with her. "And my car is right here! Oh! My keys were in my purse! Maybe they took the money and dropped the purse!" She leaned on the trunk, released Illya's arm, and started to struggle to put on her shoe. "Could you help me look? For my purse, I mean?" She turned her watery eyes on the uncomfortable Russian, a picture of complete helplessness. "Please? I really don't feel safe alone!"

"Ah, sure." Glad to have her off his arm, Illya stepped back and gave the surrounding area a cursory search. Amazingly, he found a small clutch purse in the gutter a few feet in front of the parked sports car and picked it up.

"You found it!" the young lady gushed, "Oh, thank you! Are my keys in there?" She sniffed and daubed her eye with a finger.

Illya peeked inside. "Yes. Here they are," and he pulled them out.

"You just don't know how grateful I am that you came along! I would be just too scared to get out of that..... predicament.. by myself! I might have been in there until dawn!"

"Well, here you are, then." He handed her the purse and keys. "Can you drive?" She dropped her eyes. "I don't know Mr. ..."

"Kuryakin," Illya supplied, not really wanting to get involved any more. But the idea of leaving her here didn't set so well with him, either. He knew that if Napoleon were in his place, she would be half way to her place by now with him along for the ride.

"Well, Mr. Kuryakin. Could you unlock my car for me? My hands are shaking so badly, I don't think I could. If you could drive me to a diner close by or something, I could call my boss or my sister in Long Island." Her voice was shaking as she spoke, which made Illya sigh inwardly.

"Don't be silly. It's the middle of the night." He unlocked the passenger side and helped the woman inside. "There's a nice hotel a few blocks away. I'll pay for a room for you."

She turned her doleful eyes on him. "Oh, I couldn't. But I don't have much choice, do I? I insist on paying you back, of course." She smiled, and he closed the door.

Illya trotted around to the driver's side of the sports car. He had just unlocked the door when the screech of tires made him drop the keys and instantly reach for his shoulder holster as he yanked the car door open with his free hand.

A van skidded to a halt next to him and at least a half dozen masked men leaped from it. Illya pulled out his U.N.C.L.E. special as he leaped into the driver's seat and started to aim.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya froze and glanced at the woman sitting next to him in the sports car. He was looking right down the barrel of a very large handgun. The woman's eyes were dry now, and a cocky grin replaced the quivering mouth.

"That's the last time I help a damsel in distress," Illya grumbled as he felt something sharp stab him in his side and he slid into darkness.

Act I: "Aren't You Supposed To Be In There?"

When he awoke, he did so with a start and an instinctive jerk of his hand towards his holster. His hand, however, didn't move, and that's when he noticed the metal bracelets surrounding both wrists, which were over his head. He also noticed that his shirt was off. He was able to release some weight from his wrists by standing on his toes. Craning his head, he saw that his handcuffed wrists were hanging by a hook, which was suspended from the ceiling by a long chain.

'A warehouse of some sort,' the agent noted, along with the fact that he was hanging against a crumbling interior brick wall. Surprisingly he was otherwise unharmed, save for his throbbing shoulders and wrists. He could tell he hadn't been hanging that long as he could still feel his fingers.

"I'd really like to hang around a bit longer, but I do have appointments to keep," he said loudly. His voice echoed in the largeness of the building.

There was no human response but there was a response. Almost immediately, water started to spray lightly from the ceiling area. Soon Kuryakin's body was shiny with dampness. He shook his blond mane to clear the water dripping in his eyes then heard a creaking noise. Looking up, he saw a rather intense looking young man rolling a chipped dolly his way. On the dolly, three car batteries were stacked. Lying across the top battery was a padded wand. Illya sighed inwardly; electric shock. Again.

"Excuse me," the Russian said conversationally. "But your version of the welcome wagon leaves a lot to be desired."

The intense man gave him an uncomprehending look, and began to unwind the wand wordlessly.

"As does your conversation abilities," the agent added, looking for the man to get just a bit closer.

"He's not paid to converse," a feminine voice growled. The damsel in distress appeared, walking smartly from the same direction as the goon.

"Obviously," Illya agreed. "And just as obviously, you're paid to act, I assume?"

The woman snorted, and curled her lip in a tight grin. "In more ways than one, Mr. Kuryakin. Paolo," she indicated the agent with a nod. "Show him what you're paid for."

Paolo's eyebrows rose in pleasure and Illya was momentarily disgusted by the poor state of his teeth. Like a striking snake, the wand leaped forward and caught the agent deeply in the abdomen. The shock was long and deep, and Illya couldn't keep from screaming.

Abruptly, the goon stopped. "There was a sample, Mr. Kuryakin. Paolo knows a lot more about pain. This device is just the beginning."

Illya panted. "What do you want?" He wasn't really on anything earth shattering right now, and was trying to tie in this seeming senseless abduction to the routine footwork he had been doing. Nothing warranted this treatment, unless it was simply . . .

"Straight information." The woman purred, inspecting her nails. "Locations of the newest U.N.C.L.E. offices in Europe, and the entrances. Lists of agents and locations. Basic things. It's easy enough for an agent of your..reputation." She tugged her short jacket, and folded her arms. "And I'm angry to be put on this boring detail, so we both suffer."

Again she nodded and again Paolo administered the wand with a grotesque grin. Illya convulsed, but held in his scream. This annoyed the woman even more.

"I grow tired of this. Paolo, do what you must. I'll be back in a half hour." With a toss of her head, the woman clicked off out of sight.

"Well, Paolo, guess it's just us," Illya said. Paolo just chuckled. "Oh! You do have a sense of humor!" the agent noted, watching his tormenter turn up and intensity dial.

Paolo took a tiny step forward and jabbed the wand, Illya convulsed again, but managed to see through the pain and whip his legs out, hooking the weird man around his scrawny neck with his heels. Paolo dropped the wand and grabbed the agent's ankles as Illya pulled him towards the wall. He worked his legs around the struggling man's neck then took away his breath with a scissors squeeze

As Paolo gasped and wiggled, Illya slammed the man against the wall behind him and pushed off his squirming shoulders just enough to unhook the handcuffs from the ceiling hook. As Illya fell downward he took Paolo with him, but didn't release his leg grip. Paolo was out like a light as soon as the Russian hit the floor, and Illya surmised the man could have broken his neck. He didn't stop to check.

Rolling to his bare feet, Illya wasted no time looking for an out. He prowled along the warehouse floor, surprised at the lack of guards. He noted the door leading to the back of the warehouse, and knew that's the way the woman had left. The windows were too high for escape, but there were several doors to choose from. He picked the one that looked the least rusted and appeared to go directly outside, and tested it gently. It was unlocked, but very noisy.

He took a moment to get his breath, then braced his feet and shoved the sliding door open just enough for his body to rocket through. He completely surprised the guard outside, and took him down easily. Illya jerked around the slinged rifle and blasted off two shots from the hip with the body still hanging in the sling. Both shots hit the second guard high in the chest and he went down, too. Kuryakin released the tangled rifle, dove into a shoulder roll, and heard bullets pinging off the pavement by his head.

Using the second guard for cover, a quick patted down the body of the down guard and produced a handgun and several clips. Illya stuffed them in his waistband, and pulled up the rifle to take out the guard across the street. As quick glance around revealed no more guards, so the agent tugged the rifle away and trotted down the industrial park roadway.

There were many warehouses, all of them apparently abandoned, and Illya could see train tracks at the far end of the drive. He mentally placed himself at the outer edges of the city and headed across the tracks, working his way south. Soon he heard distant voices shouting and screeching tires. Curious, he made his way to the decrepit perimeter

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fence and followed it to the main entrance of the warehouse yard. He saw several dark sedans blocking the roadway, and shook his head at the commotion. He had recognized one of the men right away: Benson, a new agent in the U.N.C.L.E. New York office. He obviously hadn't mastered the art of being discreet.

Illya circled around to the back of the cars and fixed himself against an old building. Here, he could see the U.N.C.L.E. sedans, the entryway through the pathetic fence, and the warehouses in the background.

"Not too quiet, is he?" A low voice said behind him. Illya didn't jump, though. He'd rather expected it.

"Ah, the exuberance of youth," Illya sighed, turning his head slightly to catch Napoleon Solo's eye.

Solo, always the dapper dresser, stepped up next to his partner and friend and looked him over from head to toe. "Go swimming?" he asked casually. Illya merely grunted. "Aren't you supposed to be in there?" Napoleon commented, nodding towards the buildings.

"I was," Illya replied. "But it was a boring party. How'd you get an invitation?"

Napoleon crossed his arms over his chest and rocked a bit on his heels. "Someone got a bit curious about a certain communicator pen and left it open."

"Ah," Illya nodded. "You traced the signal. So you're actually crashing this party."

Napoleon sighed. "*I* was planning on sneaking my way in. Benson decided to crash it. Then I saw you on the backside coming this way, so I just stood back and waited."

"Ah." Illya nodded again. They both watched the shouting agent directing the roadblock for a few seconds longer. "Shall we tell him I'm over here?"

"Honestly? I'd just assume leave this party, but the old man would like the communicator back, along with some of the other goodies you no doubt had stashed on you," Napoleon said with a grin.

"I can see that." Illya agreed. "Accounting can be such a pain in the head."

"Neck, Illya. Pain in the neck. Or ass. Depends on who the pain is, I guess." With that, the agents fell into step side by side and approached the roadblock.

Act II : When a Kiss is not a Kiss

Alexander Waverly was best described as a basset hound. A very smart basset hound. He was the head of the New York office of U.N.C.L.E. and lorded over his dominions with cool aplomb.

When he was thinking, he absently fiddled with an array of pipes in various stages of tamping. Most of the time they were never lit, but today was not one of those days. Both Napoleon and Illya, the number 1 and 2 Enforcement Agents in Section Two respectively, watched the matches carefully. Sometimes Mr. Waverly was so distracted in thought that the match would burn down to his fingers and he would yelp in surprise. This day, the flame made it to the bowl, and he puffed thoughtfully.

Napoleon cleared his throat. "Engleberg is a genetic scientist, isn't he?"

Waverly responded while puffing. "Yes, with a specialty in cattle and butterflies. Quite diverse. Also has had a hand in nerve gas development for Italy."

"So you don't think Illya's kidnapping was connected to Dr. Engleberg's request for asylum?"

"I didn't say that, exactly." Waverly hedged.

"I'm not even sure it was Thrush." Illya commented, his hands steeped on the table in front of him. "It seemed pretty amateurish. The rifles were standard Thrush issue, but they can be picked up anywhere overseas. And they didn't ask anything about Dr. Engleberg."

Waverly puffed. "True. It is rather peculiar all around. And the woman you described doesn't match anything we know domestically relating to Thrush." He puffed some more.

"She could be an upcoming field agent," Napoleon thought out loud. "She managed to slip away easily enough. Let that creepy Paolo guy take the fall."

"Yes. Mr. Paolo. Interesting fellow, that. Almost like an idiot savant, brilliant in torture techniques, but not much else. Hasn't given us anything we can use. And he didn't harm you severely, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya shook his shaggy mane. "No. I found two puncture wounds, but that was it. From the drugs they gave me, I presume."

"Good, good. Well, men, let's see how this incident falls with the deck then."

"You mean just continue on like we were and see if it fits?" Napoleon summoned up.

"Yes, yes." Waverly rolled the pipe between his fingers. "Mr. Kuryakin, continue to check our Dr. Engleberg's statements and formulae, and Mr. Solo, see what you can

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dig up on upcoming birds of the flock, so to speak, while you check up on Dr. Engleberg's movements in the past few months."

"Yes, sir," the agents chorused as they rose to leave.

They walked down the hallway to their office in thought.

"You still going to the Jazz Club with Jenna?" Napoleon asked lightly, a sparkle in his eye.

Illya gave him a sideways glance. The light, teasing tone wasn't lost on the Russian. He was tight as a clam when it came to his personal life, and Solo was like a determined shore bird . . . pick, pick, pick. "Napoleon, she's just a friend with a common interest. Besides, she's engaged to someone. You are welcome to join us."

Napoleon waved him off with a playful expression, "Ah, Mr. Kuryakin, you underestimate your mysterious self again. I think there's more there in her mind. You'd better watch yourself!"

Illya rolled his eyes, the stoic expression never leaving his face. "I'm going down to Research and leave you to your imagination," he said.

Napoleon stopped at his office with a smirk. "Give my regards to the fair Jenna!" he teased one last time.

Shaking his head in resignation, Illya continued on to the Research level.

The day passed rather quickly for the two agents. Illya, assisted by Jenna, managed to verify some of the formulae Engleberg had supplied. He and Jenna worked well together professionally. She never gave any indication of any ideas beyond a working friendship and Illya was comfortable around her. Normally, the breathy talk and unconscious preening by many of the women in Research and the rest of the building made the Russian uneasy. It also made for a mountain of teasing fodder for his partner. Nothing Jenna did, though, gave Napoleon ammo to use against Illya and that frustrated him. Solo was a patient man; he would get something eventually, he was sure, and the Jazz Club date was the best thing yet.

By the end of their shift, however, not a whole lot more about Dr. Engleberg was uncovered. One thing that had been discovered was that there was a several months period unaccounted for in his life while in Italy; he seemed to fall off the face of the earth for a for about 16 weeks. Waverly assigned Solo to the Rome office to chase down those details while Illya continued his follow up on some theories and formulae Engleberg had given him. The partners sketched out their duties for the next few days as they left the building.

"So do you believe this Engleberg is sincere about defection?" Solo inquired. "And on the other hand, what does all this have to do with U.N.C.L.E., anyway?"

Illya ran his hand through his shaggy hair. "If his theories pan out, he's onto a new kind of nerve gas. He also has some ideas about a delivery system that involves a nuclear device; it all doesn't quite fit together, though, and that makes me suspicious."

Napoleon snorted. "Well, there's a surprise; you, suspicious. Do me a favor, will you? If you figure out how the nuclear part of this fits in, notify me. I'd like to know beforehand if I'm going to be poking into areas where radioactive materials may be hiding." He straightened his tie as they left the building. "Glowing green doesn't go with any suits I'm planning on taking."

There was a hint of a grin on Illya's lips. "I would make you easier to track in the dark. Thrush would appreciate that, I'm sure. Do you see any connection between

Engleberg and any upcoming new birds from the nest? I still regard the timing of my capture and the initial interview with Engleberg as suspicious."

"There's nothing here I can connect. Maybe Rome will have something along those lines." Napoleon shook out his keys as he reached his car. "Can I drop you at your place? Can't have you all tired out before your tête-à-tête with the lady Jenna!" Napoleon's toothy grin only made Illya frown.

"I would again invite you to join us, but I know you have a flight to catch. And, yes, I'll take the ride, thank you, but not for the reasons you have made up in your head."

The tires of the racy Fiat squealed briefly as Napoleon pulled from the curb only a moment after Illya slammed the passenger side door.



The Jazz Club was packed. Illya and Jenna sat against the wall commenting on the quality of the group. Jenna proved to be quite the expert on the sax, and admitted that she played the instrument but not very well. She and Illya chatted politely on a friendly level. Sure, she was trim and pretty but Illya felt nothing for her but friendship, and she felt the same. She was in a long distance relationship, and was planning a wedding for the next year. In six months, she was moving to be closer to her fiancé. She appreciated her platonic relationship with Illya and the chance to pursue her musical interests while in New York.

It was well after midnight when they left. Illya hailed a cab and saw her safely home. He then returned to his apartment and went to bed.

The next day, Illya showed up in Research ready to get to work. He glanced around for Jenna, surprised she wasn't in yet, and started in on his work. About an hour later, well after the shift starting time, she showed up. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot, and there were dark bags hanging below her lashes..

"Are you alright?" Illya inquired after a glance. "I didn't think you drank that much."

"No, it's not that," Jenna replied, rubbing her eyes. "I didn't sleep very well, then didn't even hear my alarm this morning. I .." she glanced at Illya and froze for a second. "Uh .. I .. um. What was I saying?" A confused look crossed her face as she held the Russian's eyes.

"I can handle this myself," Illya said softly, disturbed by the look. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep?" Neither one was able to break the gaze between them. Then Illya lost his track of thought, so he picked up the manuals in front of him and forced his eyes to the stack now in his arms.

"No, I'll be all right," she muttered turning away, her cheeks flushed. "I'll get the next set of books you .. um, asked for yesterday." She turned and walked back into the stacks.

Illya found himself watching her walk away, an uncontrollable feeling growing in his gut. He shook his head and forced himself to turn away. Taking a deep breath, he gripped the books and made for the nearest table with a microfiche viewer. His mind was back on the formulae within a few minutes.

He knew Jenna was back before he even heard or saw her. Illya was deep into comparing a microfiche file with some handwritten notes in one of the manuals when he felt that uncontrollable feeling rise again in his gut. He glanced back and was not

surprised to see Jenna standing behind him with a collection of books in her arms. She was staring at him with her mouth partially open as if she was going to say something, but forgot what it was.

Illya found himself noticing her lips, and how full they were, when he realized that the feeling he had was desire. The urge to kiss those lips was almost overwhelming, and he fought off the thought by leaping to his feet and backing away. "Ah," he stuttered. "Wh .. why don't you leave those here while I .. um .. go .. somewhere .."

She had nothing to add as she watched him slink away. Her white knuckled grip on the books finally became painful and forced her to put down the books. She looked at her hands. They were shaking.

Illya retreated to the far side of the Research Department to gather his wits. "*What was that all about?*" he thought to himself as he perused some files. Soon he was able to brush off the thoughts of her and replace them with work. He collected a few reports, and took them back to the table. Jenna was no where to be seen. Illya picked out several related items, already preparing a report for Waverly in his head. He determined which things to use for visual aids, and piled them together. It was quite a stack. He looked up and was both disappointed and relieved to see Lisel, another Research clerk, close by.

"Could you help me with these?" Illya asked politely. He hardly noticed Lisel flutter her eyelashes and quickly pat her hair before coming over.

"Certainly, Mr. Kuryakin," she replied breezily as she swayed over and accepted a pile from him. "I have an empty cart over here," she said with a smile. He nodded and followed her with the rest of the books and files.

The empty cart was next to the elevator, so Illya punched the call button as he plopped the items on the cart.

"Would you like me to come with you and bring the cart back?" Lisel asked brightly and hopefully.

"No, no. I'm fine. Thanks." Illya flashed her a rare smile and she reluctantly stepped away, then he turned his back on her as he waited for the doors to open. He heard a small sigh, then the sound of retreating heels on the floor. The blond agent let out a sigh of his own and allowed himself to relax a bit. The chime rang, the doors slid open, and he dragged the cart in with him. He poked the button for his office level and stood back.

The doors had begun to shut when a woman's hand flashed in and stopped the motion. Illya felt the now familiar rush again, and knew who it was before Jenna even appeared. She slipped in, allowing the doors to close behind her. Illya felt trapped, and wildly tried to restrain the surge of desired he felt for her. Outwardly, there was no hint of the turmoil he felt.

"Illya," Jenna started, wringing her hands nervously as she caught his eyes. "I .. I just wanted to thank you for last night. I had a very nice time."

The Russian was thankful for the cart that was between them, and alarmed that he thought he required a physical barrier to keep him away from her. It took him a second to realize that a reply was expected. "So .. so did I," he said politely and with all hope that what he was feeling wasn't outwardly obvious. He was trying to keep his eyes off her face, and especially her lips, when he felt her presence close to his.

He glanced up just as she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek; he turned his head instinctively and caught her lips with his before he could stop himself. He cradled

her cheek with his cupped hand, and kissed her deeply; she returned the kiss willingly, eager to continue, but the ding of the elevator made her jump and break the contact.

"What?" Illya said quietly as he blinked in surprise. He hadn't even heard the door! He straightened up quickly, but it took several moments for his head to clear.

Jenna had already grabbed the cart and was pushing it out the open door, her face red, when he saw two people, a man and a woman, standing outside waiting for the elevator. Their faces were shocked; Illya's cool demeanor was legendary in the organization and the two witnesses were taken aback by what they'd seen. The Russian agent quickly gathered himself and slipped out right after Jenna. He couldn't help but place his hand on her lower back as they quickly walked down the hallway, and he felt the eyes of the amazed agents on his back. There was the sound of scrambling feet as the witnesses finally bolted to clear the closing elevator doors.

Illya felt Jenna's warmth under his hand and turned his attention to her. He could see the outline of her body under the soft material of her dress, and felt his desire rise to overwhelm him again. He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted her lipstick, totally baffled by the outrageous thoughts that sprung in his head. He forced himself to stop in the hall just as Jenna and the book cart reached his office door a few feet ahead of him.

When she straightened up, she looked as wide-eyed and flushed as Illya felt. She stared at him, and touched her lips briefly with the fingers of her right hand. Then she dropped her arm, and began wringing her hands together.

"I'd better go," she whispered fearfully, and backed away a few steps before turning and retreating rapidly down the hall.

It was all Illya could do to keep himself from going after her. After many seconds, he forced his eyes to focus on the office door and ordered his feet to go inside, dragging the cart after him. He pulled the door shut, and sank in his chair with a sigh. Shaking his head in an effort to clear the pictures of her from his mind, he made a conscious effort to put together the briefing for Waverly.

Putting together the briefing was a near-impossible task. Illya was having difficulty making connections in the data, and the theories that seemed so clear to him yesterday were, at best, confusing. He simply couldn't concentrate; his thoughts kept drifting back to Jenna and the kiss. Whenever he got his mind going on the theories he was there to corroborate, he found his mind drifting into areas that made him squirm in his chair.

With only two hours until the briefing, and nothing decent to show his boss, Kuryakin threw his pen down in frustration and stormed out of his office. Passers by in the hall stepped aside immediately due to the intense expression on his face. Without a word to anyone, he left the building in an effort to clear his mind with a vigorous walk.

After several blocks, he felt much better and in control of himself. That thought gave him a shiver; he never felt out of control. He didn't like it one bit. His thoughts again strayed to Jenna, and he tried to think of her in unemotional terms. She was beautiful, smart, nice, and shared his interests in music and science. Why was he so shocked he liked her? She was a great girl.

When he finally convinced himself that he was fine and there was a logical reason for his attraction to her, he was able to put her aside and concentrated on the briefing.

He made it to Waverly's office, fully prepared, with minutes to spare. Illya confirmed that Dr. Engleberg's information had validity, but the missing 16 weeks of his

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life were suspicious. If the scientist was pitching his theories to various organizations around the world, hoping for a high bidder, that missing timeframe would have been an excellent time to do just that. Was he playing games, or really serious about defecting? Only Napoleon would be able to answer that, if he was successful in tracing Engleberg's movements during that time. Both Illya and Waverly concluded that they would have to hear Solo's full report before passing judgment on Engleberg.

After the briefing, Illya made his way to his office. He didn't miss the smiles passing agents gave him; word of the kiss in the elevator had obviously gotten around and it irritated him. He could only be relieved that Napoleon wasn't here to join in, and hoped it would be forgotten news by the time he returned. The Russian shook his head, mystified that one little kiss could be so newsworthy.

He gathered his things and left the building at the end of the day satisfied that he'd gotten something done. He hailed a cab and was dropped at his address within minutes, and changed into a loose turtleneck sweater and comfortable pants. Padding around the apartment in his stocking feet, he was surprised when he heard a knock on his door.

Quickly he checked the table next to the door and made sure his U.N.C.L.E. special was in the drawer, then he unbolted the door and opened it up. To his surprise, Jenna stood there with a confused look on her face. She had casual clothes on, and looked great to Illya, but he fought to keep his face neutral as the same feelings seemed to rush throughout his body.

"Hi," she said shyly, her cheeks pink. "I feel so silly, but, may I come in?"

"Sure," Illya heard himself reply as he stepped aside to let her pass. It was all he could do to keep his hands to himself as she walked past; he had this undeniable urge to touch her hair .. he reached out, but mentally ordered his hand back to his side as he shut the door and locked it again. He felt like a doomed man about to walk the plank, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Jenna stopped just a few steps away, and quickly turned to face him. "I just had to ... explain ... I didn't think you'd . . ." In frustration her shoulders slumped and she looked at the ceiling, trying to compose herself. One tear slipped down her cheek.

Illya was on automatic. The drive inside him overwhelmed him and he immediately stepped up and reached to wipe the tear away without thinking. Instantly, Jenna fell into his arms and found his lips with hers.

Any chance of Illya Kuryakin sending her away fled his mind as the feelings he had all day long finally drowned them both.

Act III : "Reminds Me Of My Aunt Nola."

The flight to Italy was long, as usual. Napoleon had taken the opportunity to catch some sleep, and was somewhat refreshed by the time he touched down in Rome. He flirted innocently with the stewardess as he debarked, and was met at the gate by a conservatively dressed man in his late 20's.

"Mr. Solo?" The man asked in heavily accented English. "I am from our Uncle's office, and at your disposal. My name is Benitto Suparini, and it's an honor to meet you."

Napoleon took Benitto's hand and shook it with amusement. "Thank you. Did you read the briefs Mr. Waverly sent ahead of me?"

"Yes, I did, and I've found one place you may want to visit." Benitto motioned for Solo to follow him, and started down the terminal. "We started with the last place Dr. Engleberg said he lived and worked just after that 16 week period he was missing."

"Good, good. That will save me some time." Napoleon replied. "Now, can you tell me who would have the most information about new birds around the office? I need to cross check some information with them later."

Benitto's head bobbed up and down in understanding. "I know who you need to see. I will arrange it for later this afternoon. Is that all right?"

Napoleon clapped his hand on the young agent's back. "Yes, my friend, it is. Let's grab my bag and hit that address, shall we? I don't want to waste any time."

They loaded up the small beige car and headed out of the airport terminal. Benitto's driving was fast but sure as he confidently wove his way between traffic.

"The address is very close by. This is the address Engleberg left Italy from. We haven't questioned the landlady yet. We thought you'd prefer to do that. He was that he was only there four days before he left for the United States. "

"OK, then, let's go speak to Madame...?"

"Cassarian. Eva Cassarian. Here we go." Benitto pulled over to a dirty curb in a narrow alley and killed the engine.

When Napoleon and his guide walked to the front of the car, two men stepped from around the corner and started their way. The older agent stopped Benitto with his arm, and the younger agent followed his gaze.

"Friends of yours?" Napoleon asked softly.

"Not that I can remember," Benitto replied, taking a sturdy stance.

"Excuse me!" Napoleon spoke a bit loudly, directing his voice towards the men. "Perhaps you could direct us to the nearest petrol station? Our car seems to have stopped."

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The men continued on, intent on the pair, not even bothering to answer. When they were close enough, the lead man pulled a baton from under his coat.

"Great. We would get stuck on the touchy side of town.." Napoleon started to pull out his gun, but he didn't have time to bring it up. The lead man swung without preamble, and Solo was quick enough to slip aside, grab his wrist and pull him off balance.

In the corner of his eye he saw Benitto's hand in a shoot from the hip position, and heard a double report from the gun. The only effect it had on the second man was to cause his step to hesitate a second.

Body armor, ran through Solo's mind as he brought his elbow down across the back of the first man's neck. It managed to fell the man to one knee, but that was about it. He came up quickly with a fist in Solo's abdomen, which threw the agent against the wall with a solid bang. He didn't hesitate at all, and managed to aim a direct kick to his assailant's groin. That stopped him, but to Solo's amazement, didn't drop him. It gave the agent the needed seconds to follow up with another kick to the knee, and a chop to the sensitive part behind the ear. That combination finally put the man to his hands and knees, but not out completely. Napoleon aimed one more two handed slam to the base of the man's neck, and laid him flat.

Solo quickly looked up and saw that Benitto was still grappling with his man, and was just flipping him over with an arm twist. The man hit with a "OOOOOFF!" as the air was slammed from his chest, and the young Italian agent finished him with a side kick to the windpipe. They were both breathing hard when Solo slapped him on the back.

"Good going there, Benitto. Let's see who they are."

Benitto searched for his dropped gun while Solo patted the pockets of the downed men. Each had a small handgun secured away in a back pocket, and each gun had a stylized bird engraved on the handle.

"Thrush," mumbled Solo. "This is getting more interesting."

Benitto recovered his and Solo's weapons, and glanced at the rival agents' small guns. "I got the impression that it wasn't confirmed that Thrush was involved here. I guess that changes that, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so." Napoleon switched the ammo in his handgun and fired a small sleeping dart into each man. "That should hold them long enough for us to interview madam Cassarian. "

They pulled the bodies into the shadows and found the dark steps ascending to the loft of Eva Cassarian. Benitto called on his small radio for a team to pick up the unconscious pair as Solo knocked on the door and smoothed his hair.

It took several knocks to finally get a response. "What? Who is it?" a woman's voice barked in Italian.

Napoleon responded in kind. "My name is Napoleon Solo, and my assistant and I have some questions about a former tenant," he said through the door.

The door cracked open, and a stooped woman with a thin scarf over her head peered at them through the opening. Her eye rolled up and down, taking them both in. "Who?" she finally barked.

"Daniel Engleberg. He left early last week."

The old woman frowned. "That ingrate?" she growled. "He left me in lurch! He owes me two days' rent!" She ranted.

"If you let us in and answer some questions, we can take care of his account for you," Solo said smoothly with an easy grin that always won the ladies over. The old crone looked him over once again with a deep frown, then slammed the door in his face. Napoleon jerked back to avoid his nose getting clipped, and was relieved to hear the sound of a chain lock being undone. The door jerked open again.

"Come in. Give me 1200 lira to close his account first."

Napoleon gave Benitto a sideways grin. "Well?" he said. "Pay the woman."

Benitto hesitated only slightly, and pulled out his wallet. He took out 1200 lira exactly, and handed it to her. She snatched it from his hand, counted it, and pulled out a squeaky drawer from an old desk. She lay the money in there then pulled out a small sheet of paper. She wrote something across the paper, then handed it to Benitto.

"Receipt." She grumbled. "Now what else do you want?"

Napoleon turned on the charm. "Mrs. Cassarian," he started.

"Miss," the woman barked.

"Excuse me?" Solo said, not expecting to be interrupted.

"Miss Cassarian. I have never been married." The frown was still plastered on her face.

"Ah, right. Miss Cassarian." Solo smiled again. "Miss Cassarian, I was wondering if you could tell me about Mr. Engleberg? Anything would do. First, I guess, is how did he find you to rent the apartment?"

"I am known around here." She stated. "Lived here my entire life. If he asked anywhere for a room, he would get my name." She waited expectantly for the next question, not offering a chair for the agents.

"I see. Did he pay cash?"

"Yes. Two day's cash."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No."

"Did he have anyone over?"

"I do not snoop. I don't know."

"He was here four days, right? Did you ask him for the last two day's rent?"

"I went up there on the third day, but no one was there. I saw him leave with his suitcase the fourth day, but I was not yet dressed, and did not chase him."

"So, did you know he was leaving for good?"

"No."

Getting information from this woman is like pulling teeth, Solo thought. "So, has anyone been in the room since he left?"

"Just me. I cleaned it on the fifth day when I did not see him return."

"You cleaned it? Did you find anything in there that didn't belong? I mean, anything left behind?"

"Just papers and trash. Nothing much."

"Where are the papers and trash now?"

"Who knows where paper and trash go? I take to the big trash can, and it goes away. I do not know. Are we finished?" The woman's expression was just as glum, not changing a bit during the conversation.

"Can we look at the room now? Is someone else in it now?"

"No, it is empty. I will take you." She reached into the ancient desk for a key ring.

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"If you don't mind, we can look by ourselves. No need to bother you anymore than we already have." Napoleon slowly reached out and took the keys. Eva Cassarian squinted at him slightly, but didn't resist. "Up stairs, first door on left. Room 310."

"Thank you."

Both agents left the room and went up the stairs and found 310 without any trouble.

"I guess she's not the chatty type," Napoleon mused as he glanced about the small apartment.

"Reminds me of my aunt Nola," Benitto said as he followed.

The apartment was dark and smelled of stale air. The thin curtains let in enough light to allow them to check the room carefully. There was nothing there. They both stopped in the kitchenette area, and checked the cabinets. There was a small pad of blank paper in one cabinet drawer next to an ancient black telephone. Solo followed a hunch, and took the pad to the window. He angled it in the light, and saw some impressions from a heavy writing hand on the now missing overlapping sheet.

"Good thing I learned something in Boy Scouts," Napoleon said softly as he withdrew his pen. "This won't do. Do you have a pencil?"

Benitto patted his pockets and shook his head, then triumphantly held up a stubby pencil that was rolling around in one of the kitchenette drawers. "Here!" he said, handing it over.

Solo carefully rubbed the side of the pencil's tip across the page. Handwriting appeared on the sheet; a set of numbers. Flight information, it looked like.

"Dr. Engleberg's flight information to the States," Benitto mumbled.

"No, I don't think so. We know the airline he arrived on, and they use four digits for international flights. This is only three. And the time here," Solo pointed out the second set of numbers below, "appears to be in the afternoon. That wouldn't coincide with his arrival time in New York. This could be an arrival time."

"Here? An arrival time in Rome?" Benitto thought out loud. "Was he meeting someone?"

"I don't know," Solo replied, sticking the paper in his pocket. "But I will soon."

They returned to the Rome office of U.N.C.L.E. where Solo made his report to Waverly. The fact that the Thrush goons were around Engleberg's old apartment wasn't enough to confirm the scientist's involvement, but it certainly raised the bar on suspicion. Solo told him that he'd report back once they'd interrogated the two Thrush operatives, and Solo cross-checked airline records with the numbers found in the apartment.

The head of the Rome office gave the interrogation duties to his top agents. Meanwhile, Benitto and Napoleon perused the airline information after obtaining permission from the airport officials. They quickly determined that the three digits did indicate a flight within Italy, and were able to nail down the actual airline and route. Assuming the note was written the day Engleberg left the apartment, which happened to be the same day he boarded a jet for the United States, they obtained the passenger manifest for that day for the flight arriving from Turin. Engleberg had been on the first flight leaving Rome after that. Was there something passed to him, or did he pass something off?

The interrogation had not results. Solo wasn't surprised; they were just hired guns. Really grouchy ones, too, the interrogators reported. They were very belligerent, but had no information.

They ran the names on the manifest through the U.N.C.L.E. computer; of the 110 passengers, there were 12 hits. Solo scanned the short list; 6 had misdemeanor convictions, 2 had outstanding warrants, 4 were government employees. Offhand, none of them panned out to have connections to Thrush.

"Before we chase these 12 down, let me look at that list again." Napoleon frowned as he went over each name one by one. About half way down, his eyebrows raised and he started to laugh.

"What?" Benitto asked. "I can use a laugh, please."

Napoleon handed over the list. "Under the 'P's. Any names catch you there?"

"Panarra, Pentz, Poza, Philo..."

"That one. Philo, T. Melos." Napoleon grinned. "Get it?"

Benitto frowned. "Well, Melos sounds rather Greek..."

"The whole name is Latin, Benitto. T.Philomelos. That's the Latin name for the Song Thrush, found in the woods of Italy."

Benitto rolled his eyes and tossed the paper on the table. "They didn't teach ornithology in my training class," he moaned.

"It takes an experienced bird watcher," Napoleon chided as he picked up the papers. "Let's trace Mr. Philo, shall we?"

They took the next flight to Turin, and landed late in the evening. The Turin airport checked their data and found that T. Melos Philo had purchased his ticket from an agency about 40 kilometers out of town. They rented a car and headed in that direction. They found themselves in the country, surrounded by farms. The main street consisted of a small grocery, post office, and a legal office that doubled as a travel agency. Since it was almost the middle of the night, nothing was open. At the end of the street was a large house with a 'rooms for rent' sign out front. The agents looked at each other, shrugged, and parked the car.

A porch light came on at the sound of the car door slamming. They could see the outline of a person peering out a front window as they walked up to the stairs. The door opened as they reached the top step.

"May I help you?" a middle aged woman asked.

"May we get rooms for the night?" Benitto asked. "We are simply too tired to keep driving like we planned."

Napoleon nodded at the story. "Just one night," he added.

The woman looked them up and down, made a decision, and opened the door. "I have two rooms upstairs. Please come in and register."

When they entered the house, they saw the figure of a man in the living room, smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper. The woman, Mrs. DiBiello, offered brandy in the living room before they retired for the evening. They both accepted. Mrs. DiBiello poured the drinks and introduced her husband, the man in the chair.

"Wait a minute." Napoleon said, pieces falling together. "Are you the attorney? I saw your sign 'DiBiello Law Office' in town."

The man nodded, and offered his hand. "Yes. Anthony DiBiello."

Napoleon shook his hand and introduced himself and Benitto. He accepted the brandy from Mrs. DiBiello, and inquired further. "I have to admit, the reason I

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remember your name is because I saw that your law office was also a travel agency. Isn't that an unusual combination?"

Mrs. DiBiello giggled slightly. "No, not really. I'm the travel agent, as well as Anthony's secretary. We also rent rooms here in our house."

"Quite the monopoly on companies, here," Napoleon commented lightly. "Do you run the grocery and post office, too?"

Anthony chuckled. "This is farming country, and we are not farmers, obviously! Have to make a living, even in this beautiful country. We only fill in at the post office and store when Leo and Arabella go on vacation!"

Napoleon nodded. "Well, this is quite fortuitous, actually. I'm out here looking for an old acquaintance. You may help my search; he bought an airline ticket from your travel agency last week. Philo? T. Melos Philo?"

Mrs. DiBiello smiled immediately. "Oh, yes! I recall him. Not only is his name odd, but I don't sell a lot of airline tickets this time of year."

"Did he give you an address?"

She hesitated answering.

Napoleon turned on the charm and continued. "You see, I have some things of his. He asked me to keep them a while ago, and now I'm relocating for work, and can't keep them anymore. I've tried to call him, but apparently his phone doesn't work. I know this is the general area he lives in, but I don't have his address. I'm moving the day after tomorrow; I'd love to get his things to him." He gave her his winningest smile. "It would really appreciate it. Or maybe I can leave the stuff here? Although I'd hate to miss seeing him..."

She smiled back. "Well, he doesn't really have an address. No one does out here."

"Then maybe I can leave the things..."

"No, I don't think we want the responsibility of that," Anthony replied. "Tell him how to get to the castle, dear. They can take the items."

Mrs. DiBiello drew a simple map, and the two agents retired for a few hours.

Act IV : The Line In The Sand

Agent Kuryakin was not very productive for the next few days. His ability to concentrate, even for short periods of time, was becoming more difficult as the days passed.

Now I understand why relationships within the office are frowned upon, he thought more than once as he fought to control the urges he felt. He couldn't remember a time when he was so overwhelmed by a woman, but that idea bothered him less and less as the days passed. His daily briefings with Waverly were becoming more difficult to pull off; Illya solved the problem by bringing up more questions rather than supply answers.

After their first night together, Illya was late for the office for the first time in a long time. He arrived slightly breathless and a bit disheveled. When he entered the storefront of Del Floria's Tailor Shop, the proprietor gave him a critical once over and suggested he let him press his jacket. Illya declined, knowing he was late.

He had managed to get off a good bit of research, narrowing down some of Engleberg's formulae to some sort of biological research, possibly a nerve gas of some kind with an organic base, when Jenna arrived at work, also breathless. They tried to ignore each other; Illya's mind raced with reasons to get closer to her, and with reasons why he shouldn't. By noon they were both exhausted with the inner turmoil and found themselves together in the deepest corner of the Research stacks. The meeting cumulated into a tryst that would have lasted longer if the infernal intercom from the upper floor hadn't broken them up.

Illya was both shocked and thrilled by the encounter, and had to fight off replaying the coupling in his mind. *I've never felt his out of control* constantly ran through his mind, but by the third day, he couldn't distinguish if this was a good thing or a bad thing - it was just an exciting thing, and the rush was addicting.

On that third day, he and Jenna had encounters in the elevator (stopping it between floors was Jenna's idea), and in Illya's office. They both were insatiable, and by the fourth day, he didn't even notice the giggling glances and looks of amazement of personnel passing him in the halls. His thoughts were so constantly intense on Jenna, he rarely walked the halls anyway; on that day they had an encounter in an empty office and the copy room. On the fifth day, Illya paced his office planning his next meeting with Jenna and completely forgot his midmorning briefing with Waverly. When his intercom buzzed he slapped it in anger.

"What?!" he snapped.

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There was a slight pause, then the voice of Waverly's secretary sternly said, "Mr. Waverly would like to see you now, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya blinked, momentarily stumped. "Fine," he replied curtly, clicking off the device and fumbling for his jacket. He caught himself cursing the old man's interference, and froze. *I've got to pull myself together*, he thought momentarily, taking a shaky breath and adjusting the cuff to his jacket. The drive to storm out the door and down the hall was overwhelming, but he managed to mask the feelings and put on his normal stoic face.

On his walk to Waverly's office, the blond Russian was oblivious to the passing looks tossed his way. He could feel himself struggling to keep his pace moderate and his expression bland when what he really wanted to do was fly into the old man's office and demand an explanation. Part of him knew these thoughts and feelings were unprecedented, but the other part thought, *It's about time I got to do what I want around here instead of following orders*. He was still struggling to listen to only one inner voice when he strode past the secretary without a glance.

"I guess Mr. Waverly will see you now," the woman said to herself with raised eyebrows to the back receding through the office door.

Illya came to an abrupt stop just inside as the door closed behind him. He managed to hold his tongue only because he was surprised to see some one else sitting next to his boss; a woman in a lab coat with a badge identifying her as being from the medical division. He was trying to connect her presence with any of the briefing information he had received this week, and realized that he didn't recall much from the briefings.

"Sit, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly stated bluntly, fumbling with one of his ever-present pipes. As he absently stuffed a bit of tobacco into the bowl, his eyes never left the agent. This made the ritual pipe stuffing a bit messy, but that wasn't unusual.

"I'd rather stand," Illya stated flatly, eyeing the woman with suspicion.

"It wasn't a request. Sit." Waverly broke eye contact long enough to round up a match.

Illya flopped into the chair furthest away from the pair, and started to drum his thighs with his fingers. He openly glared at the woman, then at Waverly, but managed to keep quiet.

There were several seconds of heavy silence as Waverly lit his pipe and the woman studied Illya over the top of her glasses. She sat with her hands neatly folded on a file on the table. Illya got the impression that she was evaluating *him*, and he felt his anger growing.

Mr. Waverly blew out a stream of blue smoke. "It seems, Mr. Kuryakin, that we are overdue for an evaluation of your work."

The older man's hard brown eyes locked with the agent's steely blues. He may have spoken softly, but Illya knew that a line had been drawn in the sand, and that he was currently on the wrong side of it.

Act V : The Thrush In The Woods

"They weren't kidding when they called this a castle," Benitto said the next day, adding a low whistle.

The road had proved to be curvy, and the scenery pleasant enroute to the castle. They finally caught sight of it after they rounded a long curve carved in the side of a low valley. The castle was across the valley, nestled part way up the opposite slope. Below were beautifully arranged fields of crops and cattle.

"Some Thrush satraps don't mince on elegance," Solo replied. "Don't let appearance fool you. Let's park away from it, and see if we can walk in unnoticed."

Benitto found an appropriate spot just off the main highway amongst a collection of shrubs. The car was well hidden.

They exited the vehicle, and hoofed it towards the castle. After passing several fields, they were almost to the castle grounds, and Solo called for a rest.

"Did you notice anything odd about those fields?" Solo said casually, leaning against a tree. "The cattle fields, I mean?"

Benitto looked around. "Well, I'm kind of a city boy, but there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of cattle out there."

"True. But what have you noticed about the cattle that *are* out there?"

The thick eyebrows of the younger agent knitted together. "Like I said, I'm not a farmer, but there seems to be a lot of bulls..."

Solo snapped his fingers. "Right you are. In fact, I haven't seen any cows yet."

After a bit they continued on. As they got closer to the castle, there were mixed herds in smaller areas. What caught Solo's eye were the labels on the corral gates; a series of numbers he couldn't identify. Usually on farms, the animals were tagged, not the gates. Here, it was both. The only time he'd seen the 'cages' numbered was when it was lab rats; he logged that away in his mind as they continued on.

There were few guards around the castle. One was in the front, and one on the side. They looked bored; *probably not a lot of trespassers around here*, Napoleon thought as they circled around to the back. There was a row of small windows just above the ground line that indicated numerous basement rooms. Another guard in the back was leaning against a tree, losing a battle to sleeping in the cozy mid day sun. Adding all this up, opportunity seemed to have dropped in their laps, and Napoleon had a sudden urge to check out the basement windows.

He signaled for Benitto to follow him, and came around to the other side of the dozing guard's tree. Their sneaking flushed a rabbit out from the woods and across the

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lawn, right in front of the guard. There was no response. Solo grinned to himself and tip toed forward, signaling his partner to stand by.

When he got to the backside of the tree he could see the muzzle of the rifle pointing to the ground. He went around the other way, and heard the soft breathing before he saw the sleeping guard. Solo quietly slipped one of the sleeping darts from his arsenal, palmed it, and jabbed the man in the neck. All he heard was a quiet "Umph!!" and the man slipped to the ground. Solo dragged him into the woods and had Benitto take the clothing.

"Stand watch. I'm checking the windows." As Benitto dressed, Solo trotted across the lawn and inspected the windows. The young Italian joined him within minutes.

"I see cages, and a lab set up. And monkeys...lots of monkeys..." Napoleon muttered. Finally, the agent stood up. "I'm going inside. You stay out here and keep an eye open."

Acknowledged with a tight nod, Solo crept along the wall to a door. Benitto patted the uniform pockets and came up with a small ring of keys and handed them off to Solo. The outside door was unlocked, and he quietly let himself in.

It was obviously a back door intended for use of the hired help. Nothing fancy back here; supply closets, kitchen linens, extra chairs and other seldom used supplies. He was behind the kitchen; he could hear the clank of pans and the soft chatter of cooks around the corner. Just before the corner was a locked door. Solo worked through the keys and found one that fit, then slipped through the opening. There were stairs going down to a large room lit only by the daylight through the small, high windows. Solo could see Benitto's feet passing by as he patrolled the back of the castle.

Suddenly, there was a clamoring on one side of the room. A big monkey, *a Bonobo*, Napoleon thought automatically, began rattling his cage at the sight of the agent. This started the cage next to him going, and soon the two simians were trying to out do each other with shrieking and slapping each other through the bars. Solo ignored them, and looked for notes.

Quickly, he checked drawers and files. He saw various names on the files of several scientists who had worked here. He found the files dated within the past 17 weeks, and wasn't surprised to find many with Engleberg's name on them. The pieces were starting to fit in Napoleon's brain, but that still didn't answer if Engleberg was *still* Thrush. If T. Milos Philo were still around, then Philo obviously handed something off the Engleberg before he left for the States .. or Engleberg was being chased by Philo. Somehow Solo's gut didn't go with that thought; why would Philo then call the scientist with flight information?

Skimming the files, he wished Illya was here. He had a better understanding of formulas and experiments, and could figure this out much faster. He took out his lighter camera, and went to work.

Several minutes went by, along with two film changes for the camera, when Solo heard the hall door open and the sound of voices. The monkeys increased their racket, giving Solo the cover he needed to put the files back. As he closed the drawer, a small notebook in the front caught his eye; he grabbed it, put it in his shirt, and melted back into the rear of the room.

He listened more than watched as the people - two, he decided from the conversation - went about their duties. They were apparently the clean up crew. Solo

could hear the shrieks and rattling of the cages as the monkeys were tended to one by one. And there wasn't much love lost between the humans and the simians.

"I can't wait until these guys go." Grumbled one worker in back country Italian, a male. "I've got so many scars on my hands I could make a picture."

The woman giggled. "I don't have a problem with them. Must be a competition with other males thing."

They talked about the latest soccer match and the weather, then the sounds of cleaning themselves up.

"That should be the last day of this, anyway. I heard these guys were scheduled for removal," the man said. "After that, they'll start moving the bulls out. I think I'd rather deal with these idiots." Solo heard a cage bang. "At least I outweigh them!"

"Maybe you can take the opportunity to train yourself as a bull fighter!" The girl suggested in a teasing tone. "Those animals out there are certainly mean enough!"

"What is it with this place and mean animals?" The male said, their voices getting further away as they ascended the stairs. "They certainly don't arrive that way."

The girl's reply was lost as the door slammed. Solo looked at his watch. He had enough time to get away, and get that evening's plane from Turin to the States. He didn't think there was much more here he could get, and the U.S. Government was pressing for a response on Engleberg's asylum approval. If Engleberg was in New York for nefarious reasons, Solo felt there was enough in his photos and notebook to figure out what it was.

Solo emerged from his hiding spot, and made for the stairs. He cracked the door at the top, glanced about, and slipped into the hall. As he reached the end by the back door, a phone rang. He flattened himself against the wall as a man in an apron snatched the device from the cradle, which happened to be in full view of the back door. Solo hoped he blended into the shadows sufficiently.

The cook spoke in rapid fire Italian. "What? What? There is no one here. I am busy!" A lull. "All right! I will look!" The chef slammed the phone onto the table and strode to the back door, pulling it open. He stuck his head out. "Hey! Hey! Are you sleeping? Good! Only you out there? Yeah, I see! Go back to work!" He spun around and picked up the phone again. "The guard is still out there. Yes, yes, he is awake! I saw him with my own eyes!" Then a pause. "Fine. Goodbye." Solo heard the phone get replaced on the cradle none too gently.

After a full minute, he stepped from the wall and moved to the door, which was on his left. The kitchen was on his right, and he glanced over and saw it was clear, and edged to the door. He opened it quickly, and stepped out, then ran across the lawn. Benitto met him at the tree.

"I think our car may have been found. We need to get out of here, now. I think I have all we need," he patted the notebook.

With a nod and a grin, the young Italian shed the uniform and tossed it in the bushes. He decided to keep the rifle for now, and they both slipped away through the woods. They paused by the front of the house, and Solo's eye caught motion on the front porch. He could hear a female ordering the guard in Italian; he looked for the woman, and saw her pointing away from them. She was very trim, mid 20's, wearing a tailored suit, and had her auburn hair swept up in a French roll. Solo appreciated her profile for a moment, wondering what she was upset about. He couldn't quite make out what she was saying

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Benitto tugged urgently on Solo's arm, distracting him from the woman, and got him moving again. They made it all the way to the car before they heard the klaxon of alarms at the castle. Quickly, they jumped in and started back towards Turin.

Act VI : "What Did You Get Into, My Friend?"

Suspended!

Illya was outraged. Waverly had suspended him! First he had requested that the Russian take immediate, and long overdue, vacation time. When he had refused, the old man told him he was suspended until further notice, taken his weapons from him, and then had actually removed him from the building! To top it off, that bloody woman had taken blood samples

Illya stormed around his apartment, unable to calm himself. He ripped off the band-aid covering the needle mark, causing a spot of blood to appear. That had infuriated him even more, and finally, feeling completely helpless as his career crumbled around him, he banged his way out of the apartment in search of a bar with good Russian vodka. So what if it was shortly past noon? It was cocktail time somewhere in the world, wasn't it?

So intent in his anger, Illya Kuryakin didn't even notice the man following him.

He found a dark bar several blocks away. There weren't that many patrons due to the time of day, and service was quick. He slammed down two shots of something the bartender claimed was vodka, and Illya complained sourly as he ordered a third shot. The bartender watched him carefully as he poured the third shot.

"What are you staring at?" The Russian snapped. He downed the third shot. "I know watered down vodka when I taste it, and this is definitely that."

"Then don't drink it," the bartender growled, demanding to be paid.

"It isn't worth it!" Illya challenged. "I won't pay for water!"

"Listen, buddy. Pay for the drinks or I call the cops."

Grudgingly, Illya paid up, and was told to leave. He did so, but not without an argument.

The next bar was next to a construction site. By now it was a little after 3 P.M. on a Friday afternoon, so there were more occupants here. Illya found a dark corner and fumed as he slowly drained the bottle of Stol's he had purchased. The bar filled up as the afternoon progressed, and right after 4, the construction workers arrived, sweaty, dirty and laughing.

Illya was about halfway through the bottle when a couple of the workers bumped his table. The Russian shot to his feet and told the men to back off. Noticing the smaller man's accent, they turned their attention to him.

"What are you, anyway? German?" The first man said, cracking his knuckles.

Illya stayed on his feet and glared, his eyes icy. His hands were gripping the edge of the table, his knuckles white. He could feel the fury building.

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"Don't you speak American, fella?"

"Course he does, Billy, he already tole ya to go away."

"Go away? HE tole ME to go away? He ain't even American! He's the one that should be leavin'!"

Friends of Billy laughed and clicked their beer bottles at their friend's bright observation. Billy, emboldened by his friends, leaned over to pick up the vodka. "What kinda pussy drink is this stuff, any....." he didn't finish his sentence.

Illya grabbed his wrist and bent it to nearly breaking. He pulled the enormous man close to his mouth, his eyes boiling. "I don't share with morons," the enraged Russian said lowly.

"Hey!" Billy yelled. He reached with his other hand to push the smaller man back, but heard the snap of his wrist bone before he could connect. "AAHHHH!" he yelled as Illya pulled him onto the table, then flipped him to the floor.

Then all hell broke loose.



When Napoleon touched down he was surprised to find a driver waiting for him. Usually he just took a cab. The driver told him his luggage would be attended to by someone else, as Waverly wanted to see him as soon as possible.

It was nearly 11 at night when he walked through one of the secluded entryways to the offices of U.N.C.L.E. He warmly greeted the receptionist who clipped his ID badge on him, but she seemed to be subdued, as were the few people that passed him in the hall. When he arrived at Waverly's office, a secretary waved him through.

Waverly looked up as Solo entered. "Ah, Mr. Solo, good. We have a problem, and I am hoping that what you have brought back may be the answer we are looking for. Your briefing before you left was intriguing. Are you sure the monkeys you saw were Bonobos?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure. I understand that Bonobos have the closest genetic similarity to humans of all the apes. If the formulas were for something to be used on humans as Illya suggested, it was logical that they were there."

"Yes, yes, of course. Naturally. Tell me, did you get any idea what they may have been testing in that lab?"

Solo settled back in his chair. "No, not really. That's what Illya and the lab can figure out. Whatever it was, they were through testing, because the monkeys were being moved out."

"Hmm .. yes. And you are sure Engleberg's involved?"

"Yes," Solo answered without hesitation. "His names were all over the files, and in this hand written log." Solo pulled out the book and lay it on the table. "I believe he was there the entire 16 weeks he was missing. We need to pick him up for more questioning. I believe he is still involved with Thrush."

Waverly regarded his top agent as he leaned back in his chair. "That may prove difficult, Mr. Solo. He has disappeared."

"Disappeared? Illya lost him?" Solo sat up straighter.

The head of the New York office of U.N.C.L.E. hesitated, gauging his number one enforcement agent for a moment. "Mr. Kuryakin wasn't watching him. He has been .. suspended."

"WHAT?" Napoleon stood quickly, knocking his chair over. "Why?"

"His behavior has been .. questionable." Waverly was clearly not comfortable with the subject, but continued. "I do not listen to rumor, Mr. Solo. And there is a lot of it around this building, as I'm sure you know."

Napoleon nodded tightly, keeping his impatience to himself. "Yes," he said slowly. "What does that have to do with Illya?"

Waverly shifted again. "Well, within two days after you left, I heard some .. stories ... about Mr. Kuryakin's .. er..sexual behavior."

Napoleon laughed and recovered his chair. "There's always been rumors about that, sir, but Illya..."

"Then I saw some surveillance tapes."

Napoleon stopped, mouth still open. "Tapes?"

"Yes, Mr. Solo. You know the number of cameras we have in this building for security. Practically every square inch is covered. I .. ah .. interrupted a group watching a tape in an empty office. Perhaps you'd better see." Waverly flipped a button and a small screen lit up on the wall. The tape was of Jenna and Illya in the elevator. It was explicit, and left no room for doubt. "I then did some research, and found these. All from this past week." The pictures changed to an empty office, Illya's office, then the copy room and the Research stacks. All were very clear shots. The last one was dark, and only a set of legs and arms could be seen, but the sound and motion was as conclusive as the others.

Napoleon felt his face turn red, and his mouth opening and closing. He was speechless.

"I cannot have that type of behavior among my agents, Mr. Solo, and I know this would be considered extreme, especially for Mr. Kuryakin. At the same time, there was a dramatic drop in the quality of his work. When I brought him in to question him about it, he, well, threatened me."

"He THREATENED you?" Solo didn't think he could be more amazed. His cool, cunning partner and friend, had completely lost his mind!

"Well, yes. After I suspended him, of course. He said, ah, let's see .. something about throwing me out the window." He held up his hand. "Now, before you come to a conclusion, I want you to think about the timing. When I saw his behavior becoming so .. bizarre .. I began to wonder about the kidnapping."

"But he said nothing really happened. That he had been drugged," Solo sank back into his chair, bewildered.

"And we checked his blood when he returned. There was nothing there, save a little residual from the knock out drug. When I called him to my office, I had the psychiatric nurse here."

Solo snorted. He could imagine a sane Illya's response to that; and insane one would be unimaginable.

"She observed his behavior, and took a blood sample before I had to have him removed from the building."

"You had him *removed*?!"

"Um, yes. That was after he took a swing at me."

This was getting weirder by the minute. Part of him wished he could have seen this incident, and part was glad he hadn't been around. "Was anything there? In his blood?"

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"The only thing found was an unusually large amount of testosterone. The male hormone."

"Unusually large?" Solo questioned. He was beginning to feel like a parrot, repeating his boss's words.

"Very. Almost 100 times the normal amount. We had his records from his previous examination, and there was no damage anywhere in his brain to account for such levels. In fact, there's nothing in *nature* to account for such levels. And everything was normal after the kidnapping. Something is making him produce these levels since then. And such levels would account for the behavior."

"So there may be something *outside* of nature that can do this, you think."

"Perhaps. We're hoping the answer may be in the notes you brought back. Before he was .. well, incapacitated, Mr. Kuryakin suspected there was an organic agent involved in the formulas Dr. Engleberg gave us. That may be a starting point."

"So now that there's a possibility that there is an outside influence at work here, shouldn't Illya be in the infirmary here, for observation?"

Waverly shifted again. "He is, Mr. Solo. After speaking with you we sent a team to bring him back, but he wasn't at his apartment. We found him just before you arrived back in New York. He was in the intensive care at a local hospital."

"WHAT?" Solo jumped to his feet again. "What happened? He's here now?"

"Yes, they just completed the transfer when I sent the driver to get you. Apparently, he was badly beaten in a .. er, bar fight."

This was a nightmare. Solo excused himself and left the office, heading directly down to the lower level infirmary. He brushed off the greetings and condolences, and burst into the intensive care part of the infirmary.

There was only one occupant. Through the glass he barely saw any skin; fingertips and part of a face, but every other part was either in a cast or wrapped. The one exposed eye was bruised and swollen shut. Solo couldn't recall the last time his friend looked this bad, or if he *ever* looked this bad.

He pushed the door open to the room against the quiet protests of the nurse on duty. He ignored her, and stepped up the side of the bed and gripped the rail.

"He's unconscious. He'll probably be that way for awhile," the nurse said softly but sternly.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked, unable to take his eyes off his friend.

"He has a fractured skull, a broken nose, a broken collarbone, broken ribs, some internal injuries that have been repaired in surgery, his right hand is basically shattered and his left arm is broken. Right now, they're waiting to see if there's any danger of brain hemorrhage. We can only wait and see." She lay her hand on top of Solo's. "I'm sorry."

"Where's his ID and personal effects? Are they safe?" Solo inquired hoarsely.

The nurse regarded him blankly. "Personal effects? Other than his wallet, there were none."

Solo looked at her. "No clothing? None at all?"

She shook her head. "Maybe they are at the hospital."

Something started jiggling at Solo's mind. "I'll go look," he replied. "Now what did you get into, my friend?" he asked the prone figure before he turned away.

Act VII : "Totally Organic, But Not Natural."

The emergency room at Yonkers Medical Center was a mess. It was obviously understaffed and over worked. He found the admitting nurse, and she remembered Illya.

"I've seen beatings, but that guy was bad. I don't know how he kept fighting when he was hurt so badly; tough fellow. There's a couple of guys still here that he tangled with."

"Where's the clothes he was wearing?"

"His clothes? We had to cut most of 'em off. We usually put them in a plastic bag under the gurney, and it goes around with him. His shirt was a goner, though. Had to cut lots of parts off." She continued scanning charts. "His clothes didn't transfer with him? It was busy; let's go check the gurney."

Napoleon followed her through the throng into an exam room where several gurneys were grouped together.

"It's one of these. Look underneath," she said. "There's a basket under there."

All the baskets were empty.

"Can we check the room?" Solo asked.

"Sure, if it's not in use." She led him back again, and stopped him at the door. "Sorry. Full."

Napoleon looked through the window at a large, muscular man on the gurney.

"In fact, he's one of your friend's victims. Shattered trachea and arm. Amazing. He's about three times the size of your friend!"

Solo was looking around the room. "What about the trash can there? If his clothes were in so many pieces, could some of it been tossed in there?"

"It's possible. I'll look." She popped in the room as Solo looked at the patient and visualized Illya karate chopping his throat. He wondered what part of Illya this guy broke in return.

He saw the nurse pull out a long piece of cloth, and bring it to the hall. "This is it. A sleeve. The rest is gone. Sorry."

Napoleon gently took the sleeve. It was mostly caked with dried blood that cracked and flaked when he rolled it up.

"Thanks," he said, digging out a business card for his false firm. "Call me if anymore shows up, will you?" He smiled at her.

"Sure," she replied, tucking the card in a pocket. "Gotta get back to work."

Napoleon thought about going to the bar where the fight took place, but he decided to take the bit of clothing to the lab instead.

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By the time he got back to the office, it was the wee hours of the morning and dawn wasn't far off. The lab guys were happy to have something different to do. The night shift usually consisted of monitoring cultures and experiments the day shift had started, so they took the torn sleeve with a gleam in their eyes. Solo imagined that it would be put through every piece of equipment the lab had.

Solo returned to the Intensive Care Unit and plopped down in a chair. His eyes burned from lack of sleep, and the shock of the day's news had worn him out. He propped his chin on his hand, stretched out his legs, and prepared to wait. It wasn't long before he was asleep.

He was awakened by the smell of coffee. He smiled up at Lizabeth, one of the receptionists at the entrance from Del Floria's Tailor Shop. She had been there for quite awhile now, and had consistently refused Solo's advances. Her steadfastness against him had resulted in a nice friendship. "Hey, there," she said gently. "Thought you may need this. I saw that you checked in last night and never left!" She threw a glance at the prone Russian. "How is he?"

Solo took the coffee gratefully. "Still unconscious. Still waiting. We'll see." He sipped the brew gratefully.

"I'm sorry, Napoleon," she said.

Just then the door opened, and a distraught looking Jenna entered.

Oh my God, she looks awful! Napoleon thought. Lizabeth even seemed taken aback. Solo put the coffee down and stood up. Jenna stopped at the ICU windows and immediately burst into tears at the sight of Illya. With Lizabeth on one side and Solo on the other, they helped her to a nearby chair. Her sobbing was borderline hysteria; her dress rumpled and disheveled, her nails bitten to the skin. Alarms went off in Solo's mind. She had been in a bad way for several days at least.

"Lizabeth, stay with her. I'm going to get someone." The receptionist nodded, and put a sympathetic arm around the weeping woman.

Solo went straight to the psychiatric office and got the doctor. He followed Solo to the ICU, and immediately took over Jenna's care. As soon as they left the room, the ICU nurse approached him.

"Mr. Solo? The lab wants you to come by."

With a quick peck to Lizabeth's cheek, Solo retrieved his coffee and headed to the lab.

"What we have here is totally organic, but not natural," the technician started. "It's an oil embedded in the material, I'd say from an outside source, because it's in a scattered pattern on the cloth."

"Did it come from the person who wore the shirt?" Solo asked.

"No. It's on the outside. We're running comparative substances now, but the closest we've come up with is some sort of pheromone."

"A what?"

"A pheromone. A type of hormone meant to attract a sexual partner and sometimes called musk. This one, though, is different. It's human, I think, but there are some subtle differences. It's much stronger than normal, for one."

A sexual hormone? Solo tiredly ran the facts of what he knew through his head as he ran his hand through his hair. He felt the presence of the lab man next to him. Then it hit him.

"Can you tell if the male or female made this hormone?"

"Definitely made by the female. That much I'm sure of."

Solo rocketed out of the lab to the medical section. He found the doctor drawing something into a syringe.

"Is that for Jenna?" Solo asked breathlessly.

The doctor eyed him calmly. "Yes."

"Could you take a blood sample before giving her that? I think she may be drugged."

The doctor hesitated. "She says she hasn't taken anything."

Napoleon patiently continued. "In the course of my current assignment, I believe that she may have been given something without her knowledge. We need to know what it is. There's also a possibility other tampering, so I would think that a full exam would be in order. And I'd like the results as soon as you have them."

The doctor nodded. "First I need to confirm with Mr. Waverly. Then I will keep you informed. Do you want the blood sent to the lab?"

"Yes," Napoleon replied. "I'll tell them what to look for."

It was down to waiting now. Tiredly, Napoleon returned to the ICU for the vigil.

Act VIII : "What A Mess!"

Solo caught a few hours' sleep in the ICU. There was no change in Illya's condition, but the doctors were confident that there was no danger of brain hemorrhage. Now it was a matter of the swelling to go down enough, and he should regain consciousness.

The worried agent went to his office and changed into the spare suit he always kept there, and tried to clean up. His intercom buzzed around 11.

"Mr. Solo, please come to Mr. Waverly's office."

Napoleon acknowledged the summons, checked his jacket and weapon, and left for his meeting. When he arrived, he found that the head lab technician, the psychiatrist and the infirmary doctor also in attendance.

"Gentlemen," Mr. Waverly opened, gathering pipe and tobacco. "Let's see what we have. It should prove most interesting. Dr. Whitely, please begin."

Dr. Whitely was the physician from the infirmary. He ran down Illya's symptoms, and the mechanics involved with the production of testosterone in the normal male. He was followed by the lab technician, Dr. Weaver, who summarized his discoveries with the pheromones and how they tied in with the production of testosterone.

Solo rubbed his eyes as he listened, and stopped them for clarification. "So, you're saying that this pheromone is inhaled? And that triggers the production of testosterone which then triggers aggressive behavior?"

"Yes," Weaver confirmed. "But there's something odd about this particular sample of pheromone. It has additional triggers, so to speak. It's as if it has been altered to attack a specific genetic marker."

There was silence as this sank in. Dr. Whitely frowned. "You're talking about genetic engineering. That's not possible. The human genome is extremely complex. It would take decades to map it completely to figure out what marker to aim for!"

"True," Weaver said, "But the whole genome doesn't have to be mapped. You just have to know where the one you want is."

Solo felt a headache starting, and missed Illya even more. His partner had a gift for explaining these things to him in a way he could understand clearly. "Wait. You're telling me this ... pheromone ... was designed to work only on Illya's system?"

Weaver said yes. Whitely looked skeptical. That was when the psychiatrist, Dr. Ives, spoke up.

"Maybe I can confirm some of this," he mused. "It certainly explains some things I noted about Miss Baker."

It took Solo a few seconds to realize he meant Jenna.

"When I first examined Miss Baker, I thought she was suffering from stress and depression. Then Mr. Solo insisted on some blood work and a more thorough exam on her. What I found was the possibility that Miss Baker has been previously conditioned with hypnosis."

Mr. Waverly's bushy eyebrows shot up as he puffed on his smoldering pipe. "Is that so?" he said around the stem in his mouth. "To do what, may I ask?"

"I believe that she was conditioned to seduce Mr. Kuryakin."

Solo about fell out of his chair on that note. "What? But she's engaged to someone else! I thought a hypnotized person couldn't do things that went against their personal moral beliefs."

"True, Mr. Solo, true. But there may have been some sort of attachment or attraction to begin with. Also, I gave Miss Baker's clothes to the lab, and they confirm that they are loaded with that pheromone. It appears that she may be the source of it, but I haven't found any conclusive results from her blood work. I'm not familiar with the genetic marker field."

"So," Solo mused, "Is she making the pheromone? Or has she been programmed to apply it daily somehow?"

Dr. Ives shook his head. "I don't know."

Weaver added, " But based on the amounts on her clothing, it's possible that she applies it in a spray, like a perfume."

Solo stood. "I'll check her apartment. It may still be there, if that's the case."

"I fully agree, Mr. Solo. You may proceed with that assignment. I already have other agents looking for Dr. Engleberg."

"Speaking of Engleberg," the lab tech added, holding up the manual Solo had taken from the castle, "I have a theory about why we are seeing this at all. I think this pheromone is being field tested."

The racks of monkey cages and labeled corrals immediately came to his mind. "That's what's in that manual, isn't it? A record of field tests in animals."

"It looks like it." Weaver agreed, flipping open a page. "I read your field report. Were these the number sequences you found on the corral fences?" He shoved the book over to Solo, who glanced at the pages.

"Yes. That's the sequence."

"Well, according to these records, the good news is that once the subject is removed from the pheromone, he returns to normal. If it was on his clothes, like the piece you gave me, it would continue to stimulate testosterone production. Mr. Kuryakin's apartment may have to be checked for residue."

Solo cracked a grin as he started for the door. "I think he'd appreciate that."

Jenna's apartment was on the sixth floor of a secured building. Solo had to produce his U.N.C.L.E. identification to get in the building, and to her room. When the manager took him to her place and opened the door, she was shocked at what she saw.

"What a mess! This is highly unusual for Miss Baker. She's usually as neat as a pin." The woman clucked her tongue as she glanced around. "Don't step on anything, now." She stated before leaving.

Solo knew as soon as he saw the room that he probably wouldn't find anything; it appeared that someone had beaten him here. As soon as that thought struck him, he nonchalantly crossed the room, then flattened himself against the wall by the windows. He peeked out, and studied the street. There was some foot traffic on the sidewalk, and

some people waiting on a bus bench, but only one figure standing still, leaning against the wall by the bus stop. He was lighting a cigarette, but Solo saw him tilt his head up towards Jenna's window. Solo grinned to himself.

"So," he mumbled. "I have an admirer. Maybe they didn't get what they wanted from here after all. "

He left the apartment, and planned his trap for the tail. Walking briskly down the sidewalk, he made sure the man was on the same side of the street before he turned down a busy street with lots of storefront stores and bistros. Being lunchtime, it was quite crowded. Solo stopped at a vendor's window and bought a hot dog, then moved slowly away, just keeping within the tail's sight. Stopping by a storefront with an empty bistro table out front, Solo put the food down and stepped back into the store doorway.

The tail skidded to a stop when he saw the hot dog on the table. He was glancing around the street when Solo stepped from the dark doorway and shoved the barrel of his U.N.C.L.E. special into his back. He kept the gun hidden from the general public with his body.

"Nice day for a walk, isn't it? Come on, let's go." He pushed the man along to the first alley, then directed him to walk to the end. Solo shoved him up to the wall, removed a gun from his waistband and stepped back, his U.N.C.L.E. special aimed at his stomach. He glanced at the handgun he had retrieved. "Thrush, I see. Where's Engleberg?" Solo snapped.

"Who?" the man sneered in reply.

Solo shot him in the foot. The silencer made only the merest 'pop', but the man screamed and fell to the ground and rolled around. "I'm not in the mood," Solo snapped at the whimpering man. "One of my friends is seriously hurt, and another a mental wreck. Tell me, or your knee is next." He raised the gun to accent his words.

"OK, OK! The only place I know of is a warehouse on the East side. Corner of 63rd and Commercial. Don't know any names, but that's where I got my orders." The man ground his jaw in pain. "I need help, here!"

"I'll get your help," Solo growled, pulling out his communications pen. "Open channel D," he spoke into it.

"Hello, Napoleon." Lizabeth's voice crooned, causing him grin slightly. "You want Mr. Waverly?"

"No, I don't need to speak to him yet. Just have a pick up in an alley off of Main," he gave her the directions.

"I'll inform him, Napoleon, " she said calmly. "And you may like to know that Mr. Kuryakin is conscious now."

"Thanks, Lizabeth. That's the best news I've had today!" Solo grinned.

Solo stayed with the wounded Thrush until the car picked them up and whisked them back to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Solo had the Thrush taken to interrogation, and decided to drop in on his friend.

Illya hadn't moved much, but the exposed eye was open, the swelling down. The bruises, however, were sorely evident. Solo saw the merest twitch of a smile on the corner of his partner's lip when he bent over the bed.

"Hey," he said cheerily. "You napping again?"

Illya moved as if to try and sit up, but stopped with a groan. "Evidently," his friend whispered. "Did I get hit by a bus?"

Solo smiled. "Hardly. You don't remember taking on a room full of construction workers?"

Illya shut his eye briefly. "I don't remember leaving the building," he croaked softly. Then after a second, "Did I win?"

Solo chuckled. "If winning means you're alive, then yes.." Then, seriously, he asked. "Illya, do you remember your kidnapping?"

The blond agent was quiet for a moment. "Some of it ..."

Solo continued. "You said a woman was there. Can you describe her?"

The Russian blinked slowly. "Short blonde hair, green eyes, plays sax..."

Solo rolled his eyes in frustration. "Illya, you're describing Jenna! Trust me, my friend, the sooner you forget her, the better." Solo placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Think...the kidnapping.."

Illya was quiet for a moment. "Isn't in my report?"

"I'm sure it is. But I need to know now."

Illya was quiet so long that Napoleon thought he had fallen asleep with his eye open. Finally, he whispered, "Um, late 20's, shoulder length auburn hair, trim. Wore a suit." Illya's words were almost unintelligible by the end.

"Do you remember anything else?"

"I .. don't ..." and his eye drifted shut as his breathing became soft and steady.

"Sorry, Mr. Solo. The sedative must have kicked in," the nurse said quietly as she approached the bed and adjusted Illya's pillow and I.Vs.

"That's OK. Thanks." Solo left the ICU and the building, headed for the warehouse district.

Act IX : "He Doesn't Need To Know This!"

He scoped out the warehouse from the outside, and there wasn't any sign of activity. The only vehicle was a newer sedan parked on the corner.

Solo crept up to the windows, but couldn't see much inside. If this was a Thrush operation, it was temporary. There was nothing permanent looking anywhere inside. He found an open door and entered. It took him almost an hour to check the entire interior, but found nothing. He was stumped.

Napoleon was about to retreat and see if the goon had given up any more information when he heard a car pull up outside. He scrambled for cover, and tried to discern where the arrival would enter. The tack-tack-tack sound of a woman's heels came from off to Solo's right, followed by the slam of the building door. He risked a peek, and saw the same woman from the castle in Turin. *Illya's kidnapping friend*, Solo thought, comparing the description. She disappeared out of Solo's sight and the heel sounds stopped. He heard the groan of a door, the hollow sound of heels on stairs, and the banging of a door closing.

Solo was mystified. He hadn't seen a door in that area...

He let himself out of his hiding place and went to where he thought the woman went. He studied the walls carefully. There were several partial walls in this building, remains of previous remodeling. Solo looked carefully, and ran his hand over the freestanding wall. With a little pressure, he discovered that a metal seam was not as solid as it first appeared. He pushed the wall next to the seam, and the section gave as if counterbalanced. Pushing harder opened a space enough to reveal a stairway going down! A basement!

Solo pulled out his gun and started down the stairs. It was a long, dark descent, and he could hear voices ahead of him. They seemed to be arguing. He moved slowly down the hall, and stopped at the point where he could understand what they were saying.

"I can't believe you haven't found it yet! I knew it was a bad idea to let her have it. I didn't want one drop of that substance out of your control! We have to get it back!" That was a woman's voice.

"We know where it is. It just may be a bit difficult to get to. But even if U.N.C.L.E. gets it, they won't figure it out. No one has my level of understanding genetic engineering. As soon as these field tests are done, I will negotiate with you. I have to finish the testing first."

Something slammed on a table. "This is much too methodical for me. It works. I don't want this opportunity to slip away from me, you hear?" The woman was angry.

Just then Solo felt something hard poke him in his side. Then a warm breath touched his ear. "Why don't we get closer so you can hear better?" a man suggested, shoving Solo down the hall. "Drop the gun."

Solo did so, not able to see his captor clearly in the dark. "Well, the rats certainly are large in this building! I'll just have to tell my broker I've decided not to lease.."

"Shut up. Walk."

Solo shrugged. "Whatever you say." He walked to the open doorway where a surprised woman and man turned his way. "Well, Dr. Engleberg! Care to introduce me to your friend here?"

The doctor smiled when he recovered from the surprise. "Well! Napoleon Solo! We've never had the chance to meet in person, but I know all about you!"

Solo smiled, his hands up in the air. "I'm flattered. And this is ..?" he turned his attention to the angry woman.

"I don't have time for this," she spat. "Tie him up. I don't want the entire U.N.C.L.E. force of New York after me. You'll be released when we are finished here."

"What? No torture like you did to my partner?"

She glanced at him with narrowed eyes. "Don't tempt me," she growled.

"Oh, please, Miss Oriole. There's no reason to be so nasty. You'll get what you want soon, then you can advance in your organization as quickly as you desire."

"Ah!" Napoleon said brightly, understanding. "You're doing this on the sly, aren't you Miss Oriole? Using Dr. Engleberg's formula to further your career? Was she the highest bidder, Doctor?" The guard jerked Napoleon's arms down and began to tie them behind his back.

Engleberg chuckled. "Yes. Substantially higher than anyone else."

"Really? What's her plan?" He was counting on the scientist's megalomania to manifest as bragging. He wasn't disappointed.

"Well, the next step was to prove the effect on humans. Since she knows about how U.N.C.L.E. agents are conditioned against most chemical agents, she wanted to test it on one of them first. We had it narrowed down to four of you in the New York office; Miss Oriole wanted to pick the target since Thrush has had her working here. All we had to wait for was to see which one of our pre-selected four showed interest in a particular lady that worked in close proximity. That way we could see how Formula T affected a human male in his working environment. "

"Shut up, will you?" Oriole barked. "He doesn't need to know this."

Engleberg laughed. "There's no way he, or anyone, can reproduce this or inoculate against it! That's the beauty of it! And it worked perfectly, didn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," Solo admitted. "I was in Italy, inspecting labs. So, how does T. Philo Milos fit in? And the nuclear delivery system in you suggested to Illya?"

Engleberg waved a hand lightly. "Milos was just a courier. Brought me the list of names and my down payment from Miss Oriole before I left for New York. You were on that list, too, Mr. Solo. I was surprised Mr. Kuryakin showed himself with a lady first, knowing your history! We didn't even have a chance to get blood from you for the genetic match," he sighed. "And the nuclear delivery system was just to get U.N.C.L.E.'s attention. Otherwise, you would have ignored me."

"And you had Illya's clothes taken from the hospital, didn't you?"

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"Yes. But not that it would matter. I'm the only one who can engineer the substance. And I have a photographic memory, so there's no procedure written anywhere! It's all up here;" the scientist tapped his forehead.

And if you die, no one can copy it, Solo immediately thought.

That's enough bragging, doctor. We have a job to complete, then you can leave." The brisk tone of the woman made it clear that the conversation was over. She nodded to the guard who pulled Solo out into the hall. Oriole marched past them, and the guard pushed Solo to follow.

"So," Solo started conversationally. "Won't having sexually aroused males around you be a problem rather than an asset?"

She laughed shortly. "Sexual power is the only power a woman has in this world! And Thrush is all about power, Mr. Solo. I'll have the big boys falling all over me. Imagine the army under my command!" When she glanced over her shoulder, Solo saw a maniacal gleam in her eye. "Your partner fought well in that bar against incredible odds. You should have seen it! A dozen men that stimulated could wipe out hundreds! And it would be my *personal* army!"

"I see," Solo replied. "So you'd be like a Queen Bee, wouldn't you? Or should that be Queen Thrush?"

She stopped at an open door way, and stood aside with arms crossed. "I never thought of it that way, but yes!" she grinned, indicating with a nod of her head that the prisoner should be put inside.

The guard shoved Solo inside. "Good bye, Mr. Solo. You are merely an annoyance, and I don't need U.N.C.L.E. coming down on me as an agent killer. Not yet, anyway. And like Dr. Engleberg said, you have no information that can harm me, so I will simply leave you here. You'll be able to escape, I'm sure, but we don't want you to leave before us. Frank will be here in the hall to shoot you if you escape too soon."

"So the next time we see you, you'll be the leader of Thrush?"

She grinned. "First Thrush, then the world. I don't think small. Good day."

Frank closed the door and Solo heard it lock. Solo glanced around the room, then flopped to the floor and brought his arms around to the front of his body. "Good thing I brought my own toys," he said quietly as he slipped a thin saw blade from his shirt collar and sawed off the rope binding his hands. Then, she moved aside the hollow heel of his shoe. Inside were three small thermal grenades. He took one, jammed it into a space in the doorjamb next to the lock, and pulled the pin. Then he leaped behind a small table for cover.

The explosion was loud and smoky and blew the door off the hinges. Solo charged the hall and found Frank struggling to his feet. The agent let loose with a flying kick right into the guard's jaw, and he fell back. Solo grabbed the rifle and faced down the hall. Two more men rounded the corner, and Napoleon mowed them down effortlessly. He moved quickly down the hall, checking each room as he passed. There weren't many, and they were all empty. *Damn!* he thought. *They got away!*

He ran up the stairs and through the counterbalanced door into the empty warehouse. He pulled out his communicator pen and immediately suggested a hit on the Italian castle. Engleberg would need a lab to produce this agent; in fact, there had to be one here in New York since he was so rapidly able to manufacture the substance for Ilya. And there was a still sample out there somewhere, too.

He heard the squeal of tires outside, and dashed for a window. He saw a low, red sports car pull away with his quarry in it. Making for the first door he could find, he dashed out into the daylight, slamming the door open and startling a young man across the road. Solo immediately noticed the man's motorcycle; he also had a helmet in his hands and was frozen in surprise in the action of taking it off.

Solo ran to him, yanking out his U.N.C.L.E. identification. "I'm taking your bike! Official business!"

The young man then unfroze and said, "No way, man!"

Solo raised the rifle. "I don't have time to argue! Off!" And the man jumped off.

"OK! OK!"

Solo grabbed the helmet, threw it on and fired up the bike. As he accelerated around the corner and in the direction of the car, he patted his shirt pocket. The thermal grenade was still there.

Napoleon shot to the main street, just seeing the sports car turn a corner. He followed, trying to come up with a plan as he tried to catch up. How could he get close enough to toss the grenade in the car? And what if the windows were shut?

He kept just enough distance to keep out of sight; Oriole and Dr. Engleberg still weren't aware that he was free, and he had to hope they left the city if he were to use the grenade. After a few minutes, he realized they were, in fact, heading out of the city. Solo's brain began to work harder.

Just at the edge of town, he slowed at an intersection and saw a young boy on a skateboard, blowing a bubble with gum. Solo cocked his head as idea sprang to him. He accelerated over to the boy, pulled \$10 from his pocket and shouted over the motorcycle engine, "I need your skateboard and your gum! Here!" he handed over the money. The boy's eyes got huge, and he immediately handed over the board. "And the gum! Stick it on here!" Solo indicated the top of the skateboard as it sat across the seat in front of him. The boy slapped the pink wad of gum on the board, and grabbed the cash. Solo sprang away on the motorcycle in pursuit.

The road became curvy, and descended down the side of a long valley. Solo could see the sports car ahead of him. He stopped for a second, took the grenade out, and stuck it in the middle of the gum, which was on top of the skateboard, then took off. The sports car was going at a leisurely pace and with the cornering ability of the bike he soon caught up. He hung back until there was a straightaway, and raced by the car, glad for the helmet. If they didn't recognize his clothes, he would be all right. Soon, the car dropped behind him, and no gunshots rang out. Solo heaved a mental sigh.

When he was well ahead and around a long curve, he slowed and turned around, and held the skateboard at his side, waiting. He felt his heart pounding. "This one's for you, Illya," he whispered as the car leisurely rounded the curve and entered the straightaway. Solo revved the bike, and headed towards it. Mentally, he did a count down, then pulled the grenade ring and slowed the bike as he threw the skateboard ahead of him so it rolled at the front of the oncoming car, then accelerated past the car, going the opposite direction.

He saw the startled look of Miss Oriole behind the steering wheel, and the 'O' shape of Dr. Engleberg's mouth as he raced by. Oriole swung her head back to the road too late; the low bumper of the car had caught the skateboard and the grenade under it.

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"...two...one.." Solo counted down and turned his head in time to hear a dull roar, and see the car engulfed in a fireball. Red and chrome auto parts flew everywhere as Solo headed back to headquarters.

Epilogue : "The Case Is Closed!"

One week later, Napoleon was pushing a grumpy Illya down the hall of the medical section in a wheelchair.

"I should be able to walk," the blond agent grumbled. "My legs weren't broken."

"Oh, quit griping and be happy they even let you out of bed! Think of it as a forced vacation."

"My idea of a vacation doesn't include hospitals," he mumbled. "Where are you taking me, anyway? Going to push me down some stairs or something?"

"Don't tempt me, by friend. Your attitude leaves a lot to be desired. You'll be happy to know that the castle where your 'treatment' was invented has been cleared out, and no sign of any experiments remain."

"That's great, I guess." Illya replied. "I still don't remember any of that week. The last thing I remember is going to the jazz club."

"And let's hope it stays that way," Napoleon filled in quickly.

"And Jenna left so quickly," Illya said, sounding puzzled. "Didn't even say goodbye. Is anyone going to tell me what happened?"

"I certainly hope not. Trust me, you don't want to know. And just ignore those looks you'll probably get. Keep your same aloof expression, and it will all pass."

"*What* will pass? What did I do, Napoleon?"

"Someday, I'm sure Waverly will let you read the report. It, and the sample recovered from Jenna's purse, have been classified top secret and sent to a government lab for study. With Dr. Engleberg dead, the case is closed. No need to think about it any more."

Exasperated, Illya sputtered, "I *can't* think about it! I don't *remember* it! Do you know how frustrating...ouch!" The Russian had turned his head too quickly to yell at his partner and paid the price. He raised his hand to his throbbing head, and whacked himself in the forehead with his cast. "Ow!"

Solo had to bite his lip briefly to keep from laughing. He stopped the wheelchair at the end of the hall. He made sure all levity was gone from his voice before he spoke. "Well," he said. "I was going to take you to the Research level to get some reading material, but it's probably safer for me to bring it to you. Besides, I think the elevator is closed for cleaning."

"Can't I read it in my office?"

"No. It's still off limits until they're sure the residue of the chemical that affected you is gone from there, too."

"Your office?"

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"No! There's not enough room for me in there, then."

"The empty office next to yours?"

"Nope. Residue."

Illya cocked his unbruised eyebrow at him. "No one's going to tell me anything, are they?" he said in an exasperated tone.

Solo rolled his friend back towards the infirmary, shaking his head. "Not in this lifetime, my friend, not in this lifetime."

Finis