

THE CONDITIONED RESPONSE AFFAIR

Act I: "Illya, Can You Fill Me In On This?"

Napoleon Solo, Chief Enforcement Officer of U.N.C.L.E. New York, couldn't get to sleep. That wasn't unusual of late; he hadn't slept very well since the disappearance of his partner and friend Illya Kuryakin almost ten months before. The last message from the missing agent made it clear his assignment had turned out to be a disaster; although his voice was professional and matter of fact, the background noises of shouting and gunfire made clear the circumstances he was in when captured. Since then, it was like the agent had disappeared from the face of the earth. No amount of follow up could find his location, and it nearly drove Solo crazy with anger: Anger at the obvious betrayal of someone on Kuryakin's team, anger with the Russians, anger with the U.S. government's lack of interest.

He knew sleep wouldn't come, and got up even though the sun hadn't showed itself yet. As he went through his morning routine, he went through what he knew one more time in his mind:

The assignment had been an unusual one from the start. A collection of agents from the CIA, NAS and Army Intelligence were trying to obtain information on improvements on Russian satellite hardware. In hindsight Solo should have followed up his hunch that such a collection of agents might find it difficult to trust Kuryakin. They had requested him due to his knowledge of his homeland and language skills, but he was Russian after all, and 'the enemy' in many minds.

The investigation afterwards was labeled 'eyes only' on a 'need to know' basis. And since it dealt with national security even U.N.C.L.E. couldn't get it's hands on it. Waverly protested loud and long; the Government's response was that Kuryakin was essentially under Government control all along, and U.N.C.L.E. really had no right to any non-agency information. Illya Kuryakin had been loaned to them for non-agency duty. He was lost doing that duty. End of story.

With a sigh to quell the anger once again, Solo tugged the knot in his tie as he remembered that message. He took a mental breath, and recalled again the events leading up to this day:

Both Solo and Waverly had pressed the limits on their connections to find out what had happened to Illya. They eventually found out that the other agents had found their way back to the States, each getting home in their own way, but no details of what had happened to Kuryakin. They had been working on the edge of the Ukrainian border, and the operation had been infiltrated somehow, resulting in a clash with Russian authorities presumed to be KGB. That was all the two men could turn up, but the

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incident had been haunting them ever since. Illya's last communication had been directly to U.N.C.L.E. That alone was evidence enough to the two men that the Russian was betrayed. Kuryakin would have followed his assigned chain of command unless unusual circumstances made him break that chain, which he had. He obviously didn't trust the command he was attached to and had circumvented them. He'd also used the U.N.C.L.E. code for security breach in his last report before the communication had fallen silent.

Solo grabbed his holster and gun, strapped them on and grabbed his jacket and headed for the door as he regrouped his train of thought:

It had been several months before Waverly grudgingly admitted that the agent was lost, listing him as Missing in Action. That opened Solo up for new assignments with a variety of partners. He completed each assignment with his normal above average competence, but with a lot less zeal. It was a very long time before any semblance of his previous humor showed itself, and when it did, the halls of U.N.C.L.E. New York breathed a little easier. Looking back, he had been rather unapproachable during that time. The female contingency had feared the loss of two desirable men instead of mourning just the one, and eventually the rumor mill had started bandying around names of whom the new Number Two would be. It seemed the signs of healing were everywhere but in Solo's heart. He missed his friend and partner and couldn't yet consider taking on another permanent partner.

Just when he had begun a mental list of just whom he could stand to work with for any length of time, a contact of Solo's in Army Intelligence let him know that there was some sort of trade in the works with the Russian government. Apparently, Russia was willing to turn over some people in exchange for some of their captured scientists. The contact didn't have the details, but had seen a list of exchange possibilities the U.S. had put together for their negotiation team to work with and saw that Kuryakin had been on that list.

Solo took a deep breath and wiped the dampness from his hands as he embarked on his drive to the assigned assembly location here at the border of East and West Germany as he thought. He knew he'd be the first there; he was. He shut off the engine and began what he hoped would be the last of his waiting and wondering. Now, nearly ten months after his friend's disappearance, there was a chance he would be returned, but it hadn't been without a fight:

Solo and Waverly, hopes renewed, had begun another campaign with the government and demanded that U.N.C.L.E. be involved in the whole procedure. Grudgingly, the government agreed when the probability of betrayal was pointed out to them. U.N.C.L.E. could be a neutral third party, so to speak, but required that Kuryakin be added to the list in exchange for their help. They also agreed to allow Waverly's agency to debrief Kuryakin; Solo got the impression that they were willing to turn Illya over to them just to get Waverly off their back.

Solo smiled at that thought. The Old Man was a tenacious old bulldog. He sighed again, and settled in to wait for the rest of the team.

And now it had come down to this moment. Two minor Russian scientists were being traded for three Americans - two American engineers and Illya. All Solo could do was watch until the trade was complete. The government negotiators were in charge of the trade, and three teams assembled for each of the three freed prisoners. Illya's team was made up of U.N.C.L.E. employees; the other two teams were government. Each

prisoner was allowed one moderator at the exchange site, which was a bridge between West Berlin and Soviet sympathetic East Berlin.

And finally the time had come. The rest of the teams arrived, one by one, and by the late afternoon, they had been briefed in the procedure one more time, gone over maps and equipment, and finally were posted at their assigned spots.

The instructions had been very clear; if more than three moderators were seen within a certain distance of the bridge, the deal was off. Napoleon had to stand down at Waverly's orders to let the negotiation team overlook the exchange. So here he sat with the rest of the U.N.C.L.E. team in a darkened car, well set back from the bridge where the exchange was to take place. He focused his binoculars on the West German end of the bridge and saw the two captives that were to be exchanged for the engineers and agent. The captives fidgeted with their sleeves, and stamped their feet to keep warm. The three moderators stood silently nearby.

The East German end of the bridge was blocked by foliage from Napoleon's point of view and it was tough fighting the urge to find a nearby tree for a better view. It had been so long; he didn't dare ruin the chance of getting Illya back now. Still, to be second string in all this was galling.

The sun finally dropped behind the mountains leaving the lingering shadows of dusk over the scene. The group on the American side started to walk with a nod from the negotiators. Solo focused the lenses on the opposite side and soon had sight of three bodies moving in a line towards the American side. They walked like they were in legs chains; short, choppy steps in a row, heads down. The last one visibly limped but fell behind only slightly from the front two.

The odd parade met in the middle and crossed without hesitation or indication of recognition. That was the deal. Even with the quality lenses, Napoleon couldn't figure out which one was Illya. They were wrapped in long, dark coats, and they were all blond and similar in size and the trees interfered with his line of sight. He impatiently waited until the men headed to the East German side disappeared from view in the obscuring foliage, then dropped the binoculars and started the car. In a matter of seconds the all clear was given; the exchange was complete.

Napoleon felt a weight lift from his shoulders but knew it was far from over. He wouldn't be convinced until he saw his partner in front of him in the flesh. Again, he tried to steel himself for what he would see. God knows where his friend had been sequestered all this time.

There was a car for each body, and an additional sedan filled with medical personnel. They drove to the scene simultaneously, sliding to a dusty halt at the same time. Napoleon threw the sedan in park and leaped out with the others, still not able to pick out his partner in the twilight shadows. The three souls stood huddled together, each with his assigned negotiator. Two of the recovered men were escorted away to the other two waiting cars, so Napoleon made his way quickly to the remaining pair. He could hear the footsteps of the team and medics behind him, but was determined to get there first. They respected his wishes.

Napoleon could see the negotiator speaking, holding an arm of his charge, but not getting any response. The figure in the dark coat simply stood shakily, with his head dropped. Solo was close enough now to recognize the profile of his Illya Kuryakin, and he bit his lip as he moved faster. It was hard to believe the gaunt cheeks and short cropped hair belonged to the man he remembered as his partner and friend.

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"Illya," Napoleon breathed as he reached them. "Good God, man, are you all right?" He reached out to the shoulder of his friend. There was no initial response. Solo felt his friend quiver under his hand, then noted the boniness of the shoulder. "Illya?" He asked again in a softer tone.

The medical team swarmed around the man as he collapsed from under Solo's hand, landing on his knees in the dirt. Alarmed, Solo froze, but was then moved back a step by the negotiator.

"Mr. Solo, let the medics work on him. He seems to be the worst off of the group. Just wait a few minutes until he's stabilized."

Solo nodded mutely. He hadn't expected this kind of reaction, and his blood started to boil. How could Illya's own countrymen treat him like this?

All the time the medics worked on Kuryakin, his head stayed bowed, and his hands hovered together, shaking, in front of his body, held there by non-existent wrist irons.

"Solo! We have a problem!" One of the medics barked. Napoleon leaped forward between two medics, who parted for him. "Is that what I think it is?" The medic said softly, pointing to Illya's chest.

The thin, black coat hung open slightly, only secured by a single, low button. Just visible on Illya's chest was a taped package that looked like a bomb.

"Yes," Napoleon said between gritted teeth, furious, but holding it in. "Illya, can you fill me in on this?"

The Russian did not answer or raise his eyes. The only motion was the ragging rising and falling of his chest, and the tremor to his arms. Napoleon noted the roughness of his breathing, and the flush to his cheeks.

"He's sick. I don't think he hears me," Napoleon noted as he parted the coat with his hands. It was a simple device; clenching his teeth, Napoleon realized the purpose of it. This was a simple slap to the American's face, as well as a bit of insurance to give the Russians time to get away deeper into East Germany. It was a simple distraction, and that was all. No value was placed on the courier. He was simply another traitor to the Motherland.

"Bastards," the negotiator hissed. "Can you defuse it?"

"Yes," said Napoleon with a finality he didn't really feel. It looked simple enough, but was it a trick? He looked the device over carefully in the fading light, then, making his decision, clipped two wires. Nothing happened. "OK, now let's get this off of him."

When they stripped off the coat, Napoleon was shocked at the frail appearance of his friend. His arms were thin and bruised; scars and scabs circled his wrists from the restraints that had obviously been there, and he could see pink, raw looking marks on his skull. There was little mobility to Illya's shoulders. The device had been taped right over the shredded remains of a shirt, and there was no reaction when the tape was peeled away from exposed skin. It was difficult to distinguish between bruises and dirt on his torso, and Solo heard one of the negotiators hiss in anger.

"It's a good thing we got him now," one of the medics muttered as he began to work. "He wouldn't last much longer where he was."

Solo removed the device and dismantled it with hands shaking in anger, and put the parts in the trunk. He returned to the group just as they finished their cursory inspection.

"Let's get him in the car," the medic ordered. In his depleted state Illya was easily lifted and carried to the car. A medic climbed in first, with Illya second, flanked by another medic. Solo jumped in the passenger seat in the front, and the negotiator drove.

"It's not far to the base," the medic commented. "He can make it that far, at least."

All during the drive, Solo kept his mouth clamped shut, not trusting his voice in his anger. He faced the back seat the whole way, watching the medics hover over the Russian. Illya hadn't moved or even looked up. His hands still rested together in front of him, still held by invisible bonds. Solo had always been able to read the mood and emotion of his partner in his eyes, and it disturbed him that he hadn't gotten a clear look at them yet; Illya wouldn't raise his head or acknowledge any of them. He had yet to say a word.

Napoleon brushed aside the thoughts of where his friend had been kept all this time. They had absolutely no intelligence in this area, no information at all. Only Illya Kuryakin knew what had happened to him.

They were waved through the gates at the Army base and went directly to the base hospital where a gurney and doctor were waiting for them in the emergency room parking bay. Illya was out of the car, on the gurney and swept away inside before Napoleon even got out of the car. He was left standing in the bay with the negotiator that had driven the car.

"Mr. Solo? Will you dispose of the explosives? I need to continue the debrief."

Solo nodded. "I'll be back, though." He added, accepting the keys.

"I expected as much. Ask for me and I'll update you."

Solo nodded, "Thank you, Mr. Thompson," and turned to go, knowing Illya was beyond any help he could give for now. Before leaving, he pulled out the pen communicator from his pocket. "Open channel D," he requested.

"Mr. Solo?" Mr. Waverly's voice replied. "Is the mission completed?"

"Yes, sir. Only one minor surprise, and I'm taking care of it now. Seems Illya was delivered with an explosive gift, but we handled it."

"Very good. The negotiation team will report to me later with all the details. Do you see a need for additional security?"

"No, sir, I can handle it for now. Solo out."

ACT II: "Start Fighting, My Friend."

It was a couple of hours before the explosives were secured safely and Solo made it back to the hospital. A cloud of dread seemed to be building in his mind as the hours went by and he finally walked into the hospital.

A cursory check of the emergency room did not yield any results, but he wasn't surprised. He inquired of the nurse about the location of his friend, and was directed to another wing of the building that required him to show his ID to pass security there. He spotted Thompson almost immediately, talking on the phone in the hall. Thompson waved Solo over, and with a nod of his head indicated a door. Solo entered and found himself in a small conference room with a one-way glass that looked in on a room with a single bed. He swallowed hard the lump he felt rising in his throat at the sight of Kuryakin on the bed.

The bed had been cranked up to a semi sitting position. Illya's head was turned to one side, his eyes were closed, and his chest bare. There was a petite nurse rubbing him down with a washcloth that came away dark with dirt with each wipe. Solo could see every rib and his friend's collar bones were prominent. He realized that some of the dark spots were bruises, not dirt, by the greenish yellow color of them. The scarred wrists still rested side by side in his lap. His arms trailed various I.V.s, and there was an oxygen mask on his face. His hair was unevenly cut into a sloppy butch style, which, perhaps, was the most shocking to the agent; he'd never seen Illya's hair that short. Along with the gaunt cheeks it made the Russian look at least twice his real age.

"Is he sleeping?" Napoleon choked, keeping his voice low. Thompson had just entered the room.

"Honestly, I don't know. He hasn't said a word or acknowledged our presence in any way."

Solo nodded. "What are his physical injuries?"

"Well," Thompson said with a sigh. "I don't know where to start. Obviously, there's dehydration and malnourishment, and a collection of bruises. It looks like he wore arm and leg shackles most of the time. He walks and holds his hands like they are still there. There are some healed rib, arm and leg breaks, which is why he was limping."

Solo nodded silently, remembering the limping form bringing up the rear of the line.

"The leg break healed poorly, and they want to re break it and set it again eventually. He's not up to that right now, obviously."

Solo didn't reply.

Thompson continued, wary of Solo's quiet. "Um, he has a couple of broken fingers, a concussion, pneumonia and lots of cuts on his feet. His hands look like he has been used for hard labor. He has healed scars on his skull and back ...do I need to continue, or do you get the picture?"

It took a moment for Solo to find his voice. "I get it. How long before we can take him home?"

"The doc said as soon as he's nutritionally and physically stabilized. The outer wounds are older, and easily treated for now. He wants to make sure the rigors of moving him won't invoke a heart attack first. About a week, he guessed, until the blood work would be normal again and the pneumonia is under control."

"A week." Napoleon repeated hollowly. "What about his mental state? Is he not talking because of physical or mental reasons?"

Thompson shrugged. "I don't know. The doc can't see any physical reason for the silent treatment, except maybe for general fatigue and fever. The two engineers are responding well and talking. They hadn't seen Mr. Kuryakin at all until today, and don't know where he'd been kept. Only he can tell us what happened."

The nurse finished cleaning Illya and maneuvered him into a hospital gown. He still hadn't acknowledged the nurse. Solo couldn't tell if he was asleep or not.

"I'm going in," Solo stated, opening the door next to the mirror and stepping in before he got any objection.

He stepped up to the bed on the side that made him able to see his friend's face. He saw a sliver of blue between the blond lashes and didn't think he was asleep, but didn't think that he was truly awake, either.

"Illya!" He called gently, patting his unshaven cheek. "Hey! It's me, Napoleon! It's time to wake up, Tovarich!"

The use of the Russian word for friend made Illya blink ever so slowly, but that was all the response he got. Illya's blue eyes were now open, but still fixed on his own hands, resting side by side in his lap.

"Illya?" Napoleon asked again, trying to catch his eyes. "Come on, wake up, all right? I need to talk to you."

Illya's eyes drifted shut.

"I think he's asleep now," a voice said. Solo glanced up to see a young doctor studying the heart monitor. "The readings look like it anyway." He scribbled something on a chart, then returned Solo's look. "I think he'll be out for awhile. Are you the security he's supposed to have?"

"Yes," Solo said, returning his eyes to his friend.

"I'll get you a chair in here, then, and get you set up. When's your relief coming in?"

"I'm it," Solo replied. "There won't be any relief."

"Oh," the doctor replied. "Well, I don't know when he'll wake up, so you'd best make yourself comfortable now."

Solo was careful not to make any loud noises that might wake his friend but noticed Illya twitch with each sudden sound. He seemed to be asleep, but occasionally Solo would see his friend's eyelids slightly parted. If he was sleeping, it was a non-restful kind. It was as if he was expecting to be yanked into wakefulness at any moment. Still, he did not utter a sound, and that's what disturbed Solo the most.

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The night was long. At one point, Napoleon finished a cup of coffee and settled into his chair in the wee hours of the morning, planning to catch some sleep when he noticed blue eyes looking at him. Or at least he thought they were looking at him; they were open widely, at least, in his direction.

"Illya?" he said cautiously, easing out of the chair slowly. The eyes followed him for a brief few seconds, and then became glassy and unfocused again as the lids closed slowly. Napoleon sighed and dropped back into his chair again, resigning himself to find some sleep.

Then next days brought more of the same. The Russian either appeared to be sleeping or sat with half open eyes cast downward. He still appeared to be sensitive to sudden noise, no matter how slight, by twitching at the sounds. His hands remained in his lap, and would drift back there even when placed along his sides.

It's like he has muscle memory, Napoleon thought. The muscles have been in one position for so long they are almost fixed there. He finally contributed the twitches as expectation of pain. They really did a number on you, my friend. He pushed aside the wave of anger once again. There was no point to it, really.

Finally on the fifth day, there was a change. The I.V. tubes had been removed one by one, the remaining one supplying him nutrition and antibiotics. They removed the needle with the intention on switching arms, and were preparing to install the needle in the back of his hand since he kept his arms bent in his lap. They rubbed his hand with alcohol, within the range of his downcast eyes, and applied a tourniquet to raise a vein.

Just as the nurse touched the needle to the vein, the hand swept the nurse back not from strength, but from surprise.

"Hey!" the nurse yelped, grabbing at the arm.

Solo jumped from the corner where he had been half paying attention, also taken by surprise by the action. It didn't take much to subdue his friend. There was no strength in his movements, and he ceased to resist as soon as he was touched, but Napoleon thought he heard the word "nyet" whispered from the direction of the constantly downcast eyes.

"That's it, Illya," Solo said quietly. "Start fighting, my friend."

The blond agent blinked, and his breathing became deeper, and his eyes clamped shut. Napoleon put his hands on his partner's bony shoulders and whispered words of encouragement to him. An alarm went off as his heart rate shot up, and at the same time Illya's jaw clamped shut so tightly Solo could hear his teeth grinding. His chin pointed to the ceiling as his entire body tensed and spasmed as if it were being electrocuted.

Solo backed off, shaken and appalled when more medical staff flew in. The doctor administered something, and his friend's body finally relaxed and fell deeper into the mattress as the drug took effect. The I.V. was set quickly and without further incident.

"What was that all about?" Napoleon asked shakily.

"I don't know," the doc said as he wrote an entry on the records. "Some kind of seizure. I think the Psychology Department may have to help us out on this one."



The agent was ready to be air lifted to New York two days later, and had not repeated the outburst.

Solo could tell that Kuryakin knew a change was coming. As they readied him for the trip the Russian's body became more tense and his eyes stayed closed. The base psychologist noticed it, too, and pulled Solo aside when they transported the agent to the base airfield and the waiting U.N.C.L.E. jet.

"Mr. Solo, I know you've noticed the slight change in Mr. Kuryakin's demeanor. We still don't know what was done to him, or the exact reason for his fugue state, but I believe that he is more aware of his surroundings than we originally thought. I'm calling New York now with my evaluation, and I want you to be prepared for anything on this flight. If Mr. Kuryakin is not aware of who you are, and has been waiting for and opportunity to escape, the one nurse riding with you may not be able to handle him. I don't want to tranquilize him for lots of reasons, but I can for lots of other reasons. Therefore, I have standing orders for the nurse to put him out if she feels he's getting out of control. I want your promise that you won't interfere with the nurse's decision; 30,000 feet in the air is not a place for confrontation."

Solo peered at the doctor. The only other person that disliked shrinks more than he did was currently being loaded onto the jet behind him, but Solo had to admit he saw the point. If Illya was further injured on the jet, it would be awhile until he could be treated. Finally, he nodded shortly. "Fine."

After Illya was loaded up and the nurse was checking him over, Solo stood back and studied his friend closely. The Russian was still tense, and his eyes still closed, but had his hands finally drifted apart? Solo frowned. Yes, the hands were definitely more along his sides. He couldn't help but wonder about that.

Napoleon found himself watching Illya's hands as they took off. They were drifting apart and staying apart! By the time they'd reached altitude, both hands were flat on the surface of the mattress. As Solo radioed New York of their departure, he found himself wary of his friend's entire demeanor, knowing in his gut that something was going to happen.

He absently started to give his report to New York as he watched the nurse raise the back of the gurney to a sitting position and loosen the straps across the Russian's body.

The motion was so fast it was a blur to Solo. The next thing he knew Kuryakin's fingers were around the nurse's neck, and he was rolling to the side in an attempt to get up.

"Illya, no!" Solo yelled, dropping his communicator as he leaped to the bed. The frightened nurse issued a hideous squeak as her windpipe was squeezed. Solo fell on his hand, surprised that he couldn't peel off his friend's fingers. "ILLYA! STOP IT!" Solo yelled, throwing a quick glance toward his partner. The eyes he saw in return chilled him; they were steely, intent, and filled with more anger than he had ever seen. He fully intended to kill the nurse.

The nurse was frantically pawing at her neck with one hand and her pocket with the other. Solo used his weight to keep Illya down on the bed, and groped in the nurse's pocket, finding a syringe. He pulled it out, flipped off the cover from the needle and jabbed it into the Russian's IV tube. The only response he got initially was a growl low in Illya's throat, and a change in his eyes from anger to sorrow within a heartbeat. Solo felt his fingers tremble, and then loosen as the drug took effect.

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The nurse sucked in a wheezing breath and stumbled backwards as Illya released her and sank deeper into the mattress. His eyes were again half closed, downcast and foggy, his fingers twitching, and his hands, again, side by side in his lap.

Napoleon pushed aside waves of guilt as he tightened the straps on the gurney and helped the nurse to her feet. Her neck was already bruising from the grip. "Thank you," she croaked, regaining her professional demeanor as she rubbed her neck and checked Illya's vital signs. "Wasn't ... expecting ..."

"You're welcome," Solo said, feeling slightly like a traitor. "He surprised us both." He retrieved the communicator from the floor, and finished his report, then collapsed on the small couch and slept for the rest of the flight.



It had been a week since the chief enforcement agent had brought his second home. Illya had been firmly ensconced in the medical wing of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, New York, under complete diagnostic and psychological scrutiny. Other than the tranquilizer injected by Solo, no drug of any kind was found in his system. Other than the anesthesia administered when surgery was performed on his lame leg, he had been given nothing. Still, he kept the same head down, arms-in-lap posture he had when he was picked up.

By the thirteenth day home, Waverly was ready to send Solo out on another mission, and the agent was unable to come up with a compelling reason to refuse. He'd been with his friend twenty days, and there was no sign of recognition.

When Kuryakin was physically mended, save for a thick cast on his leg, he was transferred to the psychological wing much to Solo's dismay. His partner was settled in a comfortable room with a wire reinforced view window and a splash of color to look less sterile. Weeks passed, and the cast came off, followed by intense physical therapy to bring his muscles back from atrophy.

Solo made it a habit to spend as much time as possible with his friend, both for loyalty and friendship's sake, but also to quell the gut feeling he had deep inside; that this wasn't over.

There was something to the downcast eyes; something about the posture that suggested to him that Illya was waiting. For what, he didn't know, but he couldn't quash the feeling and he wanted to be around when whatever his friend was waiting for happened.

Over two months after Illya's return, Solo dropped by the room to chat about the day's activities. He had a date set up with Gina, a glorious red head he met at a dinner club, and was surprised when he realized this was his first real date since before the exchange, and was looking forward to it.

He entered Illya's room and found the Russian in his normal position, sitting in the chair next to bed, eyes and hands on his lap. His hair had grown quite a bit, but wasn't the shaggy mop he remembered. Solo closed the window to the late afternoon breeze and commented about his impending date and Gina's attributes. When he turned around again he was shocked to see Illya's eyes on him.

The one-sided conversation sputtered to a stop. Solo squinted in suspicion when he realized that his friend's eyes weren't focused on him, exactly, but on some far away

place. The blue eyes were clear and fixed, and it was the first time in a long time Solo had seen them so open. He felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck.

"Illya?" He said softly, not moving. "Do you hear me?"

There was no response, but Solo's gut instinct was in full roar. He was just about to step forward and shake his silent friend by the shoulders when the blue eyes dropped once again, and the lids half closed.

Solo was silent for a bit, studying his friend carefully. He checked the security of the room and made a note on the chart for orderlies and nurses to tend to him in pairs. As docile as the Russian seemed now, Napoleon couldn't put aside his instinct. He finally bid his friend farewell and left the room, promising himself to check back later.

He didn't see Illya's hands slip to his sides, palms down and flat next to him on the seat of his chair.



Napoleon would have been enjoying himself a lot more if he didn't have the feeling that something was going to happen. Gina was fun and lively, a great dinner partner and dancer, and probably wonderful in other areas that Solo was building up to, but was almost a relieved when his communicator went off during their aperitif; deep down, he'd expected it.

Excusing himself to a quiet corner, he opened the pen and spoke into it. "Solo here."

"Mr. Solo, we have a problem." Doesn't Waverly ever go home? Crossed his mind quickly, and then settled in to receive the information he already knew inside. "It seems that Mr. Kuryakin isn't as incapacitated as assumed. He has managed to slip through our security and leave the premises."

"Are you sure he's actually off the grounds?" Solo inquired, making his way to his date's side.

"He seems to have left a trail of destruction that leads to the front door. There are no physical witnesses conscious at the moment to attest to his actual departure, we do have tapes of his, shall I say, escape."

I knew it! Solo thought, I knew something was up. "On my way, sir," he closed. He quickly made his apologies to Gina, and arranged a taxi to take her home while he drove to the office.

The medical section was physically connected but totally separate from the rest of the headquarters. That was necessary in case some sort of contagion was brought back, unknowing, by an agent.

Illya had managed to make it to the main entrance to medical before encountering his first obstacle, a night orderly. He was still unconscious in medical receiving, along with a bruised nurse and two security guards who probably had broken arms. Solo took in the reports of carnage stoically, trying to piece things together. He requested the work schedule for the night, and wasn't surprised at what he saw.

"You were understaffed tonight," he commented to the head nurse as he flipped through the pages.

"Yes," she said. "I was at bare minimum when I let several of the staff have the night off to celebrate a birthday." She blushed, not only at Solo's dreamy eyes, but at the

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fact that her understaffing was noticed. "We were fine until two nurses called in sick. But it has been so quiet lately, I couldn't justify the over time."

"I see." Solo closed the schedule and smiled at the nurse. "Thank you."

He made his way back to his office and quickly pulled the files on the engineers that had been returned with Illya. He was going through them when his intercom buzzed. "Yes?" he said absently.

"I just thought you'd like to know that Mr. Connelly has reported in and Illya's apartment appears intact. Should he stay?" The female voice asked.

"Yes. Have him stay."

"And by the way, Mr. Waverly is waiting for an update."

"Thank you."

Solo closed the files and took them with him to Waverly's office. The Old Man waved for him to sit as he poked at the barrel of yet another pipe.

"Mr. Solo, sit. And may I say that I'm surprised you are still here."

"Surprised, sir?"

"Yes. You appear to be handling this better than I expected."

"Ah, yes sir." He shifted under the man's comment. "I, um, was really rather expecting this."

Waverly's eyebrow rose to near his hairline. "Really?" He mulled it over for a bit, then replied, "Our medical staff wasn't. What did you notice that they didn't?"

Solo went on to explain what his instinct had been telling him all along; that Illya was waiting for something. "I think he was waiting for the right time to leave, sir. Since he's been physically healed, this is the first night that the ward was understaffed. I've had the feeling all along that Illya has been well aware of what's going on around him. He picked up the information he needed from the staff gossip; that everyone would be at a party, and it would be a skeleton staff at the most. I checked the schedules; this is the first time in months that the staff was that low. It rarely gets that way. He knew it was a good time to get away."

"And what is he getting away for?" Waverly asked, his curiosity piqued. "Are you saying he's programmed? By who? The Russians, Thrush? Who?"

Solo shook his head. "I don't know for sure yet, sir. I was hoping these files would help. I'm sure I can figure out where he's going. I'll need to speak with the negotiation team that arranged his trade."

"Done," Waverly mumbled over the pipe. "Research will have the information for you in the morning. Meanwhile, what do you think Kuryakin's next move will be?"

"Well, he needs some clothes, that's for sure, and possibly supplies. I'll start by monitoring the police scanner for burglary reports. I can do that while I read these files again."

Waverly nodded and dismissed the chief agent with a nod. Solo settled himself down in the conference room adjacent to his boss's office and tuned in the scanner from electronics panel. The chatter of the New York area police and surrounding agencies whispered in the background as he perused the files.

The engineers that had been returned with Illya were experts in rocketry and aerodynamics, and had been loosely connected with government contracts relating to design. There really wasn't much there; they had both been spirited into Russia from China while they were attending a worldwide conference on space travel, and had been held as spies for almost a year. Their knowledge was general.

Solo had been at it for several hours and it was close to dawn when his ears perked up from a police call. "...in progress. Unit to cover 42-Lincoln?"

"25 Charlie 1, to cover. 10-9 location."

"25 Charlie 1 to cover 42-Lincoln on a 459 in progress, 1561 Eden Grove, the Surplus Supply store. 25 Charlie copy?"

Solo slammed the files shut and sprinted from the room. Surplus Supply was an army surplus store, and had just what a mole needed!



Solo parked a block away, and counted no less than four squad cars on his way to the surplus store. He knew the warehouse was surrounded, but also knew this was a minor detail to the crafty Russian. Solo had to get to him before the officers got hurt and scared him off.

He encountered an officer on the perimeter and identified himself. The cop gave him a puzzled look. "Sure, I know your agency. Since when are you interested in local burglaries?"

Solo said it sounded like a suspect he was after, and asked if there was a description.

"Blond male. That's all we have other than the fact that he bypassed the alarm and has managed to eluded six officers for almost an hour. We only know he's in there because a witness saw him enter."

Solo nodded grimly, loading sleeping darts in his gun as he listened to the progress of the capture on the radio. Illya was running them in circles. Solo requested permission to enter, and the officer warned the others of plain-clothes backup. Solo cringed, and hoped his partner didn't hear that. At least they didn't describe him specifically.

Napoleon slipped into the dark warehouse, all senses on alert. He knew from the radio chatter approximately where the officers were, and where he would be if he were in Illya's shoes. He had joined the inside perimeter of police and motioned his intent to circle around. He crept along the stacked boxes, very aware of the open rafters well above his head. Feeling around a particularly dirty stack of boxes, Solo stumbled over something and looked down to see policeman.

"Damn!" Solo thought, feeling for a pulse. "Good, he's alive." If Illya had killed a cop there was no guarantee this could be ended quietly. Solo also noticed that the officer's gun was gone. "Great!" he thought. "And Illya's a better shot than I am! Well, at least I have surprise on my side...I think."

With his gun in the ready position, Solo continued into the depths of the warehouse, towards a far corner. Solo knew this trick; lure them in, thinking their quarry was cornered, and attack from the rear. But in this case, Solo was betting the quarry was sneaking out! Napoleon immediately reversed his direction and headed to the opposite corner. He saw a quick flash of motion up ahead and dropped lower, keeping quiet.

Low crawling around a forklift he saw a dark form fade into the shadows, and made a dash towards it, dropping to a roll when he saw the form stop and turn. There was a muzzle flash and gunshot, and Solo aimed his darts toward the flash as he rolled. Two more shots rang out and thumped the cement next to his head. He felt cement

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chips ping on his face, and snapped off two more shots of his own. Bumping to a stop against a shipping crate, he heard a short Russian swear word and didn't hesitate to bolt towards the noise. He had to reach his partner before the police!

There was the clattering sound of a dropped weapon moments before Solo landed bodily on his friend. They rolled over several times, each trying to get a grip on the other, when Solo felt Illya's grip fade.

"It's about time those darts worked!" he thought as he pinned the weakening agent to the floor. Illya was issuing what Solo was sure were unfriendly comments in Russian as the drug took hold. He heard shouts and running footsteps in his direction as he gathered the drugged man in a fireman's carry over his shoulder. Breathing heavily, he flashed his identification to the lead uniform and left the scene.

ACT III: "You, April, Are An Easy Girl To Please."

Illya was staring at the one-way glass, back in U.N.C.L.E.'s medical wing. There wasn't any sign of the previous fugue; now his wide-eyed look was far away as if he was waiting for someone to come through the door. Additionally, he was openly hostile to any ministrations and restrained in the bed, and most notably, only speaking Russian the rare times he did speak.

Solo watched him with bleary eyes, chin in hand, from the other side of the glass. He'd gotten a few hours sleep, but wasn't at all rested. This puzzle troubled him deeply, and he knew he was out of his league. It was in the medical team's hands to figure out what had happened to his friend, and hopefully, find a cure. He blinked wearily at the sound of someone entering the room.

"Mr. Solo. I just gave my report to Mr. Waverly, so now I can brief you." The man dropped in an adjacent chair and sighed. "This is the deepest case of brainwashing I have ever seen. I've seen subjects conditioned to respond to various kinds of stimuli, and I've even seen subjects reverted to earlier versions of themselves, like their childhood, but I've never seen a subject programmed to monitor his surroundings and respond to stimuli he gathers and processes himself, all as another person so to speak."

Solo looked at him blankly, turning over what he was hearing. "So what you're saying is, he was trained to evaluate an environment and react a certain way when the timing was right? Where's the Illya we know?"

"Oh, he's in there, I think. I just have to figure out how to get him out. This isn't simply a result of mental trauma, as we first believed. This is deliberate manipulation at a deep level. Something has been done to his brain physically; the scars on his scalp attest to that. Somehow, the memory paths have been altered. I don't know if it's even reversible. And you saw what happens if he tries to resist the conditioning."

Solo turned that over, too. "Yes, the epileptic-type spasms. Does he remember me? I mean, does he have his old memories?"

"He must. He got out of here in a direct enough fashion. I don't think he's lost his linguistics skills, either, because he had to understand English to gather the information he needed to get out. His nerve synapses can't access all the old pathways and memories, just some or parts of them. It's a brilliant piece of work."

With all this in mind, Solo shook his head and prepared to enter the room. He straightened his tie, blinked away the tiredness, set his jaw, and entered.

The eyes that met him stopped his heart momentarily, but he didn't let that show outwardly. He smiled a charming smile, and pulled a chair next to the bed. Illya's eyes almost followed him all the while, icy cold, but always a bit behind Solo's motion as if he

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was looking for someone to follow. Solo parked in the chair, put his feet up on the nightstand, and laced his fingers behind his head. "Well, Illya, what kind of mess have you gotten us into now?" he asked casually, meeting the dazed-looking eyes. He noted that his partner's muscles were all tensed, and his arms and legs were straining against the restraints. The Russian blinked, and his eyes focused for a split second. He obviously hadn't expected that introduction, and for a second Solo saw a chink in his friend's eyes, a fleeting moment of confusion? Recognition?

"What's the matter?" Solo continued casually. "Feeling a bit guilty about the reports you left behind for me to do? It was quite a substantial pile." The blue eyes faded again and looked beyond Solo's shoulder. It was all the dark-haired agent could do to keep himself from looking behind him. "Don't think you're off the hook, here. I plan on keeping you busy." Solo stood as the eyes shifted towards him again, and he turned his back and left the room, more shaken than he showed outwardly.

As he passed the doctor, Solo said tiredly, "I think he's waiting for something again and I'd sure like to know what it is, even if it's in his own head."



When Napoleon Solo reported to Alexander Waverly's office he already had an idea. He slipped into the chair next to the curmudgeonly older man and adjusted his jacket, waiting for his cue to speak. The Section Head leaned back with a newly stuffed pipe and fumbled with a match.

"Well, Mr. Solo, I have read the doctors' reports and done some research, and, regretfully, have come to a decision regarding Mr. Kuryakin."

Solo didn't like his boss's tone or the actual words and felt his stomach lurch. "You have, sir?"

"Yes. I am sorry to say that since there is nothing further we can do here for you partner, we must transfer him to a secure, long care facility. You will be assigned another partner for the duration of Mr. Kuryakin's disability."

Solo's mouth felt dry, but part of him had expected this. "When will he be moved?"

"Today. There is no reason to delay. His actions of late have dictated this move. We do not have the staff to guard him properly. Ridgecrest does."

"Uh, sir, may I suggest something first?" Solo leaned forward in earnest, grasping his hands together on the table in front of him.

Waverly's bushy eyebrow raised in curiosity as he puffed on the pipe. "Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"Why don't we let the conditioning run its course? Before we say there is nothing else we can do, let's see what has been done."

Waverly puffed silently, the blue smoke rising in a lazy current to the ceiling. "Go on," he said.

"Well, maybe it's like a fever. If we let the behavior he has been conditioned with go ahead and happen, perhaps the conditioning itself will 'burn itself out' so to speak."

"I see what you are saying. Interesting idea," the Old Man nodded thoughtfully. The pipe burned itself out, and he didn't seem to notice.

"We could tag Illya so we can follow him and see what it is he's been programmed to do, or if he has been programmed to do anything." Solo sat back.

Waverly puffed on the pipe, then his brows furrowed in annoyance when he realized the tobacco had burned out. Distracted, he put the pipe down. "I don't want to lose Mr. Kuryakin, and think that he deserves this opportunity. Not only is there a chance we can get him back, we will also have more information on the extent of this conditioning. We do need more information. You have my permission, Mr. Solo."

Solo shot to his feet with a grin. "I'm on it, sir."

Waverly stopped him with a look. "Remember Mr. Kuryakin's abilities, Mr. Solo. Don't lose him, for his safety and ours."

"Yes, sir." Solo was out of the door in a heartbeat.



The plan was simple and Solo briefed only those that needed to know. Illya would have to truly believe what he heard around him for the plan to work. The doctors let their patient 'overhear' their plans for the transfer, and their reasoning for drugging him as lightly as possible during the move. Solo was right outside the door when they put him under, and at their signal entered the room with the tracking device. They made a very small incision and slipped the device just under the Russian's skin, just inside the hairline at the base of his skull. It required a single, tiny stitch to secure it.

They loaded him onto a transport gurney without restraints, and into the back of an ambulance. The two drivers were actually Section Two agents that had been recently transferred to New York, and they were on their way. Solo followed at a discreet distance with a mobile tracking screen in the car. To his delight, his partner for this venture was April Dancer.

"Here we go, luv," April said lightly as she flipped the switch on the screen. "Looks good." She had a map opened in her lap to correspond to the readings.

"And so do you," Solo quipped with a smile, keeping his eye on the distant ambulance.

"You silver tongued devil," April giggled. "I won't fall for that stuff. I know you too well."

"And I say not well enough," Solo countered.

Riverside was several miles outside of New York City, and the drugs were scheduled to wear off within the hour. They followed the screen blip through traffic and along several turns in the suburban area around the facility. Long after the time that Solo thought something should have happened, April finally commented.

"They are almost to the facility. Shouldn't something have happened by now? The knock out drugs should have worn off a while ago."

"I know," Solo replied through clenched teeth, and he gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter. "I'm going to get a little closer."

The blip on the screen continued on smoothly. "Wait!" April said excitedly. "The ambulance went right by the facility turn off! I think Illya's in play now."

Solo's smile was grim. "The escorts haven't contacted us yet. I wonder what.." He was interrupted by the beeping of his communicator pen and April snatched it from his pocket.

"Dancer here. What's up?"

"This is Wallace. The bait was taken," there was a slight groan.

"Are you all right? How's Baker?"

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"Baker's still out, but he'll be OK. I'm glad Kuryakin's on our side, or will be again soon. We were dumped out of the vehicle along the road. I'll arrange for a pick up."

April's smile was brief. "Acknowledged. Dancer out." She closed the pen and returned it to Solo's pocket. That had been the one chance they'd have to take; that the Illya inside wouldn't kill unnecessarily. "Part one complete. Now what do you think the wily Russian will do?"

"The same thing he did before. He needs supplies. Anything on the map helpful?"

April studied it for a moment. "Go north on the interstate, by the way. That's where he went. Let's see here. There are some government areas here, and a National Guard station, a small airport; lots of choices. Whoa, wait, he just turned east." Solo followed her directions and sped up a bit. "He's slowing just outside of this little town. Keep going."

The blip stopped for a moment, then continued on at a much slower pace. "I think he's on foot. Pull over in about a mile and stop."

Napoleon did so, and they both watched the screen. The blip stayed just outside the small town of Emoryville, moving at a very slow pace, and even stopping for lengths of time. The areas corresponded to small farms and houses.

"I bet he's getting clothes," Solo guessed. "And I bet his next acquisition is a car. The ambulance is a bit too obvious." They watched the blip circle around the outside of the town, then come to a stop. It stayed there for a while. Solo looked at April, and she shrugged in return. Nearly an hour later, the blip moved again, this time at a much higher rate of speed. "Saddle up, we're off! Have one of the back up teams check out the town for casualties." That was the only rub in the plan; they were assuming that Illya's basic personality and morals about injuring civilians would guide him, but they had to be sure. If not, they had orders to stop him permanently. He shuddered at the idea, and pushed it out of his mind.

April shook out the map as they hit the road and called in the back up unit. They headed north along the smaller roadways at an almost leisurely pace. She consulted the map again. "I'm betting it's the National Guard armory he's headed for." Her finger poked at a site several miles ahead. "Our intelligence shows they store all kinds of ammunition and vehicles there. A tank, perhaps?"

Solo grinned and shook his head. "We both know that's too obvious for the Illya we know." He hesitated a second. "Well, I hope not, anyway."

"Me too. Make a right. Yup, that's where he's going, I'm sure."

They took another route that would bring them in on the opposite side of the armory, and parked. The blip on the screen also stopped directly east of them with the armory in the middle.

April was already on the radio trying to get the rundown on what was in the armory as they watched the blip slowly circle the compound. Then, it stopped a little distance away.

"I bet he's picked his spot and is now waiting for nightfall," Solo commented, pulling out his field glasses. "I'm going to see if I can get a visual."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll join you when I get the inventory."

Solo got out of the car and walked as close to the fence as he dared, keeping elevated on a small hill. He could see across the entire facility to the fields beyond knowing his partner was out there somewhere. He also kept out of sight; the Russian

was very good at surveillance. It was awhile before April plopped down in the grass next to him.

"Our boy's shopping list will be interesting. There are uniforms and all sorts of handguns and rifles; we expected that. What surprises me is the amount of plastic explosive and loose gunpowder."

Solo's neck was sore from holding it up to use the field glasses, but he ignored it. "What does the National Guard need with plastic explosives? Those college campus peace demonstrators getting a wee bit out of hand?"

"Hey, peace and love to you, too, baby. Actually, they are just storing it. This is a central depository in this area to collect it, and then it's shipped off a couple of times a year for disposal. I guess it's the old stuff, or stuff that is seized as evidence."

"Ah." Solo acknowledged, frustrated that he couldn't spot his partner. "Just curious, but did the blip move? He's not sneaking up on us, is he?"

"Hasn't moved much at all. He's still out there."

Solo finally dropped the glasses and rubbed his eyes. "All right, let's brain storm, here. Where do you think his ultimate destination is?"

April looked thoughtful. "Well, let's look at what we have. Who did this? The Russians, but who? KGB? The government? Thrush? Do we even know that much?"

"The negotiations for his release was through the government, but Illya wasn't kept with the other two. We don't know where he was kept that whole time, so I guess it could have been anyone. Thrush is at the bottom of my list, however. I don't see any benefits for them right now. The government, though, is another story."

"I guess we'll just have to see what happens." April grabbed the glasses. "Meanwhile we can cuddle in the grass together here! How romantic!"

Solo grinned. "You, April, are an easy girl to please."

She adjusted the focus. "Let's keep that between you and me, hmmm?"

ACT IV: "Let The Program Run Its Course."

When darkness fell, they moved back to the car and watched the blip that was Illya move. He was in and out of the facility in under a half hour, and the guards were none the wiser. When it appeared that he was moving away in the car, Solo contacted the support team who would liaison with the Guard and obtain a list of what Kuryakin had taken. Meanwhile, they followed their target at a leisurely pace.

"He sure won't draw attention for speeding," April mumbled.

"But he might for his general lousy driving," Solo replied airily. "Maybe they conditioned him to be a better driver!"

April laughed as she studied the map. As time went by and she noted the route, she frowned. "Hey," she said suddenly. "I think he's headed towards the Grummann factory in Bethpage." Poking at the map, she added, "That's the only thing in this direction."

Solo looked thoughtful. "Isn't that where they assemble the F-14 fighter jets?" he said after a moment. He glanced at April; she was looking at him, wide-eyed.

"You don't think they're having him blow up the plant do you?"

"I think that would be a one-way mission, don't you?"

April looked thoughtful. "Yes, I think you're right. But if it isn't a suicide mission, then what's the encore?"

Solo didn't want to go there, but Illya had forced his hand. "Well, if it's like the escapes we've seen, I think he'd have to fully believe that his mission was completed before anything would happen, you know, upstairs." He tapped his forehead.

"Napoleon, how do we fake the total destruction of an aircraft assembly plant?"

"I don't know, but we'd better start figuring that out!"

April was silent for a minute. Solo jumped when she snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute! What if he's programmed to steal plans and give them to a contact of some sort?"

"I suppose it's possible, but don't you think they would know we'd be watching him? That we'd follow him?"

"He wasn't supposed to be caught, remember? I don't think they figured you into the equation, Napoleon, and how well you know your partner. You've pretty much predicted his behavior all along. And if they didn't figure you into the equation, that pretty much narrows the suspects down to the Russian government. They have all Illya's military and personal records and should know how solitary he is. That would work in

the government's favor. I don't think Thrush would share their knowledge of you with the Russian government, do you?"

"I'd say that's unlikely," Solo shook his head. "You may be on to something there, but how do we know which scenario to follow?"

They looked at each other as their minds went over the facts. Finally, April sighed. "I guess we have to wait and see what happens." She clenched her teeth and looked back at the map. "I hate that idea."

"Me, too." Solo grumbled.

April sighed. "Well he could be there simply to take pictures." The two agents looked at each other for a heartbeat. "Nah!" they said together.

The surveillance pressed their patience and the anticipation brought them to the edge. April's guess had been correct as far as they'd seen. Illya's blip stopped outside the city of Bethpage, fairly near the Grumman facility. Again, they knew nothing would happen until nightfall, so they kept busy by placing Grumman uniformed U.N.C.L.E. personnel in key positions around the factory. The agents were pulled from offices outside New York and had not met Kuryakin.

By factory closing at five P.M. fifty-six agents had reported in for the swing shift. Kuryakin hadn't moved the entire afternoon.

"Doesn't he ever eat?" April griped, just as her communicator called in sync with the whistle blowing quitting time for the day shift at the factory. She grabbed at the device. "Dancer here." She started scribbling and saying, "uh-huh" and "all right" to the caller, and finally ended the conversation with a "thanks!"

"Well? What did our friend obtain by five finger discount?"

April blew out a breath and raised her eyebrows. "Seems he's a one-man demolition squad. He's dressed in dark camouflage and packing enough plastic explosive to level several of these buildings. A few handguns are missing along with rope, bolt cutters and a small acetylene torch."

"Illya's traveling light, I see," Solo joked. "This place doesn't stand a chance against our smart Russian."

"I'll say," April agreed.

The afternoon rolled into evening and the sun fell from sight. Darkness followed and Illya began to move. According to the layout map they had in front of them, the blip that was Illya evaded security completely and went directly to the building where the F-14s major body parts were assembled. From there he entered the area where the engines were assembled. April marked each spot where the blip stopped in each building.

After that Illya moved to the office building where he began a systematic search pattern in each office, which was proving to be very time consuming but extremely thorough.

Even though Illya couldn't hear them, April felt compelled to whisper. "Now that he's clear of the assembly buildings I'll send in search teams. No one has spotted him yet; your partner is very good, Napoleon."

"I know," he replied quietly, following the progress of the blip on the screen.

A few minutes later April's communicator called, and she confirmed each mark on her map as she listened. "The search teams are reporting explosives with timers in the assembly buildings. They're coordinated to all go off in five hours. Doesn't look like a suicide mission; he's giving himself time to get out. That means we get to blow something up so he believes he's been successful!" Her eyes shined a bit at that, which

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made Solo grin. "I'd say this," she pointed to a pair of smaller buildings behind the assembly area, near the rearmost fence line. "It's in the same area, they stand alone, and the map here says it's general storage."

"Get the teams to empty them of any essential items and move the explosives. Notify Mr. Waverly; he's in direct contact with the complex owners and will update them." Solo continued to watch the screen and mumbled to himself, "Now what's he up to?" His partner apparently had found what he was searching for and was spending a lot of time in one particular office. Solo pulled the map over. "This says 'administration'. What exactly is in this office?" He pointed at the map where it corresponded to Illya's interest.

April flipped through her notebook, and looked at Solo with a grin. "He's in the high security storage area. I bet our little Russian has turned shutterbug."

"And he's going to hand off the film to someone. Now we're getting somewhere!" Solo was relieved, actually. It was looking like he wasn't going to end up accompanying his partner to the morgue anytime soon.

Illya's five-hour deadline was close when the blip moved out of the complex, still unseen by anyone. The thought crossed Napoleon's mind that it was too bad this would all be classified; there was a lot of good training material here! His partner moved off in the direction of where April and he thought Illya's transportation was parked, but became perplexed when he veered off into another direction, still maintaining foot speed, and stopped.

"He's verifying the explosions," April mumbled. "Good thing we covered that. Hopefully he won't check which buildings explode; he's pretty far away. I think we're OK." They began to pack up in anticipation of things moving quickly from this point on. As they hoped, the buildings went up in an impressive fireball while it was still dark, and the blip moved away, slowly at first, and then at higher speed.

"I think he just 'borrowed' another car. He left from a different location. Have the backup teams check the area for the original vehicle so we can get it back to the owners." Solo started their car as April acknowledged him, both wondering where they would be lead to next.



It was difficult to keep up with Illya. When Solo and Dancer had to fuel up, Kuryakin simply obtained another car.

"Does he have a sixth sense about cars that have gas? How does he do that?" April grouched after filling up for a second time. They managed to get within a reasonable range somewhere in Virginia. Illya stopped suddenly, and stayed put for nearly two hours.

"Sleeping?" Solo wondered.

April shrugged. "We'll check that spot when he moves on." That very thing happened a couple of hours later. She pointed out a convenience store, and they pulled in.

"Excuse me," Solo asked the counter clerk. "Did a blond man stop in here just a little while ago? Alone? Possibly in army clothes?"

"Yeah, man," the clerk responded, bouncing his head to a rock song in the background. "He was weird."

"Weird?" Solo repeated. "How?"

"Well, he didn't buy anything, for starters. Just used the phone out there," he nodded towards the parking lot. April headed for the phone.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, that dude was stoned. Slept in the car. When he got out to answer the phone I could see his eyes looked weird."

"Ah." Solo, replied, understanding. "He answered the phone, you say?"

The clerk's stringy hair bounced as he responded, wiping his hands on his Jefferson Airplane t-shirt. "First he made a call, then took a nap, then the phone rang. Then he left. Dude looked like he shoulda had the munchies but he didn't eat anything. Weird."

"Yes, I see what you mean." Solo nodded. "Thanks."

"Sure, man."

Solo went outside and found Dancer on the payphone, thanking the operator. She headed to the car as she pulled out her communicator, and fired it up as Solo started the car. "Open Channel D," she said smartly. "I need a phone number trace. The number is 555-5794. I'll wait." They got on the road again and followed their quarry eastward. "Really? Thanks!"

Napoleon couldn't hear what was said. "Well? Who did our friend call?"

"The number Illya called and the number that returned his call both go to an townhouse complex near D.C. Specifically," she smiled a toothy smile, "to the residence of one Daniel R. Durrin, who happens to be a CIA agent."

Solo grinned. "Really? Isn't this getting in teresting, Miss Dancer?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Mr. Solo!"



Illya's blip stopped miles from the Durrin residence at a city park. Solo and Dancer stopped on the opposite side of the park and proceeded on foot carefully. It was a beautiful park with lots of trees and secluded areas and even a babbling brook with a pretty little bridge. Dancer finally spotted Illya on a bench at one end of the bridge. She focused the lenses and was a little dismayed at what she saw. "He looks awful," she commented, settling down. "Do we have backup available yet?"

"Give me those," Solo said as he took the field glasses and looked for his friend. "Yes, there's a team close by and near Durrin's residence, too." He clucked his tongue when he focused in on Illya. "He does look bad." In his mind, he was alarmed at how bad his partner appeared; again, Solo was reminded of how he missed Illya. I hope my theory pans out, he thought worriedly, afraid to think of an alternative.

Illya sat there for a while, unmoving, much like he sat in his room in the hospital. After what seemed like forever, a sole male cautiously approached from the other side of the bridge. He walked slowly past the Russian and stopped a little distance away and lit a cigarette. He must have said something to Illya, because soon after Solo saw his partner rise, leaving something on the bench, and head into the woods. When Illya was out of sight the man they assumed was Durrin leisurely walked past the bench, plucked up the envelope and crossed the bridge.

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"April, take the team and follow Durrin. We need to know what he's going to do with those pictures. Notify Waverly, and ask him what he wants done with Durrin. I'm going after Illya." He tossed her the car keys and took off after his friend.



Solo tried to be as stealthy as he could as he caught up to Illya. The noisy rustling of the bushes were the biggest obstacles; Illya himself seemed to be ploughing through in a fairly straight line. When Solo finally got his friend in visual contact he could see that the blond agent wasn't making the slightest effort to conceal himself. In fact, he seemed dazed and even a bit wobbly. Eventually Illya came to a stop, breathing so raggedly that Solo could hear him from his vantage point behind a thick stand of brush.

As he watched, Solo realized that his friend wasn't breathing hard at all, but was mumbling to himself. Frowning and wishing he'd learned more Russian, he tried to anticipate his partner's next move.

Illya's back was against a tree, his head pressed firmly to the trunk, his eyes closed. Napoleon could see how ragged he looked - unshaven, dirty, sallow cheeked. He could see his lips moving over clenched teeth. 'Arguing with himself?' Solo thought.

The dark haired agent began to think about approaching his friend. 'Let the program run its course,' he reminded himself. His heart leaped into his throat, however, when he saw his friend slowly pull a handgun from his waistband. Solo's hand automatically went for his gun, knowing his partner didn't have sleep darts like he did. He held himself from drawing when he realized that Illya didn't even know he was there; something else was going on.

Slowly, Solo rose as an alarming possibility came to his mind. Only the 'let the program run its course' mantra in his mind stayed his feet. With a pounding heart, he watched his friend fall to his knees in agony, one hand pulling on his own hair and the other wielding the gun wildly.

"No! Don't let this happen," Solo whispered.

Still on his knees Illya began pounding the back of his head against the tree trunk, moaning loudly. He tried to pull on his hair with the other hand, trapping the gun against his skull.

Solo crept a little closer, fighting the urge to run to Illya's side, unable to tear his eyes away from the drama unfolding in front of him.

Illya's body started to twitch and Solo recalled the event in the hospital. 'He's fighting the programming,' Solo realized, now knowing that the idea he feared a few seconds ago must be true: Illya's final conditioned order was to kill himself! Along with the fatigue and helplessness he must feel at this point, there was a real chance he would follow through.

'Let the program run its course!' How?' he thought frantically. He'd never seen his friend in such pain and everyone, even Illya Kuryakin, has a breaking point.

Solo was now just a few feet from Illya and the blond agent was beyond screaming, hunched over in pain as each spasm racked his body. Suddenly he stiffened, and his hands dropped down in front of him and began a weird battle between themselves as his right hand fought to point the muzzle at his temple and the left tried to push it away. Sporadically his body would arch in a seizure as he fought the conditioning.

Finally, the right hand appeared to win and the muzzle of the powerful gun made a wobbly arc to the side of his head. Illya's eyes and jaws were clenched shut, his body bathed in sweat, and his overall features appearing weary, as if his body was slowly shutting down in surrender.

Napoleon Solo couldn't stand by anymore. He covered the last few feet in long strides and placed himself in front of his friend. "Illya!" he barked sharply. "Illya!"

The muzzle of the weapon wavered slightly as the tormented man raised his head. His eyes were open wide and Solo had never seen that depth of pain and sorrow before in anyone's eyes. They were clear and blue and totally focused as he pleaded, "Kill me!" in a soft, hoarse voice. "It hurts!" The muzzle of the gun began to shake, and he pressed the weapon to his temple as tears formed in the corners of his eyes.

"Illya, I..."

"Please!" A tear escaped, tracing a hot path down the exhausted Russian's cheek.

Solo reached out, but Illya's finger tightened on the trigger, so he froze - both hands out in front of him, his jacket hanging open and his holstered gun exposed. Slowly, he moved one hand toward his secured weapon. It was a huge gamble; Illya had to believe there were real bullets in there, not sleep darts. The sound of it firing would give that fact away and Illya would know. Could the conditioning be fooled? He hesitated, his hand hovering over the butt of his gun.

"This can't be the only way!" Solo said, choking slightly.

"Yesssss," Illya hissed softly; his eyes drifted closed and Solo saw his friend jam the muzzle more firmly against his temple - the decision made in his mind.

From that moment on, everything Solo saw seemed to move in slow motion; his hand darted to his own weapon and he pulled it free, hoping to find his target on instinct alone. At the very same moment Illya's fingers tightened and there was a blinding flash. The shots were nearly simultaneous and Illya Kuryakin dropped like a stone.

ACT V: "How Could I Possibly Embarrass You?"

Solo walked down the halls of U.N.C.L.E. New York with a lighter step than he'd had in the past month. He tapped the thick folder in his palm as he walked, nodding his hellos as he passed others on his way to Waverly's office.

The doors to his boss's office opened easily and he slid into his seat. "Sir," he acknowledged as he sat and opened the folder on the huge, round conference table.

"So, Mr. Solo, the news from Medical is good this morning."

"Yes, sir. Illya's finally is showing evidence of consciousness." The vision of his partner lying on the ground, bleeding, would forever be etched in his mind. The wound was bloody, but not life threatening. Solo concluded that his dart had hit its target a fraction of a second before Illya had fired, knocking his friend's body away from the killing shot. Or maybe Illya had pulled away on his own; he didn't really care which scenario it was. His partner was still alive.

Waverly leaned back and rolled his pipe between his fingers as he looked Solo over. "There's still no indication of the level of Mr. Kuryakin's recovery, and this matter cannot wait much longer." Waverly pointed at the file in Napoleon's hand with the stem of the pipe.

"Sir, the intelligence we've obtained from the CIA turncoat in the past month has been very revealing. We're confident that the perpetrator of this new mind controlling technique is a single person. We just don't know who, exactly, it is. We finally have the region in Russia where it took place narrowed down, but it's a large area. This man needs to be stopped and his work destroyed. This level of brainwashing is..."

"Frightening, yes, I agree. We need to get to him before anyone else does. The Soviet government is still negotiating for the technique, according to the intelligence. That hasn't changed, I take it?"

"No, sir, it hasn't. But the grapevine indicates the developer is now taking bids from other sources, Thrush included. Illya's performance made quite a splash: A self-destructing mercenary and messenger that doesn't need to be paid. And as far as we know, they still believe Illya's dead. Agent Durrin could only give us information on his governmental contacts. Has he been charged yet, by the way?"

Waverly placed the pipe between his lips as he fumbled with a small tobacco tin. "Yes. They agreed to lesser charges than treason in exchange for information. And as far as the Soviets know, nothing is amiss. Quite a messy affair that could have ended up quite badly for the U.S."

Solo nodded, vaguely recalling that April had some fast juggling to do when she finally detained Durrin and exchanged the film in his possession for harmless duplicates. Illya had obtained quite a collection in the Grumman administrative offices.

"The CIA has gladly handed the hunt over to us. They have a lot of follow up to do on Durrin and his associates here in the States as well as abroad. The Army Intelligence and the N.S.A. are covering the Soviet governmental contacts both for the prisoner and film trade. The identification and location of this doctor is our job since we have the only eyewitness. We need to proceed soon, before this technique is sold."

"I understand, sir. I guess it's all up to Illya." Solo rose and flipped the folder closed. "I'll head down to Medical and see what's up."

Waverly waved him off as he struck a match and touched it to the bowl of the pipe. Solo got a quick sniff of the aromatic smoke as the doors closed behind him.



His steps slowed as he approached Medical. He always hated this place, and knew Illya felt the same. They both deemed it as a necessary evil in their line of work.

Illya's bed for the past month had been a glass enclosed room that was monitored 24/7. A conscious person would have a heck of a time getting any rest with the constant goings-on. Whenever Solo had visited his friend in the past month he felt like he was sitting in a fish bowl. Illya would hate it, and he grinned at the thought as he pulled up a chair.

The monitors he had come to know like the back of his own hand were quite active. Solo was there for just a few minutes when the doctor, a nurse and a burly orderly trooped into the room. "Glad you're here, Mr. Solo. We're going to try and waken Mr. Kuryakin with a little stimulant. The monitors are all within normal levels. We don't know what to expect, though." He nodded to the nurse who started injecting something in the I.V. The sound of the door opening again made Solo turn. The staff psychiatrist entered quietly and stood out of the way, nodding a greeting to Solo. Solo ignored him.

Napoleon watched Illya's eyelids flutter. The heavy bandages around the Russian's head of the last few weeks had been replaced with lighter ones as the scar on his temple healed. His cheeks were still sunken, and his complexion pasty white.

"Illya!" The doctor called softly, a hand on each shoulder. "Mr. Kuryakin! Open your eyes!"

"Tell him he's safe," the psychiatrist suggested. "He needs to know that."

Solo snorted and leaned over his friend. The doctor backed off. "Illya! Come on partner, open your eyes! You've been sleeping too much lately!" The lids finally lifted to reveal two very blue, very confused eyes that focused calmly on Solo for the first time in a long time. The dark haired agent couldn't help but crack a huge grin. "Hey!" He said. "It's about time!"

Illya squinted and shifted his weight uncomfortably. He shakily raised his hands and looked down at them as if he were surprised they were there. He opened his mouth to talk, but all that came out was a scratchy, "Wha...." then he head fell back weakly on the pillow.

Solo asked for a glass of water, and the nurse complied as they cranked the head of the bed up a bit. He helped his friend with the straw, trying not to be obvious about watching Illya's eyes...they would tell him a lot about his friend's status. So far they were a bit confused, but calm.

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Illya pushed the glass away after a few sips and cleared his throat. "Quit yelling at me, Napoleon. I have a headache," he whispered roughly as he sank back in the pillow and flopped one arm over his eyes.

"Oh, no you don't. You have some explaining to do!" Solo said teasingly, relieved. The staff laughed and relaxed, but the psychiatrist in Solo's peripheral vision remained unmoved.



It was many days more before the Russian was allowed to walk the halls of headquarters. The day he finally made it to Waverly's office was a bit of a triumph in Solo's mind; it had been over a year since he was last here.

Kuryakin had picked up weight, but the suit Napoleon had retrieved from the Russian's apartment still hung loosely on his frame. He had a ways to go still, but Solo and the doctors were sure he was well on the mend.

"It seems, sir, that the forced memory paths programmed into Mr. Kuryakin's brain were unable to hold, so to speak. When the conditioned behavior ran its course, the programmed paths simply collapsed like a line of dominoes, allowing the old paths to re-establish themselves. That's a simplistic explanation, but essentially what happened." The doctor closed his folder and folded his hands on top of the report. Illya and Napoleon simply leaned back and waited, having heard the report before.

"So you think Mr. Kuryakin has physically returned to his previous state?" Waverly asked.

"Yes." Said the medical doctor.

"No." Said the psychiatrist. Illya frowned, keeping his anger under control. Solo began to speak, but was silenced with a motion from Waverly.

"Please explain," the head of Section One inquired.

The psychiatrist cleared his throat. "Mr. Kuryakin has undergone a tremendous physical and psychological shock, sir. There is no way that he could be back to 'normal' so soon. It could be months, even years, before the full extent of his injuries can be assessed, mentally, at least. I recommend light duty for two more months, minimum, with weekly testing."

"I don't think so," growled the blond agent. The spark in his eyes was matched only by that of his partner's.

"Mr. Kuryakin, you are hardly in the position to judge your own mental..."

"Thank you, Dr. Spence. Your opinions are noted. Now if you and Dr. Collins will be kind enough to leave us?" Waverly dipped his head and picked up a pen, making a few notes of his own. The two doctors left.

Illya relaxed visibly when the door closed. He then calmly regarded his superior.

"I assume Mr. Solo has brought you up to date on events since your capture?" Waverly asked, all business.

"Yes, sir, he has," Illya replied.

"So you know the urgency of timing in all this. Simply, we have no more time. You are the only one that can identify the man that developed this technique, and we have to stop him. I understand Dr. Spence's concerns, and will keep them in mind. Meanwhile, I need you and Mr. Solo to start working on this case as of now. The doctor has cleared you physically to go back to work if you take it easy for a few more days. I'm

sure research alone will keep you sufficiently busy for that time. Are you up for this, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya nodded his head. "Yes, sir, I am. Thank you, sir."

The top two agents of the New York office stood and politely excused themselves. As they walked out, the eyes of their boss followed them thoughtfully.

This was Kuryakin's first full day out of the medical section and he was moving a bit slowly. Solo had to slow down a bit to keep even with his friend, and kept up light chatter until they reached their office. Illya collapsed in his chair, and then began picking at the papers piled on the desk. Solo folded his arms and leaned against the wall in front of his partner's desk.

"OK," Napoleon started, making Illya look up at him.

"OK what?" Illya replied.

"Share time. I've told you what happened since you were captured; now you have to tell me what you remember. It's the only way to start."

Illya frowned and leaned back. "Yes, I suppose you're correct. I'm not sure how helpful it will be, though. All I remember is pain. Lots of pain." He forehead furrowed, and he unconsciously rubbed the scar on his temple with a fingertip.

"Then let's start before that. What lead you to believe you were betrayed? Your last message was to us here at U.N.C.L.E., not through your chain of command. Do you remember why you did that?"

Still rubbing his forehead, Illya looked thoughtful. "One of the team left us at a crucial moment; we were monitoring a lab and what I heard didn't make sense, like it was a staged discussion. Then he left the room ..." His eyes clenched shut and he put both elbows on his desk, holding his head between his hands, rubbing both temples.

"Illya? Are you all right?" Solo took a step closer but refrained from touching his friend.

"Yes," the blond agent said. "I'm still anticipating the pain. It's blocking my recall."

"We can go back to this later," Solo started.

"Nyet!" Illya barked, a bit more sharply than he intended. "I mean, no, it's all right. I have to do this eventually. I have no joy being one of Pavlov's dogs." With a big sigh, he sat up again. "OK. The infiltrator didn't realize the extent of my background in physics, I guess. The information we were gathering that day was totally useless, and one man in the team seemed restless. He'd already made several solo 'fact finding' missions on his own in the past week, and I was kept in the dark. I thought it was because of the way the team felt about me. But looking back, I think the others simply didn't notice or seem to think it mattered. They were too focused on watching me."

Napoleon nodded in agreement. "I had the feeling you weren't a trusted member."

Illya nodded. "Anyway, when the agent left the room, I looked out the window to see which direction he was going and saw that we were surrounded by what looked like undercover KGB."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know KGB tactics on surround and capture. Similarly dressed men in black coats were in a classic attack position that were moving in. I warned the others then made the call. It's kind of a blur after that."

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"The man, that is the agent that left early, was it the CIA representative of the group?"

"Yes," he said softly, suppressing his anger. "I guess that all comes together with Mr. Durrin's arrest, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. And that's the CIA's problem right now. Big shake up going on down there, I bet. And just between you and me and Waverly, April and Mark have been keeping tabs on that guy in Russia, so we have that information if we need it. Do you remember where you were taken?"

There was a long pause as the Russian began to slowly rock his chair. Solo saw him wipe his palms on his thighs, and realized he was beginning to sweat.

"Illya?"

Kuryakin jumped out of the chair and began pacing. "Wait a minute, just wait." He ran his hand through his hair.

That was the point that Napoleon Solo first entertained the idea that this may be more difficult than he anticipated. The conditioning had to be broken, and it was obvious it was going to take awhile.

"I was calling in my report, and was the last one to get out. I was caught. I was taken to a holding cell." Illya stopped pacing, dropped his hands and looked right at Napoleon. "They left me to be taken."

Solo stared back, lips tight, and nodded tightly. "That was my feeling."

Illya regarded him for a second as if that was a totally foreign idea, then slowly shook his head and dropped back in his chair, muttering something in Russian. Solo didn't ask for a translation; he knew what it meant.

Illya leaned back in the chair for a minute, looking thoughtful. "I was taken to a local holding cell. I was interrogated by the KGB."

"For how long? Hours? A day? Longer?"

"Longer, I think." Illya's forehead was all wrinkles from concentration, and he rubbed a small circle on his scarred temple with one finger.

Solo moved to his drawer and pulled out a map, opened it, and spread it on his partner's desk. "Here's where your surveillance took place, right?" He poked at the map. Illya nodded. "Where were you held?" Illya automatically pointed at an area southeast from where he was taken. Solo glanced at him, then the map. "How do you know that?"

"I don't know. I just do. I was there several days and then moved out of the city. Let's see," Illya leaned over the map. "There were lots of rocks."

"Rocks?"

"Yes. I broke up a lot of them with a sledgehammer. Lots of rocks." He was rubbing his temple harder. "And an old mine with a modern lab nearby."

Solo was going to point out how absurd that sounded, but decided to keep quiet. Illya was working hard to reveal this information from his mind; better to let it flow and pick through it later.

"Dogs. German Shepherds. I was housed alone. It was cold and I didn't have enough blankets. There was some snow on the ground."

Solo looked at the map. For the time of year in question, and the openness of the area, and using the intelligence he had of where they suspected the conditioning occurred, he circled his finger over a particular region. "This area fit the bill?"

Illya stopped rubbing his head and looked down with pained eyes, blinking. "Yes. I recall the mountain range in the distance. Here," he ran his fingers over a spot on the

map. "When I was in military training that was the range I saw! I was near a military base." He put his hands over his eyes. "I have a headache, Napoleon. The light hurts my eyes."

Without a word, Solo walked over and snapped off the light. "Better?"

"Yes. Thanks." There was comfortable silence for a few seconds. "Napoleon?"

"Yes?"

"I have to go back and stop him."

"I think you're right, partner."

The silence continued a few moments longer.

"Napoleon?"

"What?"

"If you promise you'll try not to embarrass me, I think you had better come with me."

"Me?" Solo replied indignantly. "How could I possibly embarrass you?"

ACT VI: "Well, Haven't You All Been Busy."

Solo couldn't avoid the inevitable meeting with Dr. Spence before they left for Europe. He'd tossed all the phone messages and made sure he was out of the building at suggested meeting times, but couldn't avoid a direct order from Mr. Waverly.

As he walked briskly down the hallway to Medical, Solo recalled the mood his partner had been in when he'd returned from his 'required' meeting with the doctor the afternoon before; the older agent had decided to call it a day and left the building. He had no doubt that Illya would have the same response.

When he tapped on the office door and stepped in he was met with a stern face. "Hello, Mr. Solo. Glad you could make it." Solo wasn't sure it was a sarcastic greeting. The man's voice was neutral. "Have a seat."

As he sat, the agent looked at his watch. "I have other meetings to attend, so can we hurry this up?"

Dr. Spence smiled a patient smile and clasped his hands together on top of the fat file on his desk. "I know how Enforcement agents feel about psychiatrists, Mr. Solo. Generally we try to keep out of your way. But you have to believe that we are only looking out for the welfare of all agents. We have the same mission, that of saving lives."

Solo rolled that one around as he pursed his lips and looked at the doctor. He decided to just listen to what the headshrinker had to say and not make waves. 'Just check the box on Waverly's list and be on my way,' he thought. "One big, happy family," he replied evenly.

"Yes, well," Dr. Spence continued. "With that in mind, I want to preface this discussion by telling you that your comments to me are bound by the doctor patient confidentiality clause, but if I feel at anytime that your physical safety, or the physical safety of your partner, are threatened, I will intervene anyway I can. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Solo replied, guarded and unmoving.

The doctor leaned closer. "You all ready know I object to your partner going back in the field. Your partner knows why. What I want to do now is brief you so when there is a problem, there will be minimum number on the casualty list."

"You seem sure there's going to be a problem," Solo commented in a level voice, not showing the anger he felt. His dark eyes burrowed into the doctor's. The doctor didn't flinch.

"I have no doubt something will happen. I can't say how it will manifest itself but I want to give you a list of warning signs. That's all. Are you willing to listen?" Solo didn't reply right away. "I know you think that by listening, you're betraying your partner

somehow. Look at it this way: You'll be doing your partner a favor, maybe even save his life and yours, too, if you just keep what I say in mind, that's all. Your instincts will tell you what to do, Mr. Solo. That's why you're so good at your job."

Napoleon crossed his legs and leaned back, considering the words. Dr. Spence waited patiently. Finally, Solo nodded. "Go ahead," he said carefully.

When Napoleon Solo left Medical an hour later he was sure it had all been for naught. 'Still, the more information one was armed with, the better for the mission,' he thought, trying to push away the feeling that he had, in fact, betrayed his partner somehow.



After three days of research and forced recall from Illya, they finally thought they had enough to make a move. Kuryakin seemed much steadier and looked almost like his usual, stoic self. Some time outside U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters would help his complexion lose its paleness; when the pair stepped into the sun of New York, Illya paused slowly surveyed the sky.

They gathered their things at their respective apartments, and headed to the airport. To Solo, his partner seemed eager to get moving. Incoming intelligence was still a steady flow thanks to the details Illya had managed to relay from his memories, each piece of information painful to recall. It was solely his Russian stubbornness that kept him going. Finally, they had a physical description of the doctor they felt was responsible for the whole technique, and their European connections were working overtime to place a name to the face.

The two agents were well into the transatlantic flight when Solo's communicator warbled, rousing Kuryakin from an uneasy sleep.

"Solo here," the agent answered.

"Napoleon, it's April. I think we've finally pinned a name to Illya's nightmare."

"Who?" Illya asked a bit groggily.

"The name is Antonio Rivas. He's a Spaniard with no real allegiance to any country and an expert in psychological disorders. Seems he disappeared a several years ago while working in France on ways to alter obsessive behaviors."

Solo and Illya's eyebrows raised in unison. "Really?" Solo replied. "Any idea where he went from there?"

"Not really, but the only clue we have is a German doctor that was his partner in the French project, one Dr. Wilhelm Klofensten. They worked closely in France, and in a previous project in Spain. Klofensten stayed with the French project after Rivas disappeared, but then he also dropped from the radar after he left France. He showed up again two years ago, working at a project in Germany. Has been there ever since."

"Sounds like we're starting in Germany," Illya commented as he settled his head back down in the small airline pillow with a yawn.

"See if you can get the details on what he's currently working on." Solo told April. "We'll catch up with you when we land in Germany."

"Will do, sport!" April said brightly. "Dancer out."



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When they landed in Germany, Solo couldn't help getting a shiver recalling the last time he'd come here. He stole a glance at his partner and assessed him mentally against how he was the last time he was here. Illya had come a long way.

They met up with April at a cozy country inn just outside Frankfurt, surprised to see that her partner Mark Slade was joining them.

"He did the legwork in Spain and France while I kept tabs on all things CIA here in Germany," April said as she nibbled at some confection with apples in it.

"Well, haven't you all been busy," Illya said as he motioned for the waitress.

"That's certainly calling the kettle black," Mark quipped with a grin. "I'll have you know that your activities have created quite a stir."

Illya's stoic expression did not change. "Really," he said flatly, and then ordered his meal, as did Solo. Putting the menu down, he then looked at Mark and April with neutral eyes.

Solo picked up the conversation with a curious glance at his partner. He was normally quiet, but right now seemed almost rude. "Ah, have you found out anything more?"

Mark began his briefing. "For starters, Dr. Klofensten has been keeping in touch with Rivas. They both believe 'the subject', that's you," he nodded at Illya, "completed his programming and is dead. There's a little contention between the two about how much Klofensten contributed to the technique, and he wants a cut of the money when Rivas sells it on the open market."

"But Klofensten doesn't know the technique in detail?" Solo asked.

April shook her head and swallowed her bite. "No. The only one who knows it completely is Rivas."

"So there's conflict between the two Doctors. Maybe we can use that," Solo commented as he began the attack on his dinner.

"The Russian government is very angry with Rivas, too. I've gotten a lot of information from the CIA traitors in exchange for leniency. It seems that the Russians and Rivas made a deal before he began his, er, 'field trial'." She glanced at Illya when she said that, but he continued eating without acknowledging her. "They expected Rivas to hand everything over to them in exchange for use of their labs. It seems Rivas had other ideas."

"Capitalist greed at its very best," Solo commented with a nod. "He's going for the big bucks."

"Yup. Apparently there's an auction of sorts being set up. Highest bidder wins Rivas and the only complete, written copy of his technique."

Mark grinned. "With the Russians and Klofensten at odds with him and the CIA turncoats, it sounds like it shouldn't be too hard to find that location."

"My thoughts exactly!" April chirped as she wiped her chin.

"You two cover the CIA angle and their Russian information and get what you can. Illya and I will contact Klofensten." Solo ordered.

April and Mark stood to go. "Oh, Napoleon," she added as they turned to go. "I have some pictures for you of the compound and Rivas. Come to the car and I'll get them for you."

Solo wiped his mouth and stood.

"Good to see ya up and about, mate." Mark said, giving Illya a nod.

"Yes, Illya, I'm so glad you're back," April patted his shoulder.

Illya gave them a glance and a small nod. "Thanks," was all he said.

Outside, April opened the trunk to the small sports car. "How is he, Napoleon?" She asked as she rifled through some papers. "There's something about him that doesn't seem right."

Mark agreed. "He was stoic before, but at least he had a sense of humor."

"He hasn't had much to laugh about lately," Solo agreed, "But he seems to be doing fine."

"There must be a lot of anger there somewhere," April commented as she handed over some pictures. "I mean, I'd be furious if I was put through what he went through."

Inside, Solo knew they were right. Illya's demeanor lately wasn't quite the norm for him, but could anyone blame him? "He's fine," Solo assured, although he wondered himself.

"OK, then. We'll be in touch." Mark and April hopped in the small car and took off.

After their meal, Illya and Napoleon found their rental car and took off towards the lab where Klofensten was seen last. As they drove, Solo pulled out the photos April had given him. "These look familiar?" he said, handing them to Illya.

Illya quickly went through them, stopping at the last picture. With his peripheral vision as he drove, Solo thought he saw his partner's grip tighten a bit as he looked at the photo of Rivas. Antonio Rivas was a handsome man with thick black hair touched with gray at the temples, dark eyes and a chin that jutted in confidence.

"Yes," Illya said tightly. He went back to the other pictures, his hand shaking slightly. "This is the building I was taken to for the 'treatments', and that is the mine I worked in, but these other photos I don't recognize." He picked out Rivas' picture and put the others down. "And I will never forget this face." As he spoke, he rubbed his forehead with his free hand and squinted slightly. "Or his voice." He dropped the photo and pressed his eyes shut as he held his head between his hands.

"You OK?" A concerned Solo asked.

"Quit asking me that," Illya snapped, leaning back in an obvious attempt to relax.

"Whatever you say." The rest of the ride to the lab was quiet.



The company building where Klofensten's lab was located had good security. After introducing themselves as magazine editors looking for an interview, the agents had to wait in the lobby and were eventually escorted to the correct floor. They were shown to a small conference room and told that Klofensten would be with them shortly. Solo leaned back in the comfortable chair with his elbows on the arms and his fingers steepled in front of his chin, rocking the chair slightly as he watched his partner prowl the room like a caged lion.

"Don't wear a hole in the carpet, Illya," he commented after a few minutes. The blond head snapped in his direction. Just before he scowled at him, Solo saw a flash of something in his friend's eyes that he wasn't used to seeing. Fear? Solo carefully kept his expression neutral as he logged that in his mind.

After several minutes Illya stationed himself next to the main door so that the door would hide him when the Doctor opened it to enter. Within a minute, the knob wiggled and the door opened. Solo stood up and extended his hand to introduce himself.

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Klofensten was a medium sized, middle-aged man with harried look, thick glasses and ruffled graying hair. He took Solo in with a head to toe glance and a frown as he accepted the handshake. "Mr. Solo? I understand you wish to interview me for a magazine?" He glanced at his watch. "You have 20 minutes." The sound of the door closing behind him caused his head to turn, and he gasped when he saw the blond agent glaring at him.

Solo, who still had his hand in a tight grip, pulled the man forward to the nearest chair. "Let's talk, shall we?" Solo asked rhetorically, offering him a seat. Solo stood in front of him as he questioned the man.

Klofensten answered Solo's questions mechanically, obviously shocked to see Illya up and about. It was difficult to keep the Doctor's attention, so intent he was on studying the blond agent. Illya had circled around to stand behind Solo, but hadn't said a word or come any closer. Solo felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise and wondered if Illya would be able to control his anger in the face of one of the technique's developers.

Klofensten couldn't take his eyes off the Russian. After several questions, his surprise changed to clinical interest and his look changed to that of one studying a lab rat or an interesting conundrum. The icy expression that Solo was sure Illya held didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

Finally, the Doctor turned his eyes to Solo. "So many questions about Dr. Rivas! Let's be blunt, shall we? You are here because you want the technique, right?" He let out a short laugh and indicated Illya with a wave of his arm. "Well, obviously, the technique is a failure, as the presence of your partner proves!" He barked another laugh. "Rivas has made sure his face," and he indicated Illya, "is well known to the interested parties and his activities well noted, down to the last detail which I see now were never substantiated! I knew Rivas would do himself in somehow. I knew he was in too much of a hurry and his scientific method sloppy! Tell me, if I cooperate with you and tell you where this bidding is taking place, will you have him with you," indicating Illya again, "to discredit Rivas? Publicly, in front of all the world leaders that are there to bid?"

Solo didn't quite trust his voice at this moment. He was talking about Illya like he was an inanimate object whose only purpose in life was to be manipulated in order to make someone look good...or bad, in this case. The only thing that stopped the anger from rising to an uncontrollable level was the realization that Illya heard every word. Solo spared a glance behind him and saw instantly that his partner was teetering on a very thin line between the rational and irrational. The expression Solo saw turned him cold with fear; Klofensten had no idea how close to death he was at this instant at the hands of this 'experiment'.

Solo didn't move a muscle. "Illya," he said calmly. "I think the Doctor is ready to deal."

Kuryakin didn't seem to hear, but Solo knew he'd taken in every word. His icy eyes were locked on the German and Solo could see by the set of his shoulders and the rate of his breathing that his partner was fighting hard to hang on to his control. Solo made the instant choice to end the meeting.

"Yes, he will be there." Solo took Klofensten's elbow and lifted him from the chair. "Now give us what notes you have and the details of the auction." He steered him towards the door. "Illya," Solo looked over his shoulder at the other agent. "Let our contacts know the deal is set." He was giving his partner the chance to be alone and gather himself together. "All right?" Solo and the Doctor had reached the door. "Illya?"

His partner finally tore his eyes away from the old man with a forced blink and fixed his glare at Napoleon. "I heard you," he growled as he pulled out his communicator.

Solo pulled open the door, trying not to look like he was in a rush, and propelled Klofensten out into the hall before Illya made a move to kill the Doctor in some grisly manner. He closed the door, squared his shoulders, and dropped the German's arm. "Let's go," he said as he indicated the Doctor to take the lead.

"This way," the German replied and began to walk. "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes, Mr. Solo! You have an unpredictable weapon in that man." He chuckled darkly. "And Rivas has no idea it's about to blow up in his face. The question is what is the collateral damage going to be? Yes, I'm glad I'm staying here!"

Napoleon Solo had to bite hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from strangling the man himself.

ACT VII: "You Going To Shoot Your Partner?"

Klofensten happily handed over his contribution to the technique, saying that it wasn't really that much, according to Rivas. He hadn't seen the full and final technique as it was applied or in written form, so he didn't know what percentage of this work was in the final result. That was one of his contentions with Rivas. He complained bitterly about being unceremoniously dumped from the project, but Solo could not seem to work any sorrow for the man. In fact he had a hard time from slamming his fist into the man's yapping jaws.

Finally, he got what he came for and received the information on the auction, and left the scientist behind in his lab. Solo felt somewhat annoyed that he was making this man happy by getting rid of Rivas. He returned to the conference room and found Illya waiting grumpily in the hall.

"If one more security guard tries to get me back in that room to wait, I will start shooting indiscriminately," he growled without preamble, heading towards the exit.

"I'll be sure to duck," Solo replied, happy to be away from this place himself. He resisted the urge to look in the conference room to see if it had been trashed by his tense partner and hurried to catch up.

The auction was to take place just outside of Athens in four days. They headed directly to the airport and notified Mark and April of their destination, agreeing to meet in the Athens office to discuss what each of them knew about the participants.

After the report, Illya put away his communicator and slumped against the car door. He looked unusually tired, and an alarm went off in Solo's mind; 'fatigue' was one of the pre-warning signs the shrink had given him of a possible 'breakdown', along with 'tenseness', 'agitation' and 'periods of silence'. He smiled to himself - sounded like a list of a typical U.N.C.L.E. agent on a normal day! Still, a little voice inside was telling him to keep an eye on his partner, but he would do that anyway because that's what partners did.

Solo decided to let Illya take the lead in conversation. He knew the Russian was aware that Solo had noticed his demeanor with Klofensten. If Illya wanted to mention it, he'd leave it up to him.

They rode to the airport in complete silence.



By the time they got on a plane for Athens, Illya seemed a little more relaxed. He'd let Napoleon take the lead on getting them through the hassles of returning the car and tickets, always a quiet shadow at his side. As soon as they settled on the plane, Illya fell instantly asleep. Napoleon shook his head; that was a skill the blond agent had that Napoleon wished he could adopt- sleep anywhere at the drop of a hat. Instead, he flirted with the stewardesses and had a couple of drinks and a dinner date by the time they landed in Greece.

It was early evening when they touched down. Illya was still a bit blurry eyed when they disembarked, but seemed to be back to his dour Russian self by the time they checked into the hotel. Napoleon took a quick shower and changed clothes and was ready for his dinner date in no time.

He tapped on Illya's door on his way out. His partner opened the door and shook his head. "That was fast," he commented.

"Can't keep the fair Constance waiting!" Solo replied cheerily. "You going out to grab a bite?"

"Eventually. And no, I won't take your calls for you, so leave your communicator on," Illya replied teasingly.

"See if I do you any favors! See you later!" Napoleon tugged at his tie and moved off down the hall, satisfied that his partner was over whatever mood had struck him in Germany. That shrink would be proven wrong, after all!

After Napoleon left, Illya Kuryakin realized that he, in fact, was hungry and took a few minutes to decide where to eat. Room service was out; he definitely had to get out of this room because it was too confining and way too quiet. He needed noise to keep his mind distracted, as it kept taking the same direction of thought whenever he began to focus on why they were here. 'It is simply aftereffect from the conditioning,' he said to himself for the millionth time, shaking his head and rubbing his temple. The barely controllable rages he'd often felt since his awakening, which he thought he'd managed very well so far, would eventually go away, too. 'Once this is over, I'll be fine. Anyone would be angry in this same circumstance.'

He took a shower both wake up and relax, and dressed casually for his excursion out for a meal. When he stepped out of the hotel, he took a moment to look around and realized that this was the first time he'd been outside by himself since he'd kicked the conditioning. For a second, his fingers tingled from a flash of fear and uncertainty, but he shook it off. 'Don't be ridiculous!' he chided himself. Instead, he took in the people bustling by on their errands and smiled. It was nice to be among 'regular' people again! With a little grin to himself, he ducked his head and blended in with the crowd in a search for dinner.

He found an intimate café that was comfortably busy and eased himself into a corner table, perfect for people watching and protecting your back. With a nod to his heritage and the city of Athens he had an ouzo shot with a vodka chaser and found himself pleasantly relaxed. He realized it was the first alcohol he'd had in awhile, too, and sat back to enjoy the feeling as he waited for his meal in the smoky eatery.

By the time his waitress arrived with his food he'd had another shot of vodka and realized that his mind was quiet for the first time in a long while. He looked at the girl with an appreciative grin and she responded in kind, unconsciously adjusting her blouse when her hands were free. Illya was about to thank her when a motion at the bar behind her caught his attention.

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He froze, feeling a shot of adrenalin course through his veins as his eyes locked on the back of a man at the bar: Rivas! Immediately, a searing pain pierced through his brain and his hand grabbed his temples, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the man.

"What is it?" the girl asked in Greek, touching Illya's forearm.

Illya jerked away from her touch and hunched back into the corner. "Go away!" he snapped gruffly.

"What?" she asked, looking a little scared, and Illya realized he barked at her in Russian. He repeated his demand in Greek, and her face turned angry and she stomped off. Her distraction was just enough for him to realize that the man he saw at the bar wasn't Rivas at all, but simply another man with a similar build, and the pain receded some but not entirely. Shaken, he ate some of his meal and realized he'd lost his appetite. He paid the girl, who slapped his change on the table in a huff, and he left the restaurant on wobbly legs.

On the way back to the hotel the crowded street that earlier had been comforting and enjoyable was now close and claustrophobic. The Russian weaved his way between the dinner crowd pedestrians, his head still throbbing as a reminder to what had just happened in the café.

He finally made it to the hotel and stepped into the small lobby, thankful for the quiet. He glanced at the ancient, gated elevator, decided that he didn't really want to be alone in his room with his own thoughts, and headed to the small bar off the lobby.

He sat and ordered vodka in an effort to stave the varied and unfamiliar emotions assaulting his brain along with the dull throbbing: fear at how out of control he felt, anger at his reacting the way it did when he'd thought he'd seen Rivas, and the total rage bubbling just under it all because he felt so useless in controlling his own mind and reactions. Slamming back a shot of Stolli he figured he had three ways to handle it right now: Take out his anger on the next Rivas look alike he saw, take out his anger on the room he'd rented, or drink until he reached the same relaxed state as before.

He hefted another shot glass and called for his own bottle.



It was well after midnight when Solo came back to the hotel, happily whistling as he entered the lobby. Constance had been a dream! He would still be dreaming with her if she hadn't needed to get up for an early return flight. He smiled to himself; with luck, maybe they'd meet on the flight to New York! He was loosening his tie as he nodded and acknowledgement to the night clerk at the hotel counter when he heard someone call his name.

"Mr. Solo?"

Napoleon stopped and turned slowly towards the voice, ready to go for his holstered gun. "Yes?" he said cautiously. His eyes fell on a young woman, wringing her hands at the end of the counter. Her voice was heavily accented.

"Mr. Solo, I think we need your help."

He raised an eyebrow, glanced around the empty lobby, and let her approach. "We do? For what?"

The girl nodded towards the small bar entrance. "Your friend in there. Mr. Kuryakin? Can you help him to his room?"

A flash of fear went through his veins and his hand moved closer to his gun. "What's wrong with him?" he asked, visions of a black and blue Russian coming to his mind's eye, attacked while his partner was out on a date!

She took his elbow and pulled him inside the empty bar. Well, it wasn't quite empty. In the far corner, Solo saw a dark outline of a person slouched on a table, topped with a mop of blond hair. Illya's head was lying on his arms, eyes closed, and a broken bottle clutched in his hands as a weapon.

"Is he hurt?" Solo asked as he moved forward.

"No," said the girl. "He's drunk and won't let anyone near him, so we left him there."

When Solo got close enough to see the steady rise and fall of his friend's shoulders and the death grip on the broken bottleneck, he thanked the girl and said he'd handle it. He settled the bill, left a huge tip, and stood close to his friend. He knew better than to suddenly wake him when he was armed.

"Hey, Illya," he said sharply. "Illya!" The blond head jerked a little, and Solo reached down and clamped his fingers around the armed hand.

Instinctively, the blond agent snapped to wakefulness and began to struggle against the restraint. With his other hand, he reached for his holster, but Solo's hand beat him to it. "Hey," Solo said levelly. "You going to shoot your partner?"

The Russian's eyes tried to focus on the dark haired agent. "Go 'way, Napol'n," Illya mumbled. "I'm tryin' to rest."

Solo gently took away the bottle and pursed his lips at his partner's bloodshot eyes. "Well, there's a special place to do that, it's called a hotel room." He pulled the now unresisting Illya to his feet, and placed his friend's arm around his shoulders.

"Thish is a hotl, and thish is a rum," Illya reasoned, allowing himself to be propelled out of the room.

"You are a smart Russian, aren't you?" Solo clucked. "Let's get you out of here before anyone realizes how smart you are and tries to lure you away from U.N.C.L.E., shall we?"

"I'm not leavin' U.N.C.L.E., am I, Napol'n?"

I sure hope not, partner," Solo replied as they entered the gated elevator. 'And I'm glad I won't be you in the morning!' he thought to himself.



It was very late in the morning when Solo finally decided it was time to get Illya going. They had to hit the Athens office and coordinate with the agents there about the event that was occurring in a little over three days. Armed with a full pot of thick, black coffee, he knocked loudly on his friend's door. There was no response. "Illya!" Solo said loudly. "I know you're in there, and I'll keep pounding until you open the door. I'm sure your head," the doorknob turned, and the door was opened slightly. "...won't appreciate it," Napoleon finished as he pushed the door open into a darkened room. "You need some fresh air in here!" He said cheerily as he put the pot down, and pulled open the drapes to the single window.

"I've shot people for less than that," Illya's voice growled from the bed, barely audible from under the pillow. "Please be quiet!"

THE CONDITIONED RESPONSE AFFAIR

"I am being quite, my friend, and you need to get moving. Here," he poured a cup of the brew and put it on the table next to the bed. Then he plucked away the pillow and plunked himself down in one of the room chairs. "We need to get in the office and start pulling together a plan." He studied his friend, alarmed at what he saw, but kept his expression neutral.

His friend sat up, and was shaking uncontrollably. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were huge black bags under them. Although he managed to pick up the coffee mug and even bring it to his lips, he didn't drink any. Instead he put the mug back and lurched up from the bed, heading for the bathroom. He slammed the door, and Solo heard sounds of retching. Illya rarely drank enough to be sick and he wondered what went on while he was out on his dinner date.

With three days to go until the auction, Solo decided to let this atypical behavior of late go for now. The Illya he knew always came through when it counted, and he was sure that Illya was still there.



With nearly two full days of research behind them, the pair of agents sat back at the local sidewalk café in the early afternoon and tried to relax. Although Illya's hangover from the day before had finally subsided, his conversational efforts remained the same: Minimal to the extent of being nearly non-existent. Solo felt like he was working alone, and was relieved to see Mark and April approaching on the sidewalk.

"Hey you two!" April said cheerily when she settled in a chair at their table. Mark turned a chair around and straddled it, arms crossed over the back and a grin on his lips.

"Hey yourself," Solo greeted, raising his espresso cup. Illya acknowledged them with a hovering glance and returned to his meal. The dark glasses he wore completely shielded his eyes from them.

"As talkative as ever, I see," April commented in the Russian's direction. "Well," she continued when she didn't get a response, "have you managed to dig up the scat on the names we gave you?" She waved the waiter over and ordered a salad.

"Yes, we have." Napoleon replied. "An interesting and varied group of bidders, including Russia. I guess they've forgiven Rivas for skipping the country and taken the destruction of the Grumman factory as payment for letting Rivas work there. Most of the other bidders have ties to terrorist groups worldwide."

"Really?" Mark said, plucking a chunk of bread from the table. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. It would have to be groups outside the Geneva Convention, I suppose, or at least have a history of activities against the articles of the Convention."

"So what's the plan?" April chirped. "Massive assault, clandestine infiltration or something in the middle?"

"From what intelligence has been gathered it seems that the whole process is together in only two place: Rivas' brain and one hard copy manuscript. I daresay that both of them will be at the auction and very well guarded," Mark recited. "Limited copies sure drive the price up."

"In fact," April added, "Rivas informed one of the participants that the winning bidder gets sole rights and him, in person, with the bargain. So there will be only one user of the program. Another price enhancement."

"Sounds like he's setting himself up for life," Solo commented. "Must be tired of skipping countries constantly." He pulled out his wallet and paid his part of the bill. "I was thinking that the manuscript needs to be secured first, then the issue of Rivas himself handled. Getting the manuscript will be tough; I think a quiet infiltration is the best way to go for the first part. What do you think, Illya? Any ideas?"

The blond Russian, who had been pushing food around his plate with his fork, quietly lay down the utensil. He pushed himself back and rose, picking up his notes as he said, "It doesn't matter to me as long as they both burn in Hell." With that, he pushed in his chair, nodded in April's direction, and walked away.

April's mouth hung open in astonishment for a few seconds and Mark's eyes were wide in surprise. Solo proceeded to wipe his lips with his napkin, placed it on the table and also rose to go.

"I, ah, take that as meaning he'd rather bomb the hell out of the place?" April guessed, recovering her wits.

"Yes. But that idea's been vetoed already. You know how he pouts," Solo quipped lightly, covering his partner's uncharacteristic show of emotion. "Meet us at the office in an hour."

"I'll be sure to wear my bullet proof vest," Mark commented with a nod.

ACT VIII: "He's Good, Napoleon, But Is He A Loose Cannon?"

The CEO of U.N.C.L.E. New York knew he had a situation that could no longer be ignored. Your instincts will tell you what to do, the shrink had said, but Napoleon had to admit a little self doubt in this situation. Illya was acting in a very volatile manner and Solo was beginning to have his doubts as to the agents' ability to complete this mission. His analytic assessment was at odds with his instincts. Do I listen to my heart or my head? He thought on the walk to the Athens office. The raid was going to happen soon. Solo had to make a decision.

He decided that a direct approach was the best way to start. He needed to quiet the doubts. Finding Illya alone in the conference room surrounded by documents and papers, Solo quietly locked the door and pulled out a chair beside his partner. His arrival warranted a lingering glance from the Russian.

"You wish to say something?" Illya said sharply, returning to his notes.

"Yes. I need to get this off my mind, and I'll tell you straight up. I'm beginning to have doubts about your ability to keep your head in this mission." There. It was out there, and now it all hung on his partner's response.

Illya tossed his pen on top of the papers and positioned his hands on the chair's arms as he leaned back slightly. He drummed the fingers of his right hand on the chair for a moment, his eyes locked on the edge of the table in front of him. Napoleon took in every detail of the body language and unconsciously began to tense up.

Finally, his partner spoke, his voice low and dangerous, his words deliberately slow. "Are you pulling me from this assignment, Napoleon?"

Again, Solo wished he could see his partner's eyes. "For the first time since we got here, I'm seriously considering it."

As Illya pushed himself to a stand, Solo noted how white his knuckles were on the chair arm and had to fight his urge to also rise to his feet. His instincts were now in full roar and were telling him to appear as unthreatening as possible, so he leaned back in his chair instead and watched his partner enter an obvious battle to control himself. Never had he seen Illya Kuryakin so conflicted, and it was both fascinating and frightening to watch.

Illya's fingers were twitching, and he turned his back on Napoleon for a moment. He tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. Or was he staring at God?

"What ... do I have to do ... to keep that from happening?" Solo could tell that he was speaking through clenched teeth.

The next few minutes would make or break it for the Russian. This was turning into a test of the tormented agent's self control. If he couldn't handle stress here, on

home court, there was no way he could in the field. And Illya's choice of words just then were frightening; it was as if he considered himself a programmable robot.

"I don't want you off the team, but I have a lot of people counting on me to pull this off successfully. This can't be about revenge, Illya, and you know that."

Illya clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, then turned slowly towards his partner. When his eyes met Solo's, Solo had to keep himself from recoiling from the unbridled rage he saw there. "Just tell me what you want," Illya said lowly. "You know I have to do this."

"Yes, I do. We all do." He stopped a moment and studied his friend. "I guess I'm concerned about what you consider 'this' is. The plan is to contain both Rivas and the manuscript in a controlled, safe manner. Are you on the same page, my friend?"

It took many minutes that seemed like eons before the rage seemed to fade in Illya's eyes, and his fingers relaxed. He nodded. "Yes, we're on the same page, Napoleon. I..." he hesitated, and ran his fingers through his hair. "I know I've been distracted lately, but I won't let you down."

Solo smiled and relaxed himself. "I know you won't because you never have before. That's what I'm counting on. Once again we need to save the world." That got a slight, sickly hint of a grin out of his friend, and he motioned for Illya to sit. "Let's get cracking on this. Where do you see as an entry point?" Solo indicated the blueprints of the building where the auction was to take place.



As the day of the auction drew near and the participants began to gather, the surveillance teams kept up on every detail. Their whereabouts were always known.

Illya was kept out of sight to insure that none of the interested parties saw him and spread the word that the technique didn't work, which would result in Rivas' disappearance.

On auction day Solo and Kuryakin were at the command post several blocks away from the auction location, monitoring the radio. They both doubted that Rivas and the manuscript would be there any length of time together; it was safer to keep them separate until the bidding time, and that was the tricky part. Who or whatever arrived first had to be under constant surveillance until the other half arrived. At that moment, the manuscript was to be taken, followed by Rivas himself. There would be a small window of opportunity to stay with that plan. All intelligence said the manuscript would arrive early for inspection, but they would only believe that when they saw it.

Solo took a break to stretch and studied his friend from across the room. Since their confrontation, Illya had seemed more relaxed when around him and the other agents but Solo had no idea what went on when he was alone in his hotel room. And he was in there a lot, taking his meals there and retiring fairly early. He had a slight pang of missing his old partner; he was almost there, but not entirely, not yet anyway. Inside he had finally admitted to himself that it would be awhile until that was a reality. He sighed; one step at a time, he thought.

"A security team has arrived," Illya said. "Quite a large one, too." He listened to the chatter. "Looks like the manuscript has arrived."

"So far so good. Are all the participants there?"

THE CONDITIONED RESPONSE AFFAIR

"Yes. Our bugs inside tell us that each group is going to get a chance to peruse the manuscript under close watch before the doctor arrives."

That was one thing Solo had noticed of late: Illya never said 'Rivas'. He always referred to him as 'the doctor', 'the developer' or 'the target'. He shrugged mentally. Whatever worked for his friend was fine as far as he was concerned. "Let's move in closer," he suggested.

In no time they were alongside April and Mark, each taking turns with the field glasses. The auction itself was just under two hours away, which allowed plenty of time for the participants to look over the manuscript beforehand.

"We need to get someone inside right now. That's the only way we can be sure to get the manuscript before Rivas gets in the building."

Solo had already decided to leave the manuscript to Illya. It seemed to be safer than letting Illya take Rivas. The Russian hadn't even batted an eyelash at the assignment when he gave it to him the night before, and for some reason that nagged at Solo. Had Illya fully gotten the revenge idea out of his head? It appeared so, but then again he kept reminding himself that Illya's appearances were often deceiving. Since then, he'd found that suspicious feeling that Illya was waiting for something returning. He had to push the thought aside.

"OK, I'm off," Illya said, leaving the group as silently as a shadow.

April watched him go. "If I hadn't followed him with you on the Grumann thing I would have my doubts about him getting in there." She looked at Solo. "He's good, Napoleon, but is he a loose cannon?"

"I think he'll be fine," Solo said quietly, turning his attention to the field glasses.

"Guess we'll soon see," Mark said with a sigh. "I'm hungry. When's Rivas going to arrive you think? I have time for some food?"

April laughed lightly. "Thinking with your stomach again, I see. Should have taken care of that before we left the command post, sport. It'll be our turn to go as soon as Rivas gets here, capice?"

Mark winked at her. "Yes, dear. I think I have some crumbs in my pocket to sustain me."



Illya arrived at the building without being noticed, even in the light of the late afternoon. He knew the blueprint of this building by heart and knew exactly where he was going. The one weakness of this set up was that all the security men were dressed alike; no one could tell if the men assigned to the manuscript, the building or the doctor. That would let the agent move around easily, he hoped.

He got to the roof and inside in no time at all. The pair of roof guards never knew he was there. Inside he located the locking closet he knew was here, on a floor where he knew only security would be, and ventured out to wait for his chance to obtain a uniform. The best place was the restroom, and he secured a spot for the duration.

Illya didn't have to wait long. Soon a uniformed man came in to relieve himself, and Illya relieved him of his uniform and administered a drug that would keep him out of the way. Being in action again felt great, especially out from under Napoleon's nose, and he moved with confidence to make sure the hall was clear before stashing the stripped man in the locking closet.

Checking himself in the mirror, he was glad for the cap to cover his blond hair, and wondered if he should have disguised himself further. If his face was as known as Klofensten claimed, he couldn't show himself among the bidders. Instead, he put on the dark glasses in the uniform pocket and figured that would do.

Quickly, he was back in the hall, rifle slung over his shoulder and heading for the elevator. Two floors down to where the action was. He stepped from the car with the idea to find the manuscript and simply keep it in sight for now. He had all sorts of little devices tucked away in the purloined uniform to take care of the manuscript. He didn't care what the rest of the team's plan was; his was to destroy the thing as soon as possible. There wasn't a reason in the world he could think of to keep it intact. If he hadn't kept that thought constantly in his mind for the last few days, he wasn't sure he could have held together enough to get him to this point. He had some ideas for Rivas, too, but knew that dwelling on that would make him lose his façade of control, which had served him so well for this mission.

With both of them gone, I will be fine. That had been Illya's mantra that kept him in control.

"I'm in," Illya said quietly to the wire attached to his chest. "Locating the manuscript now. Kuryakin out."

He didn't wait for an acknowledgement. The only thing he needed from the rest of the team was for them to tell him when The Target arrived. He could feel the excitement rising in his veins, and couldn't recall the last time he felt so good.

Moving easily through the sparse crowd, Illya's posture and demeanor made him look like he not only belonged here, but also was in charge to boot. None of the other guards gave him a second glance. In his search for the tome he found the room where the auction was to occur. There was no upper floor above this section. The ceiling was gone, leaving a catwalk around the perimeter where the second floor would have been. It reminded the agent of the Coliseum, and he snorted in disgust. Finally, he located the manuscript in a heavily guarded room at the opposite end of the building, catching a glance of it as the door opened to allow bidders inside.

With a curt nod, Illya took the place of the man next to the door who left without question. All he had to do now was wait for word that the Doctor was in the building.



April tapped the monitoring receiver. "Well, he's in there at least. Haven't heard a word from him since his entrance but I can hear what's going on."

Solo dropped the glasses and rubbed his eyes. "How long before Rivas arrives?"

"I'd say anytime," Mark stated. "The auction starts within the hour. Time for us to move in closer."

They started packing up. "April, make sure the backup squads are ready. They move in only if we fail to get Rivas."

"Gotcha," she chirped, passing the message on.

Soon they were on the ground centered between the two entrances of the building so they could watch both doors. It wasn't long before two limousines, escorted by separate security vehicles, pulled up to both doors.

"Damn, they're using a decoy," April snapped.

THE CONDITIONED RESPONSE AFFAIR

"Mark, April take the south entrance. I'll take the east one. Move!" he keyed the mike on his lapel. "Illya, Rivas has arrived, but we don't know which door he's coming in. Stand by."

He didn't have time to realize he didn't get a reply.



Upon hearing Solo's words, Illya couldn't keep the flash of a wolfish grin from his lips. The last viewers had just left, and the manuscript was all that was in the room. There were four other guards here in the hall. In one smooth, fluid motion he dropped his rifle so it hung by the sling, and reached inside his shirt and pulled out a handgun with a silencer.

Without even blinking, and in the same fluid arc, he took out the four guards in four silent shots, none of them able to raise an alarm in time. Like a machine, Illya pocketed the gun and applied explosives to the door lock, which blew open easily. He stepped inside the room. The entire affair had taken under a minute.

There on the single table was the thick volume of scientific data made up of the all the things he had been through. Mesmerized, he was drawn to the tome and saw his hands reach out and flip it open, not hearing April's voice barking in his ear, and found the section of field trials complete with photos of his shaved skull labeled with insertion marks. The next section was a photo of himself sitting in a chair, in a room that, until this second, he didn't recall.

Illya felt his head begin to throb. He also felt like he was suddenly an observer in all this, standing by while someone else's hands flipped the pages. Unable to tear his eyes off the dissertation, the small voice buzzing in he ear suddenly became an irritant to his pounding head. He ripped the annoying device from his ear and chest and threw it across the room where it lay in a tangle in the furthest corner.

He didn't even hear the footsteps behind him, or the sound of men raising rifles to their shoulders. Time stopped then and there when a few seconds later he heard a voice, THE VOICE, behind him say, "Turn around." He had no choice but obey. His head was pounding now, and he pressed both hands to his temples to stop it. When he saw THE FACE suddenly his legs couldn't hold him and he fell to his knees in front of Rivas, his head about to explode. A scream built up from somewhere deep inside as many hands seized him, then everything went dark.



April cursed at the microphone as Mark kept an eye on the doors. "He's not replying, Napoleon. You hear me? Illya's not answering! I hear background, some gunshots and nothing! Napoleon? I think the wire has been removed but I don't hear anyone else there."

Something's not right, Solo thought, his instincts kicking in, "Abort assault! Meet me at the last position!"

The three of them met, puffing. April pointed to the tiny receiver, and cranked the volume so they could all hear.

"Water running?" April guessed.

"No. Paper rustling," Mark corrected.

"Pages. Pages turning," Napoleon said quietly.

They all looked at each other as a voice said, "turn around." A few seconds later there was a scream that made April jump, then faint talking and the sound of something being dragged.

"They have him," Solo whispered.

"Oh, God," April breathed, putting her hand on her chest.

Napoleon Solo turned all business. "I knew something didn't add up. Did anyone get out of the limos waiting by the doors?"

"Not that we saw," Mark said. "They are still there, look." He pointed across the street.

"Then Rivas is already inside." Solo snapped his fingers. "The security detail."

"Rivas went in dressed as a guard! He's been in there this whole time with the document," April commented with a growl. "What now, Napoleon? An all out assault? Bomb the place like Illya wanted to do in the first place?"

"Tempting, but no." Napoleon said, biting his lower lip. "We are the only ones going in. We aren't losing Illya again." He hesitated, thoughtful. "If his face shows up at that auction, no one is going to bid."

"Just like Klofensten said," April finished.

"Yes, irritatingly enough, just like he said," Napoleon said lowly. "Guess we'll call this Plan B."

ACT IX: "I Thought You Said He Was Dead!"

Rivas was livid, but managed to keep his anger under control while his mind raced. All the information the Russian government had on this man indicated he was a loner; his research showed him as being somewhat distrusted by his 'peers' in America. Quickly, he got a rundown from his security chief: Only the one guard had been found disabled, and all the others were accounted for and identified. A search of the man revealed no microphones or wires. The history he knew said the subject had died, and there were no reports of any further activity. But how did he lose the conditioning? He thought. I have to conceal him until I figure that out.

Luckily, the only others that had seen the captive were the guards here with him now. He ordered them to remove the subject to the basement and they dragged the whimpering man to the stairs. Then Rivas called for new guards to take the manuscript to the auction arena and stay with it. He had 45 minutes until the auction started, and he planned on a little further conditioning to insure the subject's silence in his absence.

Dr. Rivas entered the basement and indicated that the subject be placed in a chair. The guards shoved a chair in a corner, and practically threw Illya on it. Rivas knew he had to emulate the Conditioning Room as best as he could to get the subject in the correct frame of mind so he had the guard handcuff the Russian so his hand were side by side in his lap, and secure his feet to the chair legs. With that done, he knew he had to position the head so the subject believed the probes had been inserted in his brain. A belt around the forehead and connected to the chair back did the trick. Then he was blindfolded.

This was as close as he could get, and he knew it would do. By the way the subject had responded to his voice, Rivas knew he could get what he needed and mentally patted himself on the back with a self-congratulating grin. It would take no time at all to find out what happened with this subject and perfect his technique so it wouldn't happen again. All he had to do right now was keep the subject quiet and pliable, and have him taken to the limo while the bidders were all in the auction area.

"Listen to my voice," Rivas started.

The subject began to tremble.



Solo and Mark moved immediately to infiltrate the building, putting the back up units on alert. They weren't as neat as Illya; they also used to roof, getting to it from an adjoining building, but took out the two guards there as soon as he heard them check in

with their chief. They had a little time until the next check in, hopefully enough time to locate Illya at least.

April had been left on the perimeter with the radios. She chomped at the bit to be alongside the men, but Solo pointed out that a female guard, from what they had seen so far, was way too obvious.

"Plus, you need to call in the cavalry when needed," Solo added. "And someone needs to keep an eye on the limos."

"Great. Now I'm a bugler and a valet. More talents to add to my resume," she said sarcastically, settling in with a huff.

The two men entered the building and went down to the main level. Napoleon peeked in on the bidding arena and was disgusted; it looked like a livestock auction. Circling the floor were six groups of chairs, stacked for better viewing. It was obvious the groups were separated into bidding clusters, with each cluster working together for whatever entity they represented. Solo recognized the group from Iran, another from South Africa, and another made up of Thrush representatives! There was a podium in the center, where the manuscript was now displayed. The buzzing atmosphere and the few empty clusters told him the auction would be starting soon.

Solo also knew that somewhere in this building his partner was being held. Whether his partner was alive or not was another question; Solo was counting on Dr. Rivas' scientific curiosity keeping Illya alive - Rivas would want to know why the conditioning didn't work or how it got overridden, and would want to work the 'bugs' out of the technique after he sold it. Meanwhile, the proof of failure could only jeopardize the bidding process, and the Russian had to say hidden somewhere.

He and Mark were running out of time. After the auction, everyone would scatter to the winds along with Rivas and detaining him would be extremely difficult. Waverly had been cautioned not to create an international incident with any of the bidding countries; it would be a touchy situation if allowed to go that far. Solo intended to stop this before it began.

Solo pulled Mark aside in a quiet hallway and pulled out a small device from his pocket and studied it.

"A homing device? When did you attach that?" Mark asked.

"Just before Illya left us. Because of his odd behavior lately, I decided to cover all bases." He had trusted his heart but used his head.

"And you didn't tell us because you didn't want it to look like you didn't trust him," Mark concluded.

"Exactly," Solo said. "Basement. Let's go."

"I hope I never have to think like you," Mark commented lowly as he followed closely.

When they made it to the basement, it wasn't difficult to figure out where Illya was; the guards at the door told them what they needed to know. Solo counted five; no way to take them out quietly, and if they made noise, Illya's life would be in danger.

"What are you doing here?" the first guard barked, stopping them. "No one else allowed down here. You're to stay with the manuscript. Move it."

"Yes, sir. Just patrolling the halls as ordered." Mark ad-libbed. He and Solo then retreated. "Now what?" he asked on the elevator.

"The auction will be starting soon, and most of the guards will be with Rivas. When they leave, we'll get Illya from the basement and make an appearance.

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Mark whistled lowly. "That's risky. We'll be outnumbered ten to one."

"The way I see it is when Illya's face is seen, there will be a stampede out of here and most of them will be busy. When that starts is when we have to move quickly to Rivas and the manuscript before they're lost in the crowd."

"I guess we have a plan, then." Mark said brightly. "April? Did you get that? You'll have to cover the outside. Move some back up in to help you."

"Gotcha," April acknowledged.

Napoleon and Mark had a difficult time waiting. Although it was only about a half hour, it seemed like an eternity knowing Illya was probably going through some sort of hell down there. Finally, there was movement on the elevator and Solo saw Rivas, now decked in an expensive suit, step from the car with three guards, two more surrounding him as he walked around the corner to the arena. The agents looked at each other; that would leave at least two guards with Illya. Those odds looked much better.

They planted themselves at the end of the hall until Rivas disappeared into the auction arena room and the doors were closed behind him. When they turned to go to the elevator they were surprised to see the car go down, then begin a return ascent to their floor! Mark glanced at Solo, who shrugged and indicated they should post themselves across from the elevator.

When the doors opened it was all Solo could do to keep from rushing to his partner's side. There was Illya, between two guards, in the same head down stance Solo recalled from so many months ago, leaning heavily on the guards. His shuffling feet caused him to stumble coming out of the car, and the agents took their chance and leaped on the guards.

They all went tumbling back into the car, and Solo slapped the 'down' button in the same motion he chopped the guard across the throat. One more chop to the neck sent him down. Mark finished off the second guard just as Solo reached Illya's trembling side.

"Illya, snap out of it! Come on, we haven't got the time!" Solo slapped his cheeks, and his partner's head rolled back with a groan. "Listen to me! You've got to wake up!"

Illya's eyes blinked slowly, the same glazed look in them as before, and Solo's heart jumped into his throat. Suddenly, Illya's body stiffened and began to jerk like he was being electrocuted.

"Dear God!" Mark breathed, trying to hold on to Illya's other arm

"No, that's a good thing. It means he's fighting it," Solo was having a tough time hanging on himself. "Come on partner, keep it up."

Finally, Illya's knees gave out and they fell in a heap.

"We're running out of time," Solo barked, slapping the 'up' button. "Illya, you have to walk, partner. Don't think, just walk! Come on." They pulled him to his shaky feet, which he managed to keep with little help by the time the elevator reached their floor. His head, however, rolled loosely on his shoulders.

"Come on!" Solo ordered, and they dragged their friend out of the car and down the hall. By the time they turned the corner to the arena entry Illya was stumbling along a little more on his own, an occasional shudder shaking his frame. "That's it, Illya, focus. We're going to stop Rivas."

Solo spoke the name just as they were approaching the door guards, and he felt his friend's body stiffen. Solo stole a glance at Illya's face and saw the blue eyes wide open and full of fear. "No," the Russian said weakly, feebly trying to stop.

"Oh, now you venture an opinion!" Mark said and then something struck him as he eyed the four guards at the entry door. "Then help us get out of here. We need to get through that door!"

Solo saw where he was going with that idea, and they both pushed the now struggling agent at the first guard. Illya fell on him like a wild animal while Solo and Mark took out the other three with a minor scuffle. They didn't care about being discreet; they just needed to get through the door and into full view of the bidders. When the two agents got to their feet, they both noticed Illya still beating the unconscious guard, and it took both of them to pull him off.

Illya's knuckles were bloody and his eyes were burning with rage. His arm was pulled back to clobber the closer one of the two which happened to be Solo. The dark haired agent threw up his hands, backed off a step and said calmly, "I surrender, all right?" That caused Illya to blink and hold his punch. "Hold that thought, will you, until we get in there?" Solo pointed at the doors, and he and Mark stepped up, hands drawn, and each took an arm, directing the perplexed agent through the doors of Illya Kuryakin's personal Hell.



When they first burst through the doors they entered shadows. Solo and Mark quickly took out the two guards inside with their silenced pistols, who dropped unnoticed for now. There were spotlights on the catwalks above that were aimed at the circle of chairs in the middle of the cavernous room.

Solo felt like he was entering a boxing arena. The chairs were full of people in the various dress of their country and business suits. There were arms raising that held paddles with numbers. As they got closer they saw that there were three guards in the center of the room standing around the manuscript, displayed proudly on a tall podium. The melodic rhythm of an auctioneer was heard; when they finally cleared the chairs to see the ring fully they also saw a movie screen behind the auctioneer that was showing a slide show of the pictures in the manuscript.

Solo heard Mark suck his breath through his teeth; Solo just felt the wind knocked out of him when he saw the pictures. He couldn't help but glance at Illya, whose eyes were locked on the screen. Solo could see the embers of rage starting again. He caught his breath and was about to speak and calm his friend when he heard a smooth, deep voice take over the microphone.

"I'd like to remind my guests that I am prepared to share my knowledge, all of it, with whomever the winner chooses to learn the technique intimately."

The words themselves were shocking, but not nearly as shocking as the effect the voice had on his partner. Solo suddenly found he had to use both arms and all his muscle to keep Illya from retreating. Mark seemed to be struggling, too. Solo dropped his gun as he fought to restrain his partner. They were drawing the attention of those sitting in their proximity, but they needed to get Illya in the limelight; he hated the idea but Solo knew it was the only way to stop this horror.

Solo managed to get his friend in a restraining neck hold and brought him down. Illya's nose landed right next to Solo's fallen gun, and his eyes locked on it.

"You've got to stop him, Illya, you're the only one who can. Mark and I will back you up!"

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Illya grabbed the gun. Mark grabbed Solo and pulled him off the blond agent as Illya scrambled to his feet. Guards were beginning to move their way from the perimeter of the room in an effort to contain what looked like a fight between some guards. Illya looked like a trapped animal. The only way not blocked was the entry to the bidding arena; he leaped the low railing into the spotlight, his face clear to the crowd.

"Hey!" One of the bidders yelled, standing. "I thought you said he was dead!" The bidder pointed at Illya with his bidding sign. The agent was frozen in the middle of the ring, his head tilted up to the lights.

"That is the subject up there, isn't it?" another yelled from behind Illya, making him spin around. "What kind of lies have you been feeding us, Rivas?"

The guards by the manuscript looked confused. Wasn't that one of their team? When two of the bidders threw down their numbers and stood to leave, the guards looked at Rivas for direction.

Meanwhile Illya's eyes fell on the manuscript, and Solo could see from the sidelines how his demeanor changed from fright to rage at the sight of it. He raised the gun and fired at the thick book as the audience yelled in alarm and began to run.

"Stop him!" Rivas' voice bellowed over the intercom, and the guards moved in.

Solo and Mark also moved in to protect their friend and found themselves in the middle of a huge donnybrook. Illya, however, managed to shake off the guards and continued to fire at the book until his gun clicked impotently. White paper was fluttering like confetti around their heads, and the book and stand crashed to the floor. Solo saw his partner use the weapon like brass knuckles on a guard trying to stop him, and then saw Illya grab the fallen guard's sidearm.

Solo could see that his eyes were focused on a new target: Rivas, who was stepping back from the announcer's podium. The Doctor was moving to the stage stairs and Illya was well on his way to heading him off. Solo managed to catch Mark's eye and they fought their way in that direction. Neither agent wanted to see what the raging Kuryakin could do to the Doctor; they knew he'd regret it later, so it was up to them to stop their friend and detain Rivas.

"April! Have the team move in, but do not detain anyone trying to leave! We have Rivas in sight!"

Illya got to the bottom of the stairs ahead of Rivas and raised the handgun in a double fisted grip. Rivas dodged the shot and jumped off the platform with Illya in hot pursuit. The Russian angled in from one side so Rivas was cut off from the retreating crowd, and he ducked out another door. Illya slammed out the door seconds behind him, with Solo and Mark following a slight distance behind.

Running footsteps echoed in the empty hallway. Solo and Mark heard a shot, a door slam, and the sound of a body hitting a door. They rounded a corner just in time to see Illya's blond head disappear through a door marked "STAIRS." The door had time to click all the way closed before Solo slammed into it. When he and Mark drove through the door, all was quiet. They slid to a stop, breathing heavily. Finally, the only noise they could detect was a low murmuring coming from somewhere below them.

They peered over the railing to the flight of stairs cutting back below them and saw Illya on the bottom step, gun raised and shaking all over. They could hear the low muttering of a deep voice and realized it was Rivas. Cautiously, the two agents made their way down the stairs behind Illya and stopped half-dozen steps away.

Illya had Rivas cornered. The Doctor had his hands extended in front of him in an open, harmless manner, trying to draw his subject back into his control by using his voice. And it seemed to be working. As long as Rivas spoke, the blond agent was transfixed.

Solo spoke softly, "Illya."

The Russian spun around and pointed the gun at Solo. His eyes were icy cool and unfocused. Rivas grinned smugly at the two agents. "Seems we're at an impasse here, right gentlemen? My subject here is so tuned into my voice that he can't even register who you are." Rivas continued to talk in his even tone as Solo tried to reason with his friend.

"Illya, it's me, Napoleon, your partner. Turn the gun on the bad guy, tovarish." He thought he saw a flash in his friend's eye, but he pistol didn't drop. "Illya, come on. We have to finish this. You have to finish this. The only way to do that is to stop Rivas." The mention of the name brought a twitch to the agent's eye, but the gun still didn't drop.

"Shoot them," Rivas said in his melodic voice. "Shoot them and the pain will stop. I guarantee it." He kept on speaking. "Pull the trigger and the pain will disappear. You have the power to do that."

Illya's hands tightened on the gun.

Mark held his breath.

"Illya," Solo said calmly. "You're not going to shoot your partner, are you?"

The muzzle dropped a little and Solo saw Illya's eyes begin to clear. He took a second to look over Illya's shoulder to Rivas and saw that the Doctor was reaching inside his jacket with a scowl. Solo's eyes must have reflected something, because Illya was spinning around even before his partner yelled, "Look out!"

A single shot blasted from the handgun and Rivas slammed against the wall, a bright red hole blossoming in the middle of this throat and a gun slipping from inside his coat, clattering to the floor. Rivas slid slowly down the wall, his eyes astonished.

The bullet hole was dead center in his vocal cords.



Solo couldn't shake the image in his mind of a little black cloud hanging over his partner's head as Illya sat grumpily in Waverly's office. True, the young Russian had been jumping through all sorts of hoops for all sorts of doctors in the past two weeks since their return, but Solo knew he'd passed every test with flying colors. It was almost like the past year had never happened, and everyone couldn't be happier; everyone except Illya Kuryakin, of course.

"Good morning, partner," Solo said cheerily, dropping into his seat.

"It is?" Illya grumbled. "I haven't been allowed outside to tell."

"Well, the rumor mill says that's about to change," Solo said perkily.

"You must mean that brunette in Medical," Illya retorted with a snort.

"If you mean Susan," Solo started, stopping when Mr. Waverly cleared his throat as he entered the room. He toted a thick file under his arm.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he stated as he set the files on the table. "And congratulations Mr. Kuryakin. You have been fully cleared to return to full duty. It seems you tested in the clear." Napoleon gave Illya a 'See? Told ya so!' look. Illya rolled his eyes in response. Waverly patted the file in front of him. "It seems that the parts of

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the manuscript that were recovered," he turned his look specifically at Illya, "and there wasn't that much still readable, shed little light on the technique used on you Mr. Kuryakin, definitely not enough to try it again. And with Dr. Rivas', um, passing," again, a glance at the blond agent, "it appears the world is safe from it being used again."

Illya simply sat quietly with an innocent expression during the briefing.

"Which is a good thing, I'd say," Solo interjected to take the attention away from his partner.

"Yes, Mr. Solo, I tend to agree with you. There's no indication of a cure, either, but it seems Mr. Kuryakin has worked that out on his own."

Illya sat up straighter, his mood a little lighter. "Yes, it does seem that way, sir. So I'm clear for full duty starting now?"

"Yes, you are. Even Dr. Spence can't come up with a reason to keep you here any longer."

"So it's back to the old homestead, eh, Illya? I daresay you've got some dusting to do," Solo quipped with a grin.

"And I can't think of anything I'd enjoy more right now," Illya said in the closest thing to a happy tone Solo had heard from his partner in a long, long time.

"If you want, I've got a line on a great cleaning lady," Solo said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I have no doubt that you do, but I'll take a rain check, thanks," Illya responded dryly.

"No, really, she does a great job of..."

"THANK YOU, but no," Illya quickly interrupted him.

"Gentlemen, please." Waverly's authoritative tone stopped the discussion instantly. "Can we move on?"

Both agents threw each other accusatory glares as they settled in their chairs. Mr. Waverly harrumphed and continued the meeting, hiding his pleasure at hearing his top two agents bickering once again.

FINIS