

**THE MYSTERY IN THE SKY AFFAIR**

***ACT I: Diamonds and Lasers***

Napoleon Solo tossed his pen onto his desktop and sighed. The writing instrument skittered between two piles of stacked files, careened off a glass paperweight, then teetered tentatively on the far edge of the desk for a curious second before dropping off to the floor below. Hands behind his head, he kicked back and thumped his feet on his desk, crossed them at the ankles, and sighed again.

His blond officemate, hunched behind his own stack of files, continued to scribble furiously as he growled, "Must you make so much noise?"

"It's unbelievable how fast paperwork builds up. If I didn't know any better, I would say it had a life of its own and this office offered the perfect growing conditions." Solo plucked a pencil from the desktop, tilted his head back and narrowed his eyes as he aimed the yellow #2 Ticonderoga at the ceiling. "Maybe you could do a scientific experiment on that. The multiplication factor of ignored reports." With one quick flick of his wrist the pencil stuck in the ceiling with a thud, making it an even dozen hanging from an impressively tight grouping above the Chief Enforcement Agent's head.

Ilya Kuryakin didn't even look up and continued to write. "Please. I don't need to generate more paperwork with irrelevant experiments. The reports piled up because we've been working non-stop on cases. No mystery there."

"Ah, mystery! That's what we need. These escort and courier duties have been much too mundane." The bored agent fruitlessly skimmed the table with his eyes for more ammo. "I'm ready for a real mental challenge. You have a pencil?"

One eyebrow on the Slavic face rose with his head, his pen still in his grip and poised on paper. His eyes flicked to the ceiling above his partner's head, then down to meet the brown, puppy-dog eyes gazing innocently at him. "Not for you to launch. Reap what you have sown." He indicated the yellow grouping on the ceiling with a flick of his free hand.

Solo opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by the click of the intercom and the business-like voice of their boss's secretary.

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

The effect of her words was instantaneous. Before the statement was even finished, both agents were on their feet and shrugging on jackets as they moved to the door.

"On our way!" Solo chirped with a grin. The intercom clicked off. "Saved by the bell!"

## THE MYSTERY IN THE SKY AFFAIR

The odor of Isle of Dogs #22 permeated their superior's office due to the innumerable lightings Mr. Waverly initiated to his pipe on a daily basis. Solo wondered how often he was able to keep the embers going long enough for a decent smoke.

"Gentlemen, please sit." The curmudgeonly appearance of the Old Man was in total contradiction of his actual abilities as both knew Alexander Waverly could out-shoot and out-think most of the Section Two operatives in U.N.C.L.E. They couldn't respect their leader any more. In a familiar motion of repacking his pipe yet again, he nodded to the wall switch. "Lights, if you please, Mr. Kuryakin."

The room grew darker and Mr. Waverly pressed a switch. The photo of a man appeared on the wall.

"Dr. John Bardeen," Illya commented immediately. Solo gave his partner a surprised glance.

"I see you are familiar with Dr. Bardeen." Waverly's face was briefly illuminated with a strike of a match.

"He won the 1960 Nobel Prize for Physics," Illya recounted. "Currently a Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Illinois, before that, employed at Bell Labs. He discovered the effect of transistors and does research on semiconductors."

Solo pursed his lips and looked back at the photo on the wall. "Quite an accomplished man."

"And there are rumors that he may become the first man to receive a second Nobel with his new research," Waverly added.

Illya nodded. "Yes, I've read about it. Something about a theory on superconductors?"

"Exactly."

"So, why are you bringing him to our attention?" Solo inquired.

"It seems that someone had burglarized his offices. Last week. Nothing pertinent to his recent work was taken, however. He keeps that in another lab. The burglary was handled by the local authorities and was considered routine until two days ago. The FBI thinks there was an aborted attempt to kidnap the doctor then."

Solo and Kuryakin looked at each other, questions running through their heads. "And why would U.N.C.L.E. be brought in? Isn't the FBI handling that?"

"Patience, Mr. Solo, I'm getting there." The pushed another button and the picture changed.

"Dr. Arthur Schawlow," Illya remarked. "Considered one of the inventors of the laser."

Solo's nodded. "That was invented at Bell Labs, right?"

"Yes, Mr. Solo, you are correct."

"What happened to Dr. Schawlow to connect the two at this time?"

"Another burglary, four days ago. His field notes on the laser development were taken."

"Did someone try to kidnap him?" Illya asked.

"No. Not yet, anyway." Mr. Waverly puffed on the pipe and the embers glowed in the darkened room. He touched a button and another face popped up. It was an unflattering black and white, obviously taken by a surveillance camera at a distance and blown up. The man was glancing back over his shoulder as he walked, his dark hair spiked up by the wind, his coat collar turned up to his jaw line. The fuzziness of the

picture still didn't hide the prominent scar that ran down the man's left cheek from temple to chin.

"A fingerprint lifted at the laser lab burglary belongs to this man, Gunter Voss, a midlevel Thrush operative who normally works out of Germany . He specializes in thefts involving technology. A check on his recent whereabouts show him meeting with this man."

The picture changed again to a sidewalk in front of a small shop. Voss, recognizable by the scar, was speaking to a smaller man with short, blond hair.

"This was taken in West Berlin , three days before the burglary of Dr. Bardeen's office. The other man was identified as Anton Mueller. A cross check shows that an Anton Mueller was a recent graduate of the University of Illinois ."

"Let me guess," Illya said. "Electrical Engineering major?"

"Correct, Mr. Kuryakin. A student of Dr. Bardeen."

"Hence the connections to Thrush, and therefore involving U.N.C.L.E.," Solo summarized.

"Precisely. Voss appeared in South Africa two days ago. We think there's something going on involving lasers, transistors and diamonds."

"Diamonds?" Solo repeated.

"Yesterday, Mr. Mueller was seen accepting a package from a Thrush courier outside Port Elizabeth , South Africa . Local sources say it was diamonds."

Illya's forehead furrowed in thought, and then he said, "Could be some sort of communications device. Doesn't Thrush have a lab that specializes in that sort of thing in that area?"

"Precisely. And you two are going there to investigate what it is. We've received information that there has been an increase of Thrush activity in that particular area."

"What kind of activity?" Solo inquired.

"It seems that they are expanding that communications lab, but there's no sign of buildings."

The new picture on the wall showed an aerial view of a vast, barren area surrounding a collection of buildings with an unusually broad area of pavement.

There was a moment of silence, then Illya sat up straighter, his eyes wide.

"That looks like a rocket launch site!"

Waverly nodded. "Yes. And we just got a report late last night that a Dr. Von Heisen has disappeared from Germany ."

"The rocketry specialist?" Solo was now alarmed at what the clues were telling him. "Thrush is putting a laser in space? Why?"

Mr. Waverly looked at his watch. "The answer to that is in your hands, gentlemen. Our researchers can't figure it out. Your plane leaves in an hour."



Port Elizabeth , South Africa was a charming town that enjoyed mild weather year round. They were currently in their summer and the agents found the sunny warmth refreshing when they stepped out on the tarmac.

"I wish we could soak up some of the local sights," Solo mused as they waited to retrieve their minimal luggage. Two slim, dark skinned beauties, one with startling

green eyes, glided by and offered bright, white smiles as they passed. "Ah, yes. The locals sights seem . . . friendly!" He smiled back and centered the knot of his tie.

Illya watched the pair sway by, also appreciating their loose-limbed stride. "Sorry, Napoleon, but our destination is the Great Karoo foothills, not the local discothèque."

"Maybe we should enlist a guide," the suave dark-haired agent suggested. He tilted his head in the ladies' direction. "Or two, maybe!"

"I think we're already covered, there." Illya was looking at a man dressed in a bright shirt just beyond the luggage area. He was bouncing up and down on his toes and waving his arms, trying to get their attention. The man was rather portly and around forty years old with a huge, bushy moustache.

The agents picked up their bags and headed in his direction. The frantic arm waving stopped, but the bouncing didn't. "I say, you must be Solo and Kuryakin. Pleased to meet you! I'm Solly. I'm your driver."

"Pleased to meet you, Solly. You know where we're going?" Solo was disappointed at their guide and gave the two retreating beauties one last look.

"Yes, yes. Please, come with me."

The agents fell in behind their guide who bounced ahead chatting about the weather and the horrible traffic. The two new arrivals glanced around at the half dozen cars idling or moving in front of the terminal. Traffic?

Solly popped the trunk of what appeared to be a retired taxi cab. Although the outside begged for new paint and sported a variety of dents and dings, the inside was crisp and new. Solo slipped into the front and his partner took the back. Solly popped in behind the steering wheel.

"Yes, this is my baby! Working to refurbish her. Just finished the interior. Now to get going on the outside!" He fired up the engine, which purred smoothly. He lovingly patted the dashboard. "Ah, yes. Moxie and I are great friends. We'll get you where you need to go."

"Your car's name is Moxie?" Illya asked.

"Yes, sir. Was my wife's idea. Said a taxi in service as long as this one was must have some street moxie." He laughed and stomped on the gas, flattening the agents against the seat backs. "Odd Americanism, but when the wife explained it, the name simply fit. She's a honey. The car, that is. Well, so is my wife," he stammered, veering wildly between cars and making for the main road. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, yes we do," Solo replied between clenched teeth. His fingers dug into the dash in self-preservation.

After a few hair-raising turns and near collisions and with Solly chattering the whole way, they finally screeched to a stop in front of a neat building. "Here we are." Solly stated as he slammed the retired taxi into 'park'. "U.N.C.L.E. Port Elizabeth!"

Illya and Napoleon leaped from the car, grateful to be in one piece, and followed the jovial Solly into the nondescript doorway. A typewriter and an old, black telephone sitting on a tiny wooden desk identified office space inside. An elderly woman wearing a flowered dress pecked at the typewriter without bothering to give them a glance. Solly skirted her desk and made for the back wall with the two agents following curiously. When they reached a floor to ceiling bookcase on the rear wall there was a loud click and Solly pushed it aside easily to reveal a brightly lit stairway that angled down.

Descending into the basement was a technological shock. High-tech monitoring equipment and sophisticated armaments neatly lined one wall, and a large, orderly desk sat directly in the middle of the room. A small man with large glasses and wild, red hair looked up from a work table to one side and grinned a toothy grin. His hands were tangled in wires.

"Well! You made it! Mr. Waverly gave us the outline of your assignment and I think I have everything you need."

"And you are. . . ?" Solo extended his hand politely.

"Oh! Sorry. Wendell. Wendell Leech, Section 3, Nairobi ."

" Nairobi ?" Illya asked, confused. Nairobi was a long way away from Port Elizabeth .

"Uh, yes. We rotate shifts in this office. Mostly radar and aerial surveillance. It's really kind of a vacation for us. It's generally quiet down here and an opportunity to catch up on research and such. Anyway, I understand you're here to look into the launch pad. I'm assuming you need to shut down the communications building, too. I have the explosives you'll need plus a layout of the area. And I don't know what you have in mind, but I would suggest penetration by ground. It looks like there are several anti-aircraft devices in the surrounding countryside."

Solo arched his brows. "I'm very curious now to see why whatever they're up to warrants the extra firepower. Recent additions?"

"Yes, according to past surveillance photos. All installed in the past six months." Leech tapped out a half-dozen red dots on the photos.

Solo was impressed by the efficiency of the tiny office and was about to comment when Kuryakin let out a low whistle. Solo turned to find Solly showing his golden-haired partner the contents of the armory.

"Why do you need such a large supply of plastique? This should be more than we need." The Russian was impressed by the collection.

"Explosives are fairly easy to come across down here. I sort of stock up." Unbelievably, the extrovert Solly and the stoic Russian had found a common bond in blowing things up. Solly's eyes shone with excitement as he pointed out the various timers and triggers he'd managed to build up in his short turn in the tiny office. As they chatted about the merits of each device Leech went over the set up of the communications labs with Solo.

After a bit, Solo contacted Mr. Waverly and briefly went over the plans. "Your job is to render the launch area useless, recover the stolen notes, and extract Dr. Von Heisen. Thrush should be unable to launch anything without him."

"Yes, sir. We'll start tonight. Solo out." He closed up the communicator and spoke as he slipped the silver pen into his pocket. "Good thing we slept on the plane."



Solly came up with a sturdy vehicle for the agents to use and they headed towards the Thrush compound shortly before dark. It took several hours to get there due to the darkness and primitive roads when they finally spotted the lights of the compound from a distant ridge.

There was a security fence surrounding the entire area with lights mounted on the fence as well as on the buildings. They pulled off the road and studied the area with

infrared binoculars. The night was comfortable and warm, and the inky black sky sparkled with a dazzling number of stars. Odd animal noises in the distance added an exotic feel to the situation.

"No moon tonight," Solo commented as he admired the heavens.

"It won't be up for another three hours. We can move in without being seen." Illya spoke as he looked through the binoculars.

"No sense in wasting time," sighed Solo.

They hid the dusty vehicle and gathered their things. As Solo darkened his face with grease paint, Illya donned a black knit cap and slung the leather knapsack loaded with explosives over his shoulder. Solo tossed him the paint, and they moved off.

When they got closer to the fence Solo noticed the sentries. "There's an awful lot of perimeter security here for a communications lab. You don't think they're further along on this than expected, do you?"

"There's no launch vehicle yet, so they can't be that close. Unless of course it's in one of those outbuildings." Illya commented. "None of them look big enough, though. All I see are a couple of helicopters. I think we're in time."

The extra security gave them pause and they decided to study the routine for a day before moving in. They familiarized themselves with the surroundings outside the fence and found a perfect hiding place for the day. By the time they set up camp and concealed their presence, dawn was breaking. They settled in to shifts and Solo nestled down for sleep.

Around nine a.m. Illya spotted Dr. Von Heisen and noted where his room was situated. He compared the map with the actual layout, and noted all the possible entries to the main communications lab. By noon, when it was his turn to rest, there was only one vent that perplexed him.

"I think there may be an underground part of the facility," the tired blond agent told his yawning partner. "It's the only thing that makes sense for the placement of that vent. The guards tend to stay outside. Once we get in the building, we should be able to work undisturbed for most of the time."

Solo nodded, now fully awake. Illya briefed him on the location of Von Heisen's room and the routine of the guards, and settled down. He was asleep immediately.

Solo tapped his partner awake at dusk. "I took advantage of the guards' routine and managed to start an opening on the fence. There may be a lot of guards, but they sure aren't very attentive. I don't think they are expecting company."

Illya stretched. "You'd think they would simply send us an invitation."

"Thrush was never known for their manners. Von Heisen is in his room now. I'll take him. You plant the explosives and find the papers. We'll rendezvous before the big bang."

Illya threw the knapsack over his shoulder. "I want to exit through the underground labs and that vent." He pointed at the lone orifice located nearly at ground level. "I'm curious about what's down there."

"If there is a 'down there'. Just remember that curiosity killed the Russian," Solo warned.

Illya frowned. "I think you mean dog," he corrected incorrectly as he moved off into the growing darkness.

Solo opened his mouth to set his partner right. "Oh, forget it," he mumbled, following quietly.

They reached the edge of the natural concealment and stopped to wait for the complete cover of darkness break through the perimeter. After several minutes Solo perked up. "Looks like Von Heisen's leaving the grounds." Sure enough, they could only watch as Dr. Von Heisen hopped into a dark sedan and drove out of the compound. "Well. I guess there's a change in plans."

"We'll get in and out faster with two of us looking for the plans. Maybe we'll get the Von Heisen in town. Ready?"

Solo appeared disappointed. "I guess. Another search and destroy mission. I wanted something a bit less mundane. You know, a mystery to solve."

"Don't count your chickens before they escape, my friend."

" 'Hatch'," Napoleon corrected as his partner melted into the night. Solo fell in behind. "That's 'hatch'!"

They were barely slowed by the fence. Illya headed to the low-placed vent and loosened the bolts. Tilting the grate sideways a bit, he dropped in a pair of portable breathers to sustain them on their escape. The devices dropped down for several seconds before hitting bottom, confirming the agent's suspicions. They expected to use the smoke from the explosions to cover their retreat via the duct, so the breathers were good insurance. "I hope the inside opening to this vent is the same size," the Russian commented.

"I hope we can find the inside opening to this vent, since it's not on the blueprints!"

"You're sounding more Russian every day," Illya replied.

"There's no need to be insulting."

The main entrance was within sight of the guard tower so the agents selected a nearby window that was deep in shadow for their entry point. The blueprints showed that it went into an office-sized space, so they weren't surprised that on entry they found themselves using a desk as a stepstool.

Solo squatted down on the desktop, picked up the name plaque and read it out loud. "Dr. E. Von Heisen. What luck!"

Illya was busy securing the window so it appeared unmolested. "It's only lucky if he were here. I doubt the papers we want are here, either."

"You're probably right. Knowing Thrush, they probably keep the left hand from know what the right hand is doing."

"Precisely. Von Heisen is the rocket vehicle expert. The papers we want should be in the payload specialist's office or one of the labs."

They moved quickly and silently through the hallway to the next office. Solo picked the lock with ease and slipped inside after he indicated with a nod that Illya should start on the offices lining the other side of the hall.

When he closed the door Solo found that he was in a file storeroom. He quickly deduced that the files they wanted probably weren't in here, either, because most of the drawers weren't locked. He quickly scanned the drawers' contents and found most of them to be personnel files. A lot of the names were familiar - minor and mid-level scientists and technicians known to work for Thrush. Another cabinet was locked and easily opened under the agent's pick. He found that it contained the files of the upper-level scientists, Von Heisen included.

Solo grinned, and pulled out the files one by one and photographed the first pages with his cigarette pack camera. Some of the names were unknown to him but

would surely pique the interest of U.N.C.L.E. Section 3. He read the specialties of the men as he photographed: Rocketry, satellite electronics, and lasers. Two of the men were physicists whose names he'd heard before. The one that caught his eye was Stefano Partini; he was listed as a diamond cutter.

It took nearly a full roll of film to get them all then he moved down the hallway. He spotted his partner leaving the office two doors down. The blond mop shook in a negative to his unspoken question and they continued checking offices on both sides of the hallway. Solo didn't find anything interesting on his side of the building and joined his partner in the last office. Labs made up the rest of the building.

Solo stepped in and found Illya applying explosives to a large safe. A few seconds later there was a 'pfffft!' and a pop, and the safe door sprung ajar. Illya pushed it open and Solo joined him in inspecting the contents.

"This is it," Illya whispered. "Collect all this and I'll start setting the explosives in the labs."

"Have fun!" Solo quipped. He began to fill his knapsack as Illya slipped back into the hallway. When the pack was filled to capacity with the stolen papers, Solo's curiosity drove him to at least glance at some of the other files in the safe. He decided to use up the rest of his roll of film on them before he set the incendiary device inside the safe. "Sorry, boys, but if we can't have it, neither can you!"

He slipped from the room and entered the labs to find Illya fitting a plastique pack with a remote sensor. The blond agent glanced over his shoulder. "We have a problem, I think."

Solo glanced at his watch in response. "Yeah, I think the moon will be coming up soon, so we have to hurry."

"No, that's not it." Illya swept his arm around the room. "All this is basic equipment. I'm sure now that there's another level of labs below where that vent exits. I haven't seen a way down yet." He affixed another load of explosives at the other end of the hall.

Solo began a careful search of the walls and cabinets, looking for a concealed door. Illya did the same after he finished with the explosives.

"Here." Solo found the back wall of a built-in closet seemed loose. Illya had just come to his side when he twisted a coat hook on the inside of the closet and the wall slid aside. He looked at Illya. "Think they got that idea from us?" he commented with a nod at the hook.

Illya shrugged. "After you."

Solo poked his small flashlight into the opening and it revealed a down-sloping staircase. He followed the light and descended.

Illya alone heard the sharp noise behind them. He had just stepped to the top stair when he heard the lab door jiggle, then open. The doorway framed the black outlines of two men as one shadowed arm was reaching for the lab lights. Illya had a fraction of a second to act. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the remote trigger button for the explosives. When the light snapped on the lead shadow turned into the form of a surprised guard who happened to be looking directly at the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

"Hey!" the guard barked as he reached for his gun.

Illya pressed the remote button as he threw himself down the stairs.



The explosion rattled the walls and Illya slammed into the back of his partner. They both tumbled down the last few steps and spilled out on to the hallway floor. Black smoke billowed in behind them and Solo's flashlight spun away on the floor.

The agents untangled themselves and sat up. They glanced at each other then up the hidden stairway that was now emitting waves of sharp smelling black clouds.

"We had company," Illya said simply, a single cough punctuating his words.

Solo reached into one of the many pockets of his knapsack and pulled out two tiny breathers. The smoke continued to roil into the hall. "Good thing you were right about the basement." He coughed and wiped his watering eyes, then stuffed a breather in his mouth. He tossed the second one to his partner.

They stood up and oriented themselves in the darkness. Emergency lighting flickered on, but didn't help much. The stairs ended in a small alcove that was so filled with smoke that they could only see the floor and the lower portions of two doors. Illya opened one door while Solo opened the other, and they rejoined in the alcove moments later. They both indicated with head shakes that the rooms did not contain exits. Shouting voices from the stairwell caught their attention. Catching each other's eyes, Solo indicated with a nod of his head that it was time to leave the alcove.

Shrill alarms pierced the smoke-clogged air as the agents dashed along the hallway. They could hear shouting and the crash of destruction above them but the noise lessened as they plunged deeper into the bank of smoke. Out of habit, both agents hunched forward as they ran, prepared to bowl over any obstacle in their path concealed by the black clouds. The tiny breathing devices they pressed to their mouths would only last a few minutes - just long enough to get out if Illya's exit plan was correct.

Illya waved his hand in front of his face as he ran, fruitlessly trying to bat away the darkness. His partner was somewhere ahead of him lost in the smoke. Using the wall as a guide, Illya's hand felt the smoothness of the hallway walls, and realized that the walls were lined with glass. Curious, he hugged the wall and saw that each glass framed the view of a pristine lab. The contents of each room were clearly visible, as each room was sealed to prevent smoke and dust from entering. Something in one lab caught the attention of the scientist in Illya and he skidded to a stop.

Backpedaling quickly, he pressed his face to the glass of the last lab. At first the contents of the room seemed innocuous enough - a chalk board covered in writing, files and papers spread out on a table and schematics tacked to wooden crate - but it made a connection in the agents' brain: Laser, diamonds, launch pad, Dr. John Bardeen. Each was a dot in a connect-the-dots puzzle that had confounded U.N.C.L.E. researchers. This lab revealed the final dot in the puzzle.

In Illya Kuryakin's brain a picture suddenly appeared from the various and sundry clues. His first thought was, 'Why in a communications lab?' The next thought he whispered out loud when the realization hit him. "Impossible!"

He was filled with horror at what the picture in his mind showed him.

"Illya!" Napoleon's voice was barely heard in the cacophony of destruction above them. The billows of smoke suddenly doubled in thickness and intensity, blinding the Russian completely. It took another shout from his partner to move Illya's feet but his pace slowed considerably as his mind raced.

These labs had to be completely destroyed.

Illya's mental calculations told him that the current destruction sequence left too large of a margin of error. Some items on this floor had the possibility of recovery, and with what he had just seen, that couldn't be permitted.

These labs needed to be completely obliterated and every connected scientist tracked down and detained. Suddenly, this simple search and destroy mission had turned into an issue of global security and Illya Kuryakin was the only one not affiliated with this lab that knew why.

Momentarily overwhelmed with the task ahead, the agent turned on his heel and mentally counted the extra explosive packs in his knapsack. It would be close, but possible. Dropping to his stomach, Illya low-crawled back down the hall ignoring his partner's calls. If his timing were perfect, he could destroy these labs and they could both still escape.

Illya focused on his duty and shut out all else. These labs were sealed and separate but he knew that most labs shared the same air filtering and circulation system. The main service room was at the far end of the hall in the alcove; it was the first room he had checked, and he remembered seeing canisters lining the walls. Some had been labeled "Oxygen".

It took only a few moments to find the correct room. The blond agent slipped inside and removed his breather to conserve the air supply, noticing at the same time that the seal of this door wasn't as tight as the labs which allowed smoke to trail in around the door frame. Quickly, Illya pulled several oxygen tanks from the wall and dragged them to the common vent. He pried off the vent cover and yanked out the layers of filters until it was a straight shot through the ducts to the labs, and then he turned on the fan that pushed air into the labs through this common duct. One by one the trembling agent opened the oxygen tank valves and shoved them into the ductway.

Illya was breathing hard and could feel the sweat rolling down his face and chest. Ever so slowly, the room filled with smoke and the hallway outside the small square of glass in the door was completely black. It was incredibly hot. Stars flashed in front of his foggy eyes as he worked; the heat and smoke were getting to him, and there wasn't much time.

After eight open tanks were shoved in the ducts, he slapped his remaining plastic explosives on the walls of the duct, connected them, then attached the igniter and set a timer device. The cautious agent didn't want to take the chance that the remote ignition device wouldn't work in the vents.

Illya's vision blurred with tears from his irritated eyes and floating stars indicated he'd inhaled too much smoke. His throat was raw from coughing, and his mind wondered briefly at the possible contaminants that could be in the smoke entering his lungs.

Finally, the Russian started the timer and made his way to the door while inserting the breathing device back in his mouth. After two gasps and a coughing fit, he opened the door and plunged into the darkness on wobbly legs. After two steps, the agent dropped to the floor and low crawled double-time under the layer of thick smoke that nearly reached the floor.

'Napoleon has to be warned about the extra explosives,' he thought dizzily, using the shouts of his partner to guide him. 'And I hope he found that escape vent.'

Illya's arms quivered and his heart raced as he gasped for breath - the breather had run dry. He spat out the useless device and instead, tried to keep as low to the floor

as he could. Wheezing and coughing produced stars in his vision, which multiplied into a spinning galaxy. Darkness began to invade the edges of his sight; his head whirled.

When the beleaguered agent reached the end of the hall it took him a few seconds to realize he had to make a turn. He responded automatically to the sound of Solo's voice yelling his name and turned towards it. Totally blind he clawed his way along like a drowning man fighting his way to the water's surface. Finally, he bumped into a wall.

'Up,' he ordered himself. 'The exit it up.'

The agent struggled to his feet and pressed his wobbly legs to the wall for support. He was completely surrounded by thick, acrid smoke, his sight obliterated by tears and darkness. In a last ditch effort he leaned his body against the wall and stretched both arms above his head.

If his fingertips reached the escape vent above him, Illya never realized it. As he sucked in his last gasping breath of foul air he felt his world fade to black accented with an unbelievably loud roar.

***ACT II: "Home Again, Home Again, Jiggedy-Jig."***

The legend of Solo's luck had dogged the suave agent since his days in Survival School . And in all honesty, the very same phenomenon could actually be traced in his mind back to his days in the Korean War. This time, however, he knew that it was more than luck that had saved him. Divine intervention coupled with fate and a bit of good timing thrown in, perhaps? He didn't bother to try and understand why he was alive. He simply accepted it as he leaned over his partner in the darkness of the smoky duct.

Solo was beginning to think Illya would never find him in the vent. Finally, when he had heard coughing just below him, he reached out with both of his hands and immediately found the sweat-slick hands of his partner splayed against the wall below. Desperate, the American locked his grip on Illya's forearms and managed one good pull before the world exploded before his eyes. Solo's instant reaction was to clamp down harder.

He could feel the buffeting his limp partner took and somehow managed to pull the Russian's body into the narrow crawlway. The amount of debris finding its way into their escape route amazed him; the duct became entirely blocked behind them as the smoke blinded agent dragged his unconscious partner towards escape, kicking the knapsack of stolen papers ahead of him. Sections of the duct wall crumpled inward, threatening to pin them in forever.

Solo's famous luck and quick reflexes snatched them from death's door once again, and he didn't have time to figure out what went wrong. The second explosion was completely unexpected and the air was instantly thick with smoke and black as pitch. Thankful for the extra breathers they had tossed into the duct, the desperate agent automatically snaked along the cramped path on pure adrenalin, dragging his partner behind. When they made it to a section where the smoke was thinner he stopped and took the time to check the limp form by the light of his meager flashlight.

"Hey!" Solo barked as he slapped his partner's blackened cheeks. "Illya! I'm not carrying you out of here, so wake up!" After what seemed like forever, the pale form gagged, choked and coughed. The dirty, dark-haired agent jammed a breather into his partner's mouth and continued to the exit, gasping partner in tow.

"Illya!" He yelled when he found the ground level opening. "Illya, come on. You have to help me."

Coughing raggedly and shaking his head Illya roused and rose to his knees. Talking was out of the question, but he was able to regain his senses and boost Napoleon and his knapsack out of the opening.

Solo quickly glanced around as he shouldered the pack. He could hear panicked shouting, running feet and a shrill alarm within the compound, but the thick smoke issuing from the doomed building concealed their escape in the glare of the perimeter lights. With a feeling of déjà vu, the dark haired agent leaned into the vent opening and clamped on to his partner's wrists once again. This time, however, Illya was ready, willing and able to assist in the extraction.

The agents coughed around the breathers as they stayed low and ran below the smoke to the opening in the fence. Solo only realized they were running in the wrong direction when a brief opening in the smoke revealed that they were between the adjacent buildings. He skidded to a stop and flattened against a wall. Illya, coughing furiously and alarmingly red-faced, stopped beside him. They both spit the breathers to the ground.

"We're turned around," Napoleon croaked. "You OK?"

Illya nodded, his face slowly returning to its semi-normal paleness beneath the grime. Any attempt to talk, however, triggered another coughing fit. His eyes watered uncontrollably as he shook his head to clear his hair of debris. He motioned with his hand which way they should go, then pointed up.

"The helicopters." Solo felt like his throat was made of sandpaper and could only imagine how his partner's felt. Illya had been in the thick smoke much longer.

Illya nodded and led the way. After ducking around a few corners to avoid the busy footpaths they found themselves at the edge of the tarmac, flooded in lights. The prevailing wind kept a lot of the smoke from the parked aircraft, but truck noises and distant yelling told them the burning building was still the center of attention. Seizing the opportunity of distraction, they slipped unnoticed between the two French-made aircraft.

"Can you fly these?" Solo asked as he glanced around. Illya replied with a withering look. "I'll take that as a yes. Pick your steed."

Illya climbed in the left seat of the smaller craft. As he fiddled with the controls Solo asked, "Do you have anything left to disable other one?" Illya shook his head as he fired up the craft.

Solo buckled the 5-point restraints as he spoke. "You used the rest of the explosives? That explains the big bang, but why?"

"Necessary," Illya croaked, his voice barely audible. "Talk later." The blades began to whirl. Between the engine noise and the agent's damaged throat, talking impossible.

Solo nodded in response and the chopper lifted gently from the ground. They were just above the fence line when an audible ' PING ' of a bullet announced that they had finally been noticed.

Illya dropped the nose and increased power. The responsive craft darted off through the smoke towards the Great Karoo Mountains and cover. Solo estimated the mountains to be about five miles away. Speed wasn't a virtue of particular model, but it was extremely maneuverable. The Russian, aware of the anti-aircraft stations, executed an evasive zigzag course below radar level to try and limit any successful tracking by the anti aircraft stations.

The first two missiles weren't even close. The third caused Illya to change course rapidly, but still missed them cleanly. The foothills below them grew quickly in altitude and steepness and Napoleon felt they were home free. He pulled out his communicator

and briefly reported to Solly, saying only that the mission was complete and they were being pursued.

"Not over," Illya rasped painfully, his voice barely audible. "There's more . . ."

Suddenly the craft lurched to one side with a blinding flash that made Solo's head ring. There was a second explosion, but to the agents it was one huge concussion that seared away their night vision.

At least it's close to sunrise, Solo thought crazily as the craft lurched sideways. He dropped the communicator to grab something solid. Hints of gold in the tallest of the mountains below announced the arrival morning sun. Black gashes of valley shadows stretched away like death's fingers between them.

The craft began to twist and picked up speed with each passing second. With the catastrophic loss of the tail rotor their spin was uncontrollable as they fell out of the sky. The blurred sight of his grim partner wrestling with the helicopter's bucking controls, pale features illuminated by the console lighting, was the only vision that made any sense at all.

In a weird second, Solo recalled the horror stories passed between agents of such a mechanical failure; it had happened to Illya once, but he had landed successfully, lucky to be close the ground. The Russian always laughed the incident off as dumb luck combined with skill.

Illya wasn't laughing now.

The motion of the machine pinned Solo in his seat as he hung on for dear life. Time slowed down. As they spun the brightness of the morning sky and the darkness of the valley intertwined like a crazy strobe; then the sharp rims of the mountains thrust up into his line of sight and his world tipped sickeningly to an impossible angle.

And still they spun.

A deafening screech made the dark-haired agent grimace. One hard jolt caused his head to rap the side window, and Solo saw stars. Groggily he also saw his partner still trying vainly to save their souls with the useless controls. With his vision darkening and the sight of his partner's hair standing straight up Solo was momentarily confused; they were inverted and Illya still fought for control.

Finally the yellow and silver curtain of the dawn sky was erased by the dark, grey hues of boulders and mountain. A loud BOOM! announced their collision with the earth. Illya jerked once against intruding rock and finally released his hold on the controls, his head lopping loosely forward between limp shoulders.

I guess we're in trouble now, Napoleon Solo thought drunkenly as his world went black with the shrill shriek of torn metal.



Solly and Leech gaped at the communications console. What they heard had not been encouraging; there was no response with their repeated efforts to raise either Solo or Kuryakin.

"What was Kuryakin saying at that last moment?" Leech asked. "I couldn't quite get it."

Leech listened to the recording over and over as Solly continued to try and raise the pair. Leech fiddled with the console, frowning in concentration. Finally, after filtering out several layers of background noise, he put his hand on Solly's forearm.

"Time to call for backup," the wild-haired agent said. "Kuryakin said 'there's more'."

"More what?"

"Obviously, more than meets the eye. Call Nairobi."



The smell of something burning was the first thing Solo noted, followed by the crackling sound of ... something. He felt himself jerk which unleashed waves of pain from all quarters and forced himself to be still and breathe.

"Where . . ." His own voice sounded garbled and far away, and he thought he might be frowning but he couldn't tell. A command to open his eyes was reluctantly obeyed by his eyelids, but difficult to achieve. One set was stuck together and the other was damaged somehow; what he saw from the one eye didn't make sense. He heard a groan and it took a confused moment for him to realize that he was the one groaning. He ordered himself to stop immediately.

His head began to throb and hours? minutes? seconds? passed before a vague sense of what had happened began to come to him.

Car crash?

The myriad of visual input was baffling even though it was dark. Wires dangling and a smell - electrical.

Something electrical is burning. That can't be good.

Napoleon Solo forced himself to concentrate. Snatches of memory came to him and connected with what he was seeing in front of him. They had crashed.

They?

Flashes of his partner's white blond hair against black shadows came to him.

Illya. He's here somewhere.

Turning his head produced fireworks of unbelievable proportions with pain to match, but he wouldn't be put off. "Illya?" Not recognizing his own slurry voice, Solo groped for the restraints release clawed at it, bringing more pain. It took him a few moments to realize that only one hand obeyed him; the other was unconsciously cradled against his chest and acknowledging it brought stabs of agony. He decided to let it be. The hand that worked was able to free him with only minor discomfort, and his body unexpectedly lurched to the side when the straps sprung loose. His partner should have been right there; stupidly, the injured agent looked down only to see a gaping hole where the pilot's seat should have been. The motion created a spark in some dangling wires, bringing home the realization that it was dark outside.

Disorientation flowed into mere grogginess as Solo freed his feet from the remains of the console. White skin was visible through great rents in his pants, and moonlight made his exposed skin glow. Slowly, ever so slowly, his immediate surroundings organized itself into some semblance of reality as he went with gravity to get out, maneuvering over the hole in the floor of the pilot's side. The time it took to get out increased with his alarm - Illya was out there, somewhere, and much too quiet.

With his injured arm pressed to his torso and his bloody legs begging to be left unmoved, the agent finally found himself sitting in the open hatch of the pilot's side. The door wasn't open in a traditional sense, but ripped away, offering the only escape. Solo's legs dangled; the cockpit was tilted obscenely over a black abyss that had no bottom.

## THE MYSTERY IN THE SKY AFFAIR

The groggy agent squinted into the darkness below, the meager light blocked by the body of the copter. After a few minutes his eyes adjusted to the darkness enough for him to differentiate the lighter forms below him from the shadows. It struck him that he didn't know how the broken chopper was suspended; it obviously wasn't on the ground.

Unable to determine where the ground was, exactly, he swung a leg in a circle outside the hole until his foot struck something solid. Solo wiggled until both his feet were flat on the protuberance and he realized it was a huge boulder.

A memory flash showed him a boulder smashing through the door and into Illya's head.

Fear clutched the agent's heart and adrenalin pushed him into action. Carefully, Solo lowered himself onto the massive rock and looked around. He was perched on one boulder that was one in a pile of huge boulders that held the remains of the helicopter above him. With a bit more confidence Solo let go of the craft and began his descent, praying that his partner was somewhere below and waiting for him.

The climb was eerie. The agent had to stop more than once to let the world stop spinning and there was the constant sizzle and crackle of the dying helicopter to remind him of his famous Solo luck. He should be dead. It took awhile for him to recall where he was, but he couldn't remember the exact details as to why they had been flying around South Africa .

It had to be Thrush. Perhaps Illya would remember. He remembered everything.

After what seemed like a lifetime Solo finally touched level ground. With both aching feet firmly planted on the floor of the narrow valley, he looked up and was blinded by the sun suspended between two edges of the valley rim. The silvery-dark outline of a barely recognizable helicopter was draped like an obscene Christmas ornament on the boulders making up the valley wall. A shiver ran up his spine and his legs gave away in shock. He sat unceremoniously on the hard ground. Every part of his body throbbed in pain.

Too tired to get up, he decided to start his search from right here. Temporarily blinded by the sun he squinted at the shadows of the valley.

Shock, his brain was telling him. You're going into shock.

The thought made him concentrate more as he studied each outline around him. It took him a while to realize that there was one dark, ragged form amongst the smooth, light boulders that made up the geology of this valley. He blinked at it.

Illya?

Solo commanded his body into action and stumbled to the form. It was nestled amongst a collection of sizeable rocks and tilted at an odd angle. With his good hand he reached out between the two large boulders blocking his way and felt cloth. An arm, it was an arm, which led to a shoulder and hair? He peered into the opening between the rocks; yes, it was hair, but darkened and matted with something wet and sticky. Blood.

"Illya?" he called softly, feeling the face to orient himself to the neck artery that would tell him if he was really as alone as he felt at this moment. He held his breath, fingertips probing, and found a very faint and erratic pulse.

A grotesque kind of pleasure went through him as he realized that his partner was at least alive. He felt the Russian's face. He squeezed his arm and found that some bones made stomach churning grinding noises. The fact that his partner was still firmly strapped in the dislodged pilot's seat was probably the only reason he was still alive,



Solo realized. He was afraid to move him; any one of those grinding bones could be a deadly splinter poised to pierce a vein or artery.

Solo's mind slowly began to tick again. Thrush had shot at them, so Thrush must be looking for them now. He peered up at the eerie, backlit skeleton hanging on the rocks and realized that it would be difficult to find thanks to the narrowness of the valley. He slipped around the boulders and settled next to the pilot seat. He fruitlessly felt for his communicator pen.

Solo turned to his silent partner and felt his pockets. Luckily, Illya's pen was clipped to an inside pocket under his jacket. Solo carefully dug it out. Opening it one handed proved to be a tricky endeavor, especially since he couldn't really feel his fingers. It ended up an exercise in frustration when all that came from the device was static..

Disgruntled, Solo slipped the pen safely away and hugged his throbbing arm to his body, mentally preparing for a difficult day ahead. "Hang in there, partner," he whispered, telling himself the same thing as he nestled among the biggest rocks that still held some measure of warmth and unwillingly shut his eyes.



Normally, April Dancer hated paperwork, but this time she was thankful for it. She and her partner had just finished up an assignment that had taken them from New York to Spain and finally Nairobi in pursuit of a Thrush courier. Explaining the complicated course that was supposed to end up in Australia had taken much longer than expected, but she and Mark Slade were glad to be available to round out the Nairobi team in their recovery of Solo and Kuryakin.

"Here." April's manicured nail tapped sharply on the map pinned to the temporary wall of the field command post. "They checked in here, and shortly after there were reports of large weapons fire in this area." The two spots were too close for comfort.

"Large, as in anti aircraft?" Mark had already put two and two together and ran a list of required equipment for a rescue operation through his head. The others in the tent merely waited for orders.

"Yes. We need to get in there, reconnoiter the area and keep an eye on Thrush at the same time. Their last message said the mission was successfully completed so I'm sure, if anyone of rank survived the explosions, they very much want their hands on our agents now that their base is a charred hole in the ground. They'll want to have something to offer Thrush after such a loss."

The team was small and April and Mark knew each man from previous assignments. This should be a routine rescue. Her heart told her they would find them; it was what her head told her that kept her on edge.



When the sun passed out of sight it brought a chill he hadn't noticed before. Napoleon knew his body was fighting shock when he finally came back to consciousness, and the real chill came when he laid eyes on his partner. His nightmares didn't seem nearly as bad as the reality; Solo was again surprised his partner was still alive.

Survival instincts kicked in, allowing the conscious agent to push aside his growing alarm as he visually surveyed the area. This was obviously a dry riverbed; tiny rocks made up the groundcover, and were edged by the monstrous boulders that had been Illya's downfall. There had to be water around; the brush attested to that.

It didn't take long to find a rancid pool tucked away under a collection of rocks on one side. Solo found a curved chunk of metal from the chopper and scooped up what he could. He tried to rouse his partner without luck, and rooted around for a container, which he found tucked in the survival kit still attached to the back of the pilot's seat along with several emergency ampoules of morphine. The weary agent tucked it all away in various pockets, knowing he had to get out of this valley if he hoped to signal for help.

He eyed Illya. The combined weight of his partner and the seat would be too much for him; the seat was the only splint the broken body had. It wouldn't be wise to remove the still unconscious agent from it. Reluctantly, Solo knew this was coming down to a race: Would he get to U.N.C.L.E. before Thrush got them? A coldness rushed through his veins at the challenge setting the dark haired agent into motion to find the best place to climb out.

A bend in the narrow valley would put the body of his friend out of sight, and Solo looked back with reluctance. "Hold on, Illya. I'll be back," he said softly.



The position of the shadows told Solo he wasn't making very good time. The day would be gone before he got to the top. Pain and the use of only one arm reduced the agent to a snail's pace and reluctantly he stabbed himself with one of the morphine ampoules and waited for it to take effect.

Seeking a distraction, the agent tried the communicator and wasn't surprised that it didn't work. A distant sound alerted him and he held his breath. Aircraft - somewhere to the south. Friend or foe? One more sip of the foul water and he pushed on. The warmth of the morphine radiated through Solo's body and the climb became less painful. He was just over half way up when the first aircraft presented itself as a flash of dark against the bright blue slash of sky above him, far to the south.

Three quarters of the way up the exhausted agent paused and counted two more passes of the aircraft, still too far away to help. Solo decided to take a chance and tried the pen again.

"Where are you?" The reply was sharp and urgent, barely audible through the static, but recognizably April.

"Valley. Deep and shallow with a dry creek bed. I think we're south of our last contact." He noted another pass by the distant chopper. "You wouldn't happen to be south of our last contact, would you?"

The static popped noisily, but the reply was clear. "No. We're north of that location."

"Then I think there's another search in progress."

"We read another craft, and it's not ours. And they are probably listening in." Solo heard her bark an order to her pilot, and knew the race was on.

It wasn't long before the rocks begin to vibrate with the growing sound of an approaching craft from the north. To the south, the zigzag pattern of the first copter tightened up in the ribbon of blue sky. Would April get back-up in time? Solo slipped the

pen back in his pocket and clung to the wall. Within seconds a craft appeared around the bend to his north between the valley walls. It was a very tight fit.

The helicopter drew alongside and nosed up slightly to a hover. The wind from the rotors whipped the weary agent's hair and pummeled his face with dust and dirt. With one eye barely cracked open Solo watched the pilot rest one runner on a nearby jutting rock, the blades barely clearing the valley wall. Two bodies stepped out and quickly climbed to Solo's aid. After a brief assessment, they strapped the weakening agent to a lightweight stretcher and hauled it to the waiting chopper.

The rescuers quickly whisked their charge into the cabin and released the straps so he could sit up. Solo began to direct the pilot to Illya. By air it took a fraction of the time to retrace the American's steps.

"Whoa," he heard the pilot's British-toned voice breathe. "There's a scary sight."

Even in daylight, the body of the chopper was barely recognizable for what it was, and the sight momentarily shocked everyone. The Solo luck had saved the legendary pair once again.

"He's down there," Solo indicated. "There's no room to land. He's still in the pilot's seat." The metallic click of safety harnesses punctuated the end of his sentence.

"We'll get him. Mark, just fly the bird. Hennessey, watch our back. That other chopper will be here any second." April, clad in a flight suit, gave orders in a clear and commanding voice as she and another similarly dressed airman attached themselves to a cable. "Let us down."

Hennessey worked the winch and watched the sky south of them. Through the open hatch next to him, Solo observed them quickly attach the cable to the pilot seat below and double check the harness holding Illya secure. April signaled to pull and the winch whined with effort. The chopper dipped slightly with the load.

A short time later Hennessey pulled in the unconscious agent, unceremoniously disconnected him and lowered the winch again. Solo moved in and checked for a pulse, alarmed at the weakness of it. April and her partner had to be recovered before they could do anything else.

"Got 'em!" Hennessey fired up the winch again. "Here they come!" he yelled at Mark as he pulled up his rifle. Solo could see the craft approaching them quickly, and nearly lost his stomach when they shot straight up.

The gunshots rang above the sound of the engine and Solo kicked himself free of the stretcher. He grabbed April's rifle from the deck and leaned out the side opposite from Hennessey. He could see muzzle flash from the enemy machine and heard the ping of bullets striking them. Solo and Hennessey returned fire. April and her partner spun on the cable below. The winch squealed protest at the abuse but kept rolling.

Mark shot up from the canyon and passed directly in front of the pursuers, who then had to arc aside to avoid a collision. Slate angled to the nearest forested mountains for cover. Solo admired the British agent's cool thinking. A noise across the fuselage caught his attention and he turned just in time to see two bodies pop into the craft. Hennessey tossed them guns before they were disconnected; none too soon, either, as bullets pinged the side of the craft.

"Hang on, mates! Secure the cargo!"

Hennessey slammed his door shut and leaped over to do the same to Solo's side. He then positioned himself to stabilize one side of the recovered pilot seat while April's helper secured the other side.

"Look out!" April yelled. She leaned over the empty co-pilot seat and shot from the small open window. The other helicopter had circled around to meet them head on.

"Ballsy move," Mark commented sharply as he initiated an evasive maneuver that relocated Solo's stomach to his toes.

April had managed to get into the empty seat and secure herself before Mark found their adversaries again. Her hands worked furiously over the control panel.

"Line it up, darling. I'm ready!" she announced as if they were heading out for a stroll.

Mark banked sharply, ducked under the enemy in an unexpected maneuver and brought up the nose. One more right bank brought them up directly behind their quarry.

"Perfect!" April grinned as she pushed the missile launch button in her grip. A projectile shot from the belly of the craft. Mark immediately pulled up and banked away from the anticipated impact.

Hennessey held his stomach with his forearm. "I hate it when he does that," he murmured sickly. His comment was answered with a loud explosion below them.

"But I like it when he does that," Solo replied brightly.

"Home again, home again, jiggedy-jig," Slate quipped as he turned the helicopter around and headed home.



By the time they reached the closest secure medical facility Solo's morphine had worn off and he was finding it difficult to focus. April finally pried his hand from the damaged pilot's seat with a reassuring whisper that everything was under control. The CEA visibly relaxed at the words.



Napoleon Solo wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when he was finally aware again he found himself in a white hospital room, unable to lift his arm. In fact, he couldn't even see his arm. Clad in thick wrapping from fingertips to shoulder and secured tightly to his body, only the very tips of his fingers were visible. That's exactly what the nurse pinched when she came into the room a moment later.

"Ow!" he yelped.

"Circulation's good, Mr. Solo. Don't try to move around too much. I think you'll find that to be uncomfortable." The pert young lady's sparkling brown eyes weren't enough to distract Napoleon from his self-assessment as she took his vitals.

"Will I ever play the piano?" The agent said innocently as he wiggled his toes and fingers.

"I don't know. Did you play before?" She grinned and adjusted his blankets, then cranked the bed to a sitting position.

"Ah, heard that one before, huh?"

"Many times, Mr. Solo. But feel free to try again." She swayed her way to the sink to get him some water. The coolness brought him to full awareness.

"I guess I'm intact. How's Illya? Mr. Kuryakin?"

She plunked a straw in the glass and put it on the table next to him. Her eyes softened.

"I really don't know. Mr. Waverly's on his way and I'm sure he'll fill you in." The nurse's final act before she departed was to fluff his pillow. "Ring if you need me," she winked as she whisked out the door.

"Certainly," he said as door swung shut. He'd just completed a frustrated sigh when the door opened again and admitted his boss.

"Mr. Solo. Finally awake, I see." The bushy-rowed patron stood by his top agent's bedside and scanned the monitors.

"How long have I been out?" Solo asked.

"You were brought in yesterday afternoon and had surgery last night." He waved a hand at the agent's arm. "The doctor had to pin a bone in your wrist. You also received a minor concussion. All in all, not bad."

"What about Illya?"

Waverly took a breath and looked his CEA in the eye. "Mr. Kuryakin wasn't as fortunate, I'm afraid."

Solo felt a jolt go through his body. Flashes of the crash pieced together in his mind to form a picture. "He hit his head," he murmured.

"Yes. Skull fracture. They are trying to stabilize him now."

"Where is he?"

"Intensive care, two hallways down." Mr. Waverly held up a stack of papers in his hand. "We've been going over the papers brought in with you. There is a lot of information here, but that states exactly what they intended to send into space."

"I took pictures." Solo frowned through the headache that was forming. "Names. Several names."

"Yes, I looked at the list before it went to the lab. We're trying to locate Dr. Von Heisen. He may know what was going on. Our operatives are also trying to find out who commanded the base. It's a long road ahead, Mr. Solo, and we need you. Get well in a hurry." With a nod, Waverly stepped from the room.

Like I can control my bones healing, he thought.

Solo spent the next hours trying to convince every nurse that came in to help him visit his friend while denying the headache, dizziness and nausea that came with having a concussion. Exasperated, he was painfully trying to worm his way out of the bed by himself when April and Mark came in.

"Trying to escape already, I see," she commented as she laid the flowers she brought down on the table.

"I need to see Illya. Bring that wheelchair over, will you?" Without question, Mark rolled the chair over and the partners gently maneuvered him into it. Mark pushed the chair and April rolled the IV rack to the wide window in the hall that looked in on a solitary bed. The three of them looked in on the white lump that was Illya Kuryakin in silence.

The blond head was heavily wrapped above his eyes, not a single trace of the golden mop visible. His skin was as bleached as the sheets of the hospital bed. A ventilator rose and dropped next to a heart monitor that showed a steady beat. The nearly flat line on another monitor was frightening testament to Illya's condition. Countless tubes and wires trailed over the headboard and sides of the bed.

"So, what's the word?" Solo finally was able to croak.

April put her hand on his shoulder. "Not good, Napoleon. They're trying to control the pressure and swelling on the brain." She took a breath. "The good news is

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that the autonomic systems are working; breathing and such. And amazingly enough, nothing else is broken. It seems the aircraft seat protected him."

Solo nodded silently, unable to trust his voice. Before Illya Kuryakin, Napoleon Solo's reputation was that of an agent who worked best alone. Now he found that aside from his partner, he was more comfortable sharing his grief with the two agents currently by his side.

***ACT III: Be Careful What You Wish For***

For the next seemingly endless two days Solo kept himself busy by trying to complete the mission report – quite a feat with a broken arm. His dictation sessions slowly filled the blank spots in his memory as more details came to him. But after he was finished, there still wasn't an ending. He'd narrowed the reasons down to two as to why this case couldn't be closed: First there was the nagging notion that Illya did not waste explosives. There was a reason for the lab overkill. And second the last words spoken by his partner: "Not over; there's more."

His notions were enough for Waverly to allow his staying in Nairobi with Illya. Solo had also requested that Slate and Dancer stay on to follow up on the printed material they had obtained. Now that he was at a standstill with his own report, Solo called in the two agents to his small visitor's apartment in U.N.C.L.E. Nairobi for a briefing.

The CEA rubbed his temple, distracted by the lingering headache.

"Illya saw something," Solo said to Mark and April. "We split up when we first got in, but he didn't tell me about any surprises when we met at the safe. We were separated again in the lower labs, and we didn't get the chance to compare what we saw down there before . . ." Solo stopped at the memory of the crash, but forced his mind onward. ". . . before he was injured." He lifted the photos he'd taken of the files away from his chest. "Whatever he saw must be in here. Any answers are here." The CEA of New York slapped the fat file on the low table in front of them.

April sighed. "We've been over this file, Napoleon, and there's nothing more than what you saw."

Mark rubbed his eyes. "If there's a connection to something greater than a laser in space, we haven't seen it here. There must have been something else in the lower lab that's not listed."

"That has to be it. I plan to ask Illya about that when he comes around."

The uncomfortable silence that followed was framed by the looks exchanged between Mark and April.

"Napoleon," April said softly, drumming her fingers together. "That may not be an option."

The dark agent stood suddenly and began a slow pace. "I'm sure he'll recover. Maybe not fast enough to stop what ever this is, but he'll come around." He stopped, turned and pointed at the documents. "Until he can tell us anything, those people are the ones we need to talk to. We need to reconstruct what was going on down in those labs."

"Will do." April picked up the list and scanned it. "So, between these five people you think they can come up with what's in one Russian's head?"

"That's the idea."

"When do we start?"

"Yesterday."

Slate and Dancer were gone for less than an hour when Medical notified him that Illya was showing signs of waking up.



The mad whirling of pain and disconnection was both confusing and irritating. Where was he? All he had to follow was the incredible pain; pain that erupted as bright flashes in the swirling of his consciousness. He struggled to retrieve his sense of self, his central being that would anchor him, but it would not be found. Outside the pain the first physical sensation he felt was his hand gripping something cold and hard. The first sound he heard was an incredibly annoying beeping that beat in rhythm with his pain. When he was finally able to force his eyes open, he saw the fuzzy outline of someone wearing white before losing himself in the riot of input.

When he was able to make his way through the swirl again and became aware of the white-clad form for the second time, he clearly heard a voice.

"I've given you something for the pain, so you may be confused. Can you hear me?" the voice said.

Things became a little less fuzzy. Behind the man was a busy-looking room with wires and tubes hanging everywhere. The patient realized he was lying down and gripped a cold, steel bedrail. Focusing on the man leaning over him, the patient couldn't seem to find his voice.

"Can you hear me? Blink once if you can hear me."

The patient understood the question, but struggled to come up with words – his thoughts were an incomprehensible tangle. He blinked with hopes the throbbing in his head would lessen and he could make sense of all this.

"Good. Do you know your name?"

Again, the words simply weren't there, and he felt anger. He searched his mind and found nothing but chaos and urgency.

Then he became afraid.

The fear must have shown in his eyes, because the man's eyes softened and he smiled slightly.

"It's all right. It will come to you. I'm Dr. Campbell, and you have someone here to see you."

The face that replaced the Dr. Campbell's brought warm feelings, but no thoughts at all except for overwhelming weariness.

"Hey, Tovarich. How's the head?"

No words came forth. He tried to study the face but couldn't focus.

"Do you know who I am? One blink for yes, two for no."

The sorrow the pale patient felt at the realization that he didn't know this man's name was reflected in the brown eyes that studied him. He knew he didn't have to blink the two times to indicate 'no', but he did anyway just to show he understood the question. Then he turned his head and closed his eyes and surrendered to the weariness.





With April and Mark gone to the States and Illya awake Solo immediately requested that he and his partner be transferred back to New York. The fact that his partner didn't know him wasn't as frightening as the other things the doctor had said about Illya's recovery. Loss of linguistic ability, mathematics, logic – some or all or even none of those abilities could be affected. The familiar surroundings would help in his recovery, Solo argued, and the Nairobi doctors eventually agreed. They waited two more days until Illya was physically stable. With the bruises on Illya's face faded to an ugly green and the damaged area was heavily wrapped, the physical signs of injury were not as telling as the look in his eyes.

In the day since he'd awakened, Solo had seen Illya's blue eyes range from completely blank to burning rage. The one thing he'd vainly hoped to see was recognition. According to the doctors, the damage to Illya's frontal lobe would account for lack of emotional control. The damage to the left hemisphere would manifest as speech and communication difficulties. When the time came to sedate Illya for the trip Solo felt a twinge of guilt for not objecting too loudly. He wasn't sure he could handle the long flight with those haunted eyes. Instead he studied the well-worn files and began to mentally assemble a team.

When they arrived in New York, the agents were hustled to the U.N.C.L.E. facilities under tight security. If there was vital information in the tow-headed agent's mind, Waverly was making sure no one else had the chance to get to it.

Once Illya was secured in Medical, Solo moved to his office to finish up his brief to Waverly. It wasn't long before his office door swooshed open and a pretty head popped into view.

"You're home in one piece, I see." April Dancer, followed by her sleepy-looking partner, stepped in without invitation. "How's Illya?"

The Chief Enforcement Agent rubbed his eyes. "Better than when you saw him last, but not quite up to par."

"I'm sorry, Napoleon." April perched on the edge of Solo's desk while Mark leaned tiredly against the wall. "Is it true? About his memory, I mean?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so." He changed the subject to something he could control. "Did you arrange for the conference?" As soon as the green light had been given for Illya's transfer, Solo had begun arrangements to bring the two top scientists on their list to New York.

"It'll happen in three days, Napoleon. Bardeen and Schawlow are as anxious to close this affair as we are. They're tired of being under constant surveillance."

"I'll be very happy to be taken out of the middleman spot on that follow up," Mark said tiredly. "My head is still spinning from an overload of scientific information I don't understand."

Solo nodded and grinned wearily. "And the only one of us that can understand it can't tell us a thing. It's all a mystery."

"I hope he finds his voice before Thrush regroup," April said.



The next day Solo was invited to sit in with Waverly for Dr. Tower's report on his partner. The Doctor warned that there may be some aphasia - spoken words would not be what the patient intended to say, and this would result in frustration and anger. Adding to this, the part of the brain mastering self control was also damaged.

"All of this should go away as the swelling reduces," the Doctor summarized. "But we should expect fireworks. "Medical isn't one of the places Mr. Kuryakin enjoys being under the best of times."

Perhaps it was the forced rest or the familiar surrounds - Solo didn't care which - he was just happy that the eyes of his partner held recognition on the next day. At least the lost, haunted look that had been there was gone when he saw Solo.

"Hey, Tovarich! Finally awake, I see." Solo was not surprised that all he got in reply was a cool look. "I'm glad to see you with us again. You've been out for quite awhile."

His friend and partner's eyes narrowed as he turned that over in his mind. The injured agent had been receiving therapy for two days now, and the doctors had warned him of the Russian's stubbornness. There still wasn't a lot of control over his mood swings and most sessions ended with him in a rage.

Solo slowly walked about the room while he considered what to say next. "I was hoping you could tell me what happened in those labs, my friend."

His partner's eyes followed him closely. The bandages around the blond head were reduced to square gauze on the left side held on with a single wrap around his skull, but the bruises that stretched out from his hairline were still very evident. The wary coolness was replaced by a frown of concentration.

Solo plopped down in a chair next to him. A thick book was on the floor, leaning drunkenly against the wall, obviously thrown there. He picked it up and straightened the pages before closing the covers. The title was in Russian. It appeared that his linguistic skills were intact and that speech was the thorn in his side. Solo decided to change tactics.

"I hear they're going to move you to one of the apartments soon."

Illya nodded very slightly in acknowledgement, his eyes still on the CEA.

"But you have to show some ability to take care of yourself."

The injured man's disgusted eye roll ended up in a painful wince. His eyes flared as his hands balled into fists.

Solo read the warning and raised a brow curiously. "OK, enough of that." He dropped the thick book on the bedside table. "I need you on this investigation, partner, but you're no good to me if you don't get better." It was uncomfortable to say the words but he had to give Illya something to work toward. He stood, removed a file from under his arm and placed it purposely on top of the book. "This is what we have. Maybe it will be more interesting reading. I'll check in with you later."

Illya watched him leave the room without comment, and turned his attention to his fists, forcing them to relax.

The room was much too quiet with Solo's departure, and his debilitations seemed to be all there was to focus on. In an attempt to stave off the anger he felt building, the blond agent picked up the file with the thought that throwing it at the door would purge the uncontrollable feelings. As he raised the file, a page slipped out and something there caught his eye. He lowered his hand and leafed through the pages in piqued interest.

Most of the words were familiar, and with some focused concentration he found he understood a lot of it.

Finally, he had something else to think about.



Dr. Bardeen and Dr. Schawlow arrived with little fanfare and were anxious to get to work. April provided them with the documents they had, and the men spread them out on the huge conference table. Schawlow's laser work was obvious but Bardeen's work and how it connected was less clear. Both scientists focused on Bardeen's work with transistors - it was the only thing that made sense at this point.



Finally able to concentrate, Illya lost himself in the document until Dr. Towers ordered that he sleep or be forced to take a sleeping medication. The agent angrily complied, but his sleep was neither pleasant nor restful.

Images of something large looming over his head dominated his dreams. Sometimes there was a large, red eye, ringed in pulsing waves of color looking down on him and he couldn't escape it no matter how he tried. Then it would explode in a flurry of white sparks. He awakened with a jerk, sweat-drenched and trembling, only to re-enter the same dream when he fell back asleep.

A night of the dreams caused deep, dark circles under his eyes and only added to his sour disposition. The next day he was combative with the staff, not wanting to be distracted from trying to interpret the images as he went over the notes Napoleon had given him.

Illya was working himself into exhaustion, and Dr. Tower was not pleased. He stopped Solo in the halls of Medical the following day.

"Napoleon," Dr. Towers said firmly. "This has to stop. Illya is overdoing it to the point of hindering his healing. He's doing much better than we expected, but if he doesn't get some rest, some real sleep, I don't know what will happen. He's jeopardizing his recovery. Remember, there was damage to some of the frontal lobe, which deals with self-control. His behavior may be as a result of that. His brain needs rest to heal."

Solo listened silently and wondered if the outbursts could be attributed to frustration rather than his injuries. Solo felt they were close to something; he now had to balance his friend's health with completing the mission.

"I'll see what I can do," he said quietly.

He took a breath and pushed the door open. The sight that met his eyes wasn't as shocking as it would have been without Dr. Towers' warning. His partner looked like Hell warmed over. Barely.

Illya was propped up in the bed with papers scattered on every available surface. Uneaten food was pushed aside with enough force that the breakfast juice glass was tipped over, pooling the eggs in orange, and the tray was teetering on the edge of the rolling table. His hair was matted and wild, his face as pale as Solo had ever seen it. The dark circles underneath stood out like greasepaint.

The papers in his left hand shook so much Solo doubted his friend could even read them. The normally blue eyes were foggy. Tension lines trickled out from the corners of his eyes as he squinted at the reports.

"Let me," the dark haired agent ordered as he snatched the papers from his partner's trembling hand. The doc was right. Illya needed rest.

Illya's glare was un-tempered by the fogginess of his eyes. He shook his head angrily. "D . . . d . . . d . . ." He held his hand up for the papers, the tremor unmistakable.

Solo held back the papers. "No. You look like Hell, partner, and need to rest. You've been pushing too hard."

Illya's arm dropped in exhaustion but the glare in his eyes didn't diminish. Both hands curled into angry fists and he began to bounce them off his thighs. Although his eyes closed and he sagged against the headboard like as if he'd given up, Solo could still see the tenseness in his muscles. Illya wasn't relaxing, he was fighting off an explosion.

"I know there's something you want to tell me," the dark agent said soothingly. "I know it's in there, Illya. You have to relax to let it come to you. You're aggravating your injuries and making recall impossible. Just stop for awhile and let yourself heal."

Solo could see that his voice was making a difference. The bouncing fists slowed, stopped, and then opened in a relaxed fashion. Kuryakin's breathing became more regular and when his eyes opened again the glare was gone. Now he simply looked lost. Illya fastened his eyes on his friend, touched his own temple and tried to speak.

"Th . . . ist," he said after a moment of struggle.

"I know it's in there, partner. I have faith you'll get it out."

Illya waved weakly at the papers in Napoleon's hand, and touched his lips with his fingers.

Solo held the papers up. "You want me to read it out loud?"

Illya's eyes brightened.

Solo moved the rolling table aside and pulled up a chair. "OK, but you have to listen with your eyes closed. That way it will look to the doc like you're resting."

The blue eyes flashed momentarily but the pale patient settled down against the pillows without a fight. With a sigh, he shut his eyes.

Napoleon nodded, satisfied, and tucked half of the papers under his bad arm, using the cast like a paperweight against his abdomen. He held the other half before his eyes. "And now for the tale of the Unknown Thrush Activities," he started in a melodramatic tone. Then he paused. "Gee, I hope I don't give you nightmares."

Illya chuffed, but kept his eyes closed.

Solo began to read. Illya forced himself to relax and let the words surround him. He reluctantly used one of the mind focusing exercises the annoying therapist tried to teach him and found that it actually did help. He found his body relaxing at the same time his concentration was strengthening. At one point, his partner's voice hesitated, and Illya signaled with a roll of his wrist that he wasn't asleep. Solo kept reading.

Suddenly, a picture flashed in his mind - a clear picture of a devastating weapon floating in space. His emotions connected with the vision and the whole, formed idea galloped away. The agent but the agent managed to hold his anger in check and return to the relaxed state. The vision was gone, but it was replaced with the flash of another.

A lab; the lab in the destroyed building that held the final clue that had put it all together for him. He spoke without thinking of the actual word: "Magnets."

The sound of his own voice surprised him into opening his eyes. His partner's astonished brown eyes were locked on him, his mouth still open in mid speech. Ilya held the connection excitedly.

"Magnets? Is that what you saw?"

Ilya nodded, wide-eyed. The picture was clear in his mind now, but the relaxed mental state was gone along with the words to describe what he was. The Russian pounded his thighs in frustration.

Solo stood and closed the folder with a grin. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out now." He put his hand on his partner's shoulder and felt him physically relax. "I knew you'd come through. You always do. I'll check back with you after I tell Bardeen and Schawlow what you saw."

All the injured agent could do was fume and wait.

***ACT IV: Putting the Pieces Together***

"Magnets," Solo said as he swept his arm over the collected files. "It took a lot of effort, time and patience for Illya to finally say a word he meant to say, and he said it with conviction. Magnets. It has to mean something."

Doctor Schawlow and his colleagues merely frowned at the files. Bardeen, however, kept a very bland face. In fact, Solo felt it was a bit too bland. Bardeen stroked his chin and stared at the files, but his eyes were vacant. He was thinking.

"What is it?" Solo asked him directly. "You see a connection, don't you?"

Bardeen's mouth opened as if to say something, then it snapped shut. He settled back in his chair as if he was making a decision. His forehead furrowed. "What is the background of this Mr. Kuryakin, again?"

"He has a Physics degree from the Sorbonne, among other things. Why?" The other occupants of the room now ignored the files and were waiting to hear what the Doctor had to say. "Um, may I speak to you and Mr. Waverly in private, sir?"

If they felt slighted at being left out, the others didn't show it. Instead they turned back to the files to see if they could piece the puzzle together them selves.

Solo stood quickly and motioned the scientist to follow. They crossed the hall to the secretary's desk that held agents at bay from Waverly's door. The alert and efficient woman was speaking in the intercom before the agent said a word; Solo's expression was all she needed to react. The door to Waverly's inner sanctum opened so they didn't even break stride. The Old Man pushed a teetering stack of files to one side.

"What have you got?" he asked abruptly, without preamble.

Dr. Bardeen checked to make sure the door closed behind him. "I may have an idea about what your man may be thinking, but I don't know how he would know any of this unless he follows my work closely and is very . . . imaginative."

"Mr. Kuryakin is not only imaginative but resourceful and very intelligent. It's not wise to underestimate the man," Waverly said without pause. Solo couldn't think of anything to add. His boss had described his partner perfectly.

"Magnets are the key. Have you heard of a rail gun, gentlemen?"

Solo's head snapped up. "Yes. Illya has described has described to me, but I thought it was a theoretical weapon."

"No, it's not." Waverly spoke slowly and steeped his elbows on the table, fingertips together. "The idea of a rail gun is fairly new, but not untried."

"True. I am aware of it because it ties into my new research."

"Rail gun?" Solo inquired. "A super powered gun?"

"Yes." Waverly noted. "Instead of the projectile being driven by explosive, like your sidearm, Mr. Solo, it is driven by magnets, which makes it virtually frictionless. The velocity is supposed to be greater than anything currently in use."

"The constraint is power." Bardeen added. "To give the magnets the power needed make it impractical as a portable field weapon."

"So if the power needs are solved," Solo mused, "it would work. But how does a space launch tie in?"

Dr. Bardeen looked reluctant to speak. "That is the nature of my current work. A superconductor magnet could push a projectile with unimaginable velocity and range. In space, there would be no friction to slow the projectile. Superconductor metals have to be near absolute zero temperature to work. Space is near absolute zero, so less energy would be needed to maintain the correct temperature. Also, with solar power directed through a specially cut diamond that would constantly channel sunlight to a laser device, the energy needed to charge the metals would be available. And if it's in orbit, the weight of the device is not important. It becomes very portable, so to speak." He paused, letting the idea sink in. "But this is only theoretical! Nothing like this has ever been proposed or built! It's quite a leap in logic to put that idea together."

"A rail gun in orbit would be a formidable weapon," Waverly stated.

"Nothing in space or on Earth would be safe," Solo added. "It could easily take out a satellite or a ground target."

"Yes, it could." Bardeen agreed. "I still can't believe this is what your man believes he saw."

"I believe it." Solo said with confidence. "And I'll confirm it."

"And after you do, steps need to be taken to insure it doesn't happen. Mr. Kuryakin has taken the first step by destroying the lab and the physical notes. Now we need to remove the people trying to put this together."



When Napoleon returned to Medical later that evening Nurse Janice stopped him in the hall just outside of Illya's door.

"Just a warning, Napoleon. He's in a mood."

"Thanks."

She smiled and continued on. Solo slowly opened the door to his partner's room and found the wiry patient pacing in a very wobbly fashion. At the sound of the door he stopped and glared at Solo.

"Bad day?" Solo inquired innocently. The spark in Illya's eye was all the response he needed. "I think I may have a cure." The spark of anger melted away. "You were trying to tell us about a rail gun, weren't you? A rail gun that Thrush is planning to launch into space."

First a look of astonishment crossed the Slavic features, and then the relief that came to the Russian was so complete that he sank into the lone chair in a corner. He nodded tiredly. The left corner of his mouth smiled a little. "Pos. . . ssbl."

To be unable to clearly communicate would be a frustration that Solo couldn't even begin to comprehend, but the comment made him smile.

Illya tapped his head and looked frustrated, but kept his emotional control.

"You can see it clearly in your mind, I know. Now we finally see it, too, thanks to you, and Dr. Bardeen tells us it is possible. We're hunting down Voss and Mueller, hoping to get a lead on the Thrush responsible for the project. Neither one of them is capable of pulling this off, so there has to be a lead man. Now that the launch site is unusable we have time to find the mastermind before he reorganizes."

Illya raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, I guess I didn't tell you that. The Nairobi team went in and finished what we'd started. The site is now under U.N.C.L.E. control, and will soon be turned over to the villagers in the area. They plan on making it a regional airport."

His partner nodded tiredly. Something still nagged at him. True, a great weight seemed to be gone now that the rail gun plans were out in the open, but there was something else. He shut his eyes, lay his head back and again employed the focusing technique taught him by the therapist.

The lab flashed again in his mind. There was a chalkboard with writing; a table; papers. There was something in the papers. He relaxed more and felt his concentration waver. He fell asleep, but the vision of a pair of eyes tinged in red suddenly flashed in his dream. The eyes grew and exploded. He jumped and was instantly awake bathed in sweat.

A photograph. There had been the photograph of a person on the table, sticking out of a file. Those were the eyes he kept envisioning.

Illya leaped to his feet and tried to ignore the wash of pain from the sudden movement. He cringed and looked around the room and found himself alone. Solo must have left when he fell asleep in the chair. Somewhat exasperated, Illya went to the closet looking for clothes and found none. Clad only in the thin hospital gown and slippers, he pulled open the door and concentrated on walking in a straight line.

He had to find Napoleon before he lost the image of the photograph. His vision swam and he held the rail along the wall for balance.

"Mr. Kuryakin! Where do you think you're going?" Nurse Janice grabbed his elbow and tried to stop him.

He shook her off and continued slowly down the hall.

"Stop, or I'll have to get the doctor." She watched him move carefully along, reluctant to touch him. She'd seen him explode before and didn't want that problem here in the hallway. "I warned you," she sighed. Enforcement agents had a habit of responding to only certain authority figures, so Janice returned to the nurses' station and called Dr. Towers. She was put through to Mr. Waverly's office, where Towers was in late night conference, as she watched her patient step into the elevator.

Security was waiting for the wavering Russian as soon as the elevator doors opened. He tried to push his way between them, not getting far, but managed to escape the elevator before the doors closed. The men were reluctant to fight with him, so the pair made themselves an impassable wall.

By the time the Old Man arrived, Illya's head felt as if was going to explode. His eyes narrowed in pain and the wall became his crutch in the struggle to keep his feet..

"Mr. Kuryakin." The agent looked at his boss and saw him flanked by Dr. Towers and Napoleon Solo. Suddenly noticing the darkened and empty hallways Illya wondered what time it was. "What's the meaning of this? You have orders to stay in Medical."



Dr. Towers stepped forward and gripped one of his patient's elbows. "You shouldn't be pushing yourself. . ." Illya shook off the hand, nearly falling over in the effort.

"You have something else, don't you?" Napoleon quietly asked.

The effort it took to nod through the pain made Illya's knees weak. He leaned heavily against the wall, and started up the hall.

"Sir, I think he has some information . . ." Solo let the statement hang in the air while he tried to figure out where his partner was going. He glanced up the hall. "Records. Are you going to Records?"

The nod was slight but definite.

"Dr. Towers, get a wheelchair up here now." Waverly's tone was firm.

"But sir, he shouldn't be . . ."

"Now, Doctor."

Towers stepped into the first office to call for the chair. Napoleon eased to his partner's side and helped him down the hall, waving off security with a backward wave.

"You are most stubborn, you know that?" Solo said lowly as Illya continued painfully down the hall with an acknowledging grunt.

The Records Office was mostly dark this time of night. There was one research assistant flipping through a file at a small desk who jerked to attention at the unusual disturbance. Her eyes were wide behind her reading glasses when she identified the pair. Solo dragged a chair next to her desk and forced his partner to sit.

"We're here to find someone," the CEA said.

The clerk, unused to dealing with anyone face to face in the middle of the night let alone the infamous CEA, stuttered, "O . . . okay . . ." She swallowed hard.

The suave agent acted on her nervousness with a winning smile. "I know it's the middle of the night, um . . ." he raised his eyebrows in a question.

"Ah, Natalie. I'm Natalie."

"Natalie, yes. Well, I think we need to start with the file on agent Dancer's surveillance. Who has she been looking at?"

Much to her credit Natalie pulled herself together quickly and turned to stack of files on her desk. "Here they are," she said, hefting the stack into her arms and plopping them down in front of Kuryakin. "I haven't had time to look at them yet." She ignored the sway in Kuryakin's posture as she settled across from him. "Um, where to do you want . . ."

Kuryakin growled something unintelligible.

"He needs to identify someone." Solo pulled part of the file in front of him and began leafing through the first one. "Just put all the photos of people in the front of the file." He pulled out an 8 by 10 and made it the first page of the file, and slid it to his partner. "Illya will look at them until we find what we need."

Natalie started on the second half of the pile with one eye on the pale Russian. "Are you sure he can focus?" she asked meekly.

"He can see every freckle on your nose, I'm sure." Solo shoved more files in front of his partner to distract him from scaring off young Natalie. "But let's not waste time, shall we?" We need to find something before my partner passes out, the CEA thought.

The quiet rustling of papers was interrupted only once by Dr. Towers bringing in the wheel chair. He parked it as close to Kuryakin as he could, hesitated as he debated if he should lodge his objection to all this, then wisely left without uttering a word. The

agents he could deal with; he simply wasn't convinced that Waverly would back him up this time, and decided to let it ride.

When they passed the final file to Illya, neither one of them commented on the tremor in his hands or the sound of his breathing. He was beyond exhaustion and physically spent but determination kept him going. When no other files came his way, he looked to his partner with stormy blue eyes.

"That's it," Solo answered. "That's what we have."

The explosion was immediate, and the pile of papers closest to the injured agent hit the floor as he violently swept his hand across the table. Loose papers fluttered like falling snow.

"Hey!" Natalie yelled as she jumped to her feet. "Stop that!"

Lucky for Natalie, the patient had drained his last reserves with the explosion and was unable to continue. He listed to one side, panting, and weakly tried to reach for another pile. Solo intervened and dragged his partner's chair away from the table.

"You heard the lady, Illya. I think we've worn out our welcome." He pulled the wheelchair over. Illya glared at it, then at his traitorous partner. Solo ignored him and pointed to the wheelchair. "You either get in it or I'll let you collapse in the middle of the hall. Neither one is dignified, but I'd say one is more preferable than the other." They locked eyes for several tense seconds.

Finally, blue eyes blinked, and Illya's head sagged in defeat. Solo helped him to the chair and pushed him toward the door. As they passed the check-in desk, Kuryakin's eyes wandered to the bulletin board on the wall that usually held head shots of newly 'discovered' Thrush that hadn't yet been identified.

And there, looking back at him from the second row was the face from his dream. Illya fumbled with the brakes, and tried to stand at the same time.

"Whoa, partner!" Solo slid to a stop and kept the wheel chair from tipping over, which was tricky with a cast on one arm. "Sit, will you? What's up?" His eyes followed his partner's struggles, and he glanced at the board. "One of these guys?" Illya stopped trying to stand when Solo stepped to the display. "Which one?" He tapped each picture, and ripped the black and white from the second row at Illya's nod. Solo looked at it, and handed it over. "That's him, huh? Well, at least we have a face. Now all we need is a name."



"This picture was taken in Germany about two weeks after we spotted Voss there. They must have met; it can't be a coincidence." Solo slid the photo across to his boss and dropped in a chair, rubbing his eyes.

"This is the same man Mr. Kuryakin saw in the photos in the lab? He's sure?" Waverly studied the picture for a moment.

"Yes."

"I take it Mr. Kuryakin is now resting in Medical."

"Yes. He seemed relieved and fell asleep right away." The lucky dog, Solo thought tiredly. He'd been up the rest of the night tracking down the agent that took the photo and the circumstances that surrounded that particular surveillance. Solo felt like his partner looked when he'd last seen him in Medical. "This man was seen in the company of Nigel Torrance, a known Thrush supplier of arms. Torrance was picked up by

U.N.C.L.E. several days later on a weapons charge. This man was apparently not involved in that incident.”

“Then he must have been brokering another deal,” Waverly concluded. “Where’s Torrance now?”

“In custody through the London office. He’s being held in the local jail pending charges. When that’s handled to the local law enforcement’s satisfaction, he’ll be turned over to us.”

“And how long should that take?”

Solo smiled. “Quite awhile, I hear. U.N.C.L.E. has plenty of time to pull its case together, but it’s really a moot point. He’s probably going to get life for the local charges - he killed a police detective during the raid to arrest him.”

They were interrupted by a woman’s voice on the intercom. “Mr. Waverly, Agent Dancer is on Channel D.”

“It’s about time. I’ll take it.” Waverly swiveled to the communications console next to him. “Miss Dancer?”

“Sir, we have Von Heisen, and he seems willing to talk, but only to you. He wants protection.”

“I see, I see. Very good. Are you still in Berlin?”

“We’re in a small town on the outskirts, sir. Von Heisen’s hometown. We thought we’d give it one last visit.”

“Good work, both of you. Return immediately. And watch him carefully. We’ll send you a copy of someone to watch out for; he’s connected to this whole affair, but we don’t have a name to go with the face yet. Maybe Herr Von Heisen can help us there as a show of good faith.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll look for that at the Berlin office when we pick up our travel vouchers. Dancer out.”

When Waverly spun his chair around to face Solo, he had the closest thing to a smile the CEA’d seen in several weeks. “One more down, sir.”

“And one to go, Mr. Solo. Let’s see what we get from our scientist.”

Stifling a yawn, Solo nodded acknowledgement as he saw that the sky had lightened with a new day’s dawn.



The other good news of the morning was that Kuryakin was given the OK to return to his apartment. Since Solo was sidelined with a broken arm, the doctor agreed that if Solo brought Kuryakin to Medical daily for therapy, the ill-tempered Russian could go home. The familiar surroundings may even hasten healing and improve his sleep.

The surly agent also had to agree to use a wheelchair to and from home, which put him in a sour funk on the drive. It didn’t last long, however, and his mood improved proportionally with the distance from Medical.

Solo brought his partner up to date on the latest from April, trying to keep Illya’s attention from the wheelchair shoved in the back seat. When they pulled up to the apartment building, Illya managed to get the car door open and pull himself out before Solo got to his side.

“Wait a second, let me get the . . .” If looks could melt flesh, Solo would have been a steaming puddle on the sidewalk. “Well, then, never mind.”

Illya shuffled through the front door to the lobby, shaking off his partner’s efforts to assist. On a good note, Solo noticed that his partner had kept his anger under full control. He was greatly improved from a mere two days ago.

“Fine,” Solo acquiesced. “I just hope you don’t crack the nice floor when you hit it with your hard head.” His statement elicited a grunt from his partner.

Illya was pale and tired by the time they entered his place, but he insisted on carefully checking each room before collapsing with a pleasant sigh onto his couch. He was asleep instantly.

Since it was just after noon and Solo knew how his partner could be when both hungry and in pain, the suave agent decided to shop for groceries. He was tired, too, after the long hours, but figured he’d rather shop now than later. Illya was sound asleep when Solo set the alarms and locked up.

The nearest grocer was two blocks away. The walk was pleasant this time of day, and he took his time to admire the scenery that strolled by on fashionable heels. His injured state also elicited help from several ladies willing to assist a handsome and seemingly helpless man. He could have had his pick of lovelies to prepare a meal for the evening, but knew that Illya wouldn’t appreciate the intrusion. Instead, he arranged for the service to be done at his place the following night by the fair Amelia, whom he met in the produce section.

Solo was then distracted by Daphne’s invitation to coffee on the way back, and by the time he returned to Illya’s building it was late in the afternoon. Solo expected his partner to be asleep, and if he was awake, very grouchy from hunger.

Something alerted his agent senses as soon as he stepped from the elevator. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck tingled. Solo froze, trusting his instincts, and slowly set the grocery bags on the floor of the hall. He felt for his gun as he glided along the wall as silent as a shadow.

Illya’s door was ajar.

With a racing heart the American agent peered through the opening and saw the alarm panel dangling from the wall by a mass of wires. He took a breath, kicked the door open and dashed inside, his gun leading the way.

All the living room furniture within a five foot radius of the couch was upset; even the couch was tipped over backward. A quick scan of the rest of the apartment revealed undisturbed rooms and no sign of his partner.

Feeling sick to his stomach, Solo reported in. The mystery in this affair had just taken another turn.

*Act V: Spies For Spies*

The U.N.C.L.E. forensics team came up with nothing in the apartment, which didn’t really surprise Solo. He’d known it was a professional operation the minute he entered the room. The only clues he had to work with were back at Headquarters, and he returned to the office with a single purpose: Find the leak at U.N.C.L.E. New York .

The ‘who’ of the situation was rather obvious as the only player unaccounted for was the mystery man in the photo. The ‘why’ of Illya’s kidnapping was another story; the reason for it eluded the dark haired agent. The one thing that was very clear was that Illya’s whereabouts had been monitored carefully for quite awhile for him to have been taken so quickly. Information on his partner’s movements had to have come from the

inside, specifically, in the Medical section. It was time to clean house. Before leaving the apartment Solo, through Mr. Waverly, instituted a low-key lock down of the Medical section as the department heads files were pulled and examined.

By the time the CEA reached Waverly's office, a grim-faced Waverly and the head of Medical were waiting for him.

"We have a problem," Solo began before the doctor had a chance to speak. Waverly kept silent, letting his top agent take the lead. "There's a leak in your department."



Dr. Towers' eyebrows raised in curiosity, the previous look of annoyance gone. After a second he asked, "How do you know it's not me?"

Waverly interrupted with a harrumph. "Rest assured, Doctor, that we would not take you into our confidence without additional security checks." The Chief did not go into detail.

Towers cleared his throat, and then got down to business. "I know that the doctor and nursing staff have been here for quite awhile, but the support staff seems to have a larger attrition rate. I would think they would be the ones to start with."

"I agree," said Solo, unconsciously rubbing the fingers sticking out from his cast. "I would like to go over Illya's medical records with you to see who has had access to him. You can brief me on who you know and where to start."

"Certainly," Towers replied. "But the records won't show everyone that had access to his room, only those that signed in."

"Then we'll have to cross reference with the duty shifts and do all this without raising any suspicions from your staff."

The doctor ran his hand through his hair. "That will take some time," he mused.

"That's all we have right now, and the one thing we're running out of," Solo said, rising to his feet. "First, we need to explain the lockdown."

"That's simple enough," Towers replied instantly. "An unexplained contagion automatically initiates a lockdown until we determine the extent of the contamination. I can easily mock up an infected patient."

"How much time does that give us?" Solo asked.

Towers grinned. "How much do you want?"



Consciousness came slowly and painfully, accompanied by a familiar sour taste on his lips that Illya's muzzy brain automatically identified as the aftertaste of chloroform. A swell of fury slowly rose from his gut causing his muscles to tense and his head to throb even more painfully. Before opening his eyes he willed the anger under control, and calmed enough to take stock of what his other senses were telling him.

He was lying on something cold and hard; he wasn't tied up in any way, and movement was painful - he'd been roughly handled. There was a slight echo and the sound of dripping water that went with the musty smell. Slowly, he cracked his eyes and a spot of bright light made his head throb harder, which didn't seem possible to the

agent. A low groan escaped his lips before he could stop it as he reluctantly struggled to sit.

The room slowly came into focus. The light came from a barred window high on the wall of the small room. The walls were cement block, the floor poured cement, and the ceiling solid wood with a collection of pipes snugly fitted against it, one of which was dripping water, and running the length of the room. Illya's immediate assumption was that he was in a basement with a ground level window.

He surveyed plain walls adorned with one feature other than the window: a solid metal door with a very small barred window. He couldn't recall a more secure prison cell; no ideas of how to escape immediately came to mind. Then again, all he could think about at the moment was the pain he was in and leaned heavily against the wall as he tried to recall anything between his returning home and his present situation.

It wasn't long before he heard footsteps descending stairs outside the metal door. He squinted at the door and saw the blur of a face, which was followed by the sound of a key in the door. The injured man had finally found a position that minimized the pounding in his head, and knowing he couldn't overpower a puppy at this point he didn't move when the door cracked open.

A wash of anger overcame him when he recognized the man standing in the doorway as the one from the lab photo. Illya didn't move, but locked his eyes on the man and managed to keep his face emotionless. His visitor did the same, resulting in a silent standoff of wills.

When several seconds of careful scrutiny passed, the visitor finally spoke. His tone was as cold as the surrounding cement. "You have caused me a lot of problems, Mr. Kuryakin." The man had an odd accent that the agent could not place. "I see you are in no condition to harm me physically, so I shall move you to more comfortable quarters. But understand you will be under close watch. We will then discuss how you can fix what you have broken."

Illya did not respond, not wanting to reveal his current medical state. He wanted to find out how much this man knew, and where he'd gotten his information. It was clear, with the ease of his kidnapping, that information had been leaked from U.N.C.L.E., and he intended to find the responsible party if he ever got out of this. The man signaled someone from the hallway. Two musclemen crowded through the door and pulled the agent to his feet.

Pain sparked in his temples for a moment. He tried to relax as the men roughly escorted him down a narrow hall and up a dark set of stairs. Illya distracted himself by carefully taking in the lay of the building and found that the pain seemed to recede as he increased his concentration.

Even with the current bad situation, it felt good to be back in action again. Right now, the agent's sole concern was that his body wouldn't fail him when he needed it most. Blue eyes brightened when the realization struck him that he'd been thinking clearly for the past several minutes. Hope of a full and complete recovery blossomed, and Illya began to try and facilitate a plan. For now, he could collect facts and assess the situation in an orderly fashion. His confidence rose

Illya was taken through a rather sterile structure that appeared to be a house transformed into a collection of labs. It was a strange mix of offices and scientific paraphernalia. He assumed his host, who lead the way, mingled with both the intellectual and scientific communities and obviously prospered from the relationship.

Although the surroundings were Spartan, the few trappings were the best money could buy, from the desks and appointments to the glimpse of lab equipment he saw.

Their final destination was a large office with a pair of desks. The agent was unceremoniously dumped on one of the desk chairs while his host graced the other. One of the guards stood by the window that overlooked a grassy garden, and the second stepped into the hall and shut the door.

His host leaned back in his chair and locked his eyes on the agent as he pursed his lips in thought. Illya held the gaze and mentally took stock of his surroundings. Escape seemed problematic at this time.

“As I said,” began the man, “you have caused me problems that have required me to take some chances I normally wouldn’t take. That does not make me a happy man.”

And why should I care about that? the agent thought.

“I understand U.N.C.L.E. and specifically, you, are responsible for the destruction of my compound in Africa .” Illya could see the clasped hands of his host tighten at that thought. “It took a lot of time and effort to pull that set up together. Money, too, but Thrush absorbs that loss. They are rather upset about that, and insist I am to blame.”

Illya remained emotionless, but thought, And now they want what they paid for, I imagine.

The man confirmed the agent’s thought. “They want a product for the money they spent. I want my reputation unscathed. Outside of Dr. Bardeen, who is too closely guarded at this time, you are the only one that can do both of those things.”

Illya frowned. The man leaned over his desk to make his point perfectly clear. The anger that burned in his eyes was obvious.

“My intelligence tells me you know what was being designed in Africa . I purposely kept all aspects of this project separate, and all involved scientists were experts in their particular area. I thought Bardeen was the last piece I needed to pull it together but apparently you have that knowledge. You will tell me everything you know: How the device works, exactly what is needed to both build it and get it positioned, and the best spot to do that from. The second best spot, I should say.” He stood, barely containing his anger as he pushed himself to his feet. “I had the best spot before you interfered. You will repair what you destroyed starting now.”

Illya frowned slightly, surprised that this man had no working knowledge of the weapon he was responsible for.

“I am a broker,” the man said as if reading the agent’s thoughts. “My talent is bringing together specialists for one end result. I do not have the scientific know how to create, but due to my talents, have been responsible for some of the greatest inventions in weaponry the world has seen to date. I will not allow you to hinder my success.” The man began to pace like a caged tiger. “I am fully aware of your injuries. I have been kept well informed of your situation. You will stay here until you give me what I want. Time is no matter to me.” He stopped and faced his prisoner. “This will be your last home, Mr. Kuryakin. Mark my words.”

The as yet unidentified man stormed from the room, leaving the surprised agent with his thoughts and a very watchful guard.

Illya doodled on the paper supplied to him, drawing technical schematics that looked impressive but meant nothing. He was fed lunch and dinner, and escorted to a very small bedroom when darkness fell. The room consisted of a mattress on the floor and a tiny bathroom. The window was barred. The frustrated agent flopped down and

shut his eyes to the constant pain in his head, trying to convince himself that that the throbbing had lessened a bit. The agent distracted himself by examining every detail of the room for possible weapons or escape.

The door swung open a while later and his captor stormed in. “This is trash, Mr. Kuryakin.” He threw the diagrams at the blond agent, and they fluttered to the floor like autumn leaves. “I knew you would be difficult. What you need is incentive.”

Illya regarded him with carefully hooded eyes.

“I thought I’d try the easy way first, but it obviously didn’t work. So, I have things in play to coerce your cooperation. I’ve left just enough clues for your fellow agents to find me. All I need to do is wait until someone shows up, and then I will have a hostage. Your fellow U.N.C.L.E. agent, whoever it ends up being, will lose first his fingers, one at a time, then his toes, and then his limbs, until I get what I want. If he dies first, I’ll simply get another one. It’s that simple. So, sleep well tonight because I think it’s the last chance you’ll have for that kind of thing.”

The man left, his anger spent. Illya silently cursed his weakened state, and rubbed his once again flaring headache and wondered who, if any one, would be joining the party.

Illya hadn’t seen any indication of being watched but he wanted to be sure. He memorized the room as he waited for darkness, and then moved into the bathroom. Under the sink he felt around and found a flat, easily removable piece of metal that controlled the sink plug. Then he went back into the sleeping area and used the metal to pry up a corner of the linoleum flooring in a corner and under the mattress to get to the rough concrete. He spent a majority of the night sharpening the metal on the concrete as he listened for signs of visitors.



Carolyn Mercer was worried. When she was hired on with U.N.C.L.E. she didn’t expect to be caught in this kind of situation.

If I wanted to work around sick people I would have applied for a hospital custodial job, Carolyn thought. Sick people made her nervous; and now here she was, locked down in Medical since the end of her shift the day before because of some horrible, undiagnosed and probably incurable disease. She had plans for her life, none of which involved dying young!

Since waking up this morning in one of the Medical beds, she began to polish the office windows with vigorous circles to take her mind off the idea of developing boils or rashes or some other ugly affliction. In the past several months she’d come to realize that U.N.C.L.E. Medical usually meant treatments for physical injuries with the occasional injected element. Unlike a regular hospital, contagious diseases were rare. That’s why this lockdown was so unnerving – whatever it was had to be bad. Very bad. She adjusted the surgical mask on her face which had been issued to everyone as soon as the lockdown was announced late the previous day.

“That’s it,” she mumbled as she rubbed. “I’m resigning as soon as this scare is over.” She had more than enough money to tide herself over for several months, not only from her wages, but also from the undercover work she’d been doing. Carolyn shook her head at that thought – spies spying on spies – but it had been logically



explained to her that it was the only way to keep track of people who were experts at keeping secrets. And her contact certainly had a trustworthy background!

That blond man that was in here was a good example of what her contact kept an eye on. Imagine, an American installation having a Commie employee! Carolyn just knew he was faking his symptoms, and she must have been right because he disappeared right after she'd made her final report on him. She scrubbed harder with the satisfying thought that she had at least accomplished that much in her time here. With her contribution to God and country over, and if she survived this germ that kept her trapped here, she was off to greener pastures.

Windows done and sparkling, Carolyn assembled the cleaning items on her cart and prepared to move to the next area. When she pushed her cart into the hall, she was surprised to see a pair of unmasked men coming toward her, one of them being that handsome man with the broken arm. She stopped and smiled, and was completely taken aback when they roughly separated her from her cart and escorted her quickly out a private door.



“We’ve checked your bank accounts, Miss Mercer. We have a few questions for you.”

The brown eyes boring into her were the color of chocolate, but at the same time felt as piercing as a knife. Carolyn braided her fingers in her lap and felt her hairline begin to prickle with sweat.

“Is...is this a test?” She squeaked. “Because I was never told about any tests. I understood my reports were considered, well, to be extra credit.”

Solo’s train of thought completely derailed. “Excuse me?” That was not the reply he was expecting; outright lies, yes, unmasked anger, yes, or even a nervous breakdown, but not this. She didn’t seem to realize she’d done anything wrong. “Um, what reports?”

Carolyn’s eyes widened. “Oh, dear. I think you may not want to know this.” Completely sympathetic, she leaned forward and patted Solo’s hand like she was patting the head of a recalcitrant child. “I’m not sure I’m the one you should talk to. Perhaps Mr. Spade is the one you should talk to.”

Solo glanced at the one-way glass, behind which Mr. Waverly sat watching the interrogation. The agent stood and fingered his tie. “Mr. Spade?”

“Why, yes,” Carolyn replied. “Mr. Samuel Spade of Internal Affairs.”

The agent took a moment to plot strategy. He glanced at Garrison, his back up. Garrison shrugged and shook his head.

“Um, Sam Spade, you say?” Solo’s eyebrows raised in curiosity.

“Yes, of course. All those stories Mr. Hammett wrote are from his real life cases! Surely you know him.” The woman sat up stiffly as if she were surrounded by dolts. “That’s why I decided to do as he asked. He’s a real hero, if you ask me.”

“Ah, yes.” Solo hitched a hip and sat on the corner of the table. “I know who you mean. He prefers to keep a low profile around here.”

“I’m not surprised.” Carolyn smiled affectionately. “I imagine he’s embarrassed about his fame.”

## THE MYSTERY IN THE SKY AFFAIR

“Yes. Yes, he is. And in fact, we are investigating Mr. Spade right now to see if he deserves a promotion for his exemplary work. Could you tell us his exact instructions to you?”

Her face brightened. “Certainly, if it will help him get the credit he deserves! He was so nice. I thought he’d be older, though.”

“Why don’t you describe him for us? We also want to evaluate his, ah, disguise abilities.”

“Oh my! He was in disguise? It was so convincing, down to the mole right here!” She pointed to a spot just below her left ear and then proceeded to describe the mystery man in the photograph in every detail. “I met with him three times and his disguise looked exactly the same each time! He is good, isn’t he?” Solo held up the photo of the mystery man. “That’s him! He came to my place shortly after I was hired here and gave me the undercover job of telling him exactly who was in the infirmary and when they left.”

Solo’s alarms went off. “But you’ve been working here for nearly a year!”

“Yes, I know. I have my first week of paid vacation coming up.”

The agent couldn’t believe he was hearing this. “How many reports did you make?”

Carolyn picked at her nails, unconcerned. “Let’s see, I left something at the drop point once a week. 52 weeks in a year; I’d say about 40?”

Solo had to fight to keep his jaw from dropping. “And they were names only, you say?”

“Yes, names only. Except when that Communist came in. That’s the only time Mr. Spade asked for detailed records, and I was more than happy to get them. Imagine, a Red Communist right here and exposed to all these secrets. Honestly,” she shook her head. “I don’t know what the U.N.C.L.E. president was thinking.”

Solo’s anger was only kept at bay by curiosity. “President?”

“Yes, sir, you know; the man Mr. Spade works for.”

“Oh. Yes certainly.” He immediately made a mental note to make drastic changes in the hiring practices of maintenance staff, and had no doubt that there were more Carolyn Mercers in U.N.C.L.E. New York, and possibly worldwide. No wonder this mystery man was able to keep out of their sights - he probably knew every U.N.C.L.E. agent in every office! “Will you excuse me a moment?”

Carolyn smiled and nodded. Solo told Garrison to stay put, and he joined his boss in the adjoining room where he found the old man on the phone and very red faced.

“. . . immediately!” Waverly barked as he slammed the phone down. It took him a moment to calm down. Solo wisely waited until his boss spoke first. “I am appalled,” the Old Man stated bluntly. “Using innocent people as unknowing traitors. And what is most upsetting is we never thought of that happening!”

“The best spy is the one who doesn’t know they are a spy,” Solo mused. “At least we have a line on our mystery man. I do refuse, however, to call him Sam Spade.”

“Understandably, Mr. Solo. Let’s use Miss Mercer to get a fix on him immediately.”

“I’ll start with the drop point - the place she turned in her reports.”

“Get to it, then. I seem to have a new problem to attend to.”

“Yes, sir.”



Carolyn the cleaning lady happily took Solo and Garrison to the spot where she dropped her reports on the western edge of Central Park . “It’s right on my way home,” she chirped happily. “I put them in this box right here.”

She pointed to a locked metal box in a line of other boxes that covered utility access stations. The box she indicated had a slit cut into it like a mailbox, but other than that it looked just like the other city electrical boxes. It was a brilliantly simple location.

“I drop the papers right in here every Friday.”

“Did you ever see them get picked up?”

“Funny you should say that. I was met here twice by Mr. Spade. The first time right after that Russian was admitted, and the second time was the day he was released.”

Solo frowned. “That was a Wednesday.”

“Yes, it was! When I met him here the first time I was given a phone number and instructed to call when the commie was getting released, then to get a copy of his medical papers.” Her voice dropped. “He told me it was a spot test of the doctor’s record keeping. Everyone is under his eye, I guess!”

“Do you remember the number?”

“No.”

“Do you still have it?”

“Of course not! I ate it.”

“You ate . . .”

“Mr. Spade said that was the best way to destroy paper evidence.”

Solo sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, close to the area where a headache was trying to blossom behind his eyes. “Did you see his car?” He asked as a last ditch effort to get something from this exasperating woman.

“Why, yes, I did! He didn’t see me, though, because I didn’t leave the park in my normal direction. He had one of those newfangled cars with the funny doors.”

“Funny doors?” Garrison frowned.

“You know, where the doors open up.” She raised her arms like wings.

“Gull wing doors?” Solo clarified.

“Yes! It was a new car, too. No license plate yet. I looked because I wanted to see if the plate turned like they do in the spy movies. It certainly looked like a spy car! Do you get to drive it, too?”

Solo instructed Garrison to take the woman back to Headquarters and contact the phone company for her phone records, and get the name of the car dealers in town that dealt with the kind of car she described.

“What are you going to do?” Garrison asked.

“Break into this box and see what’s in there. Maybe there are some fingerprints. Maybe we’ll get lucky and out-spy Sam Spade.”

***ACT VI: Missing Pieces***

By late morning Solo and Garrison had the phone number the mystery man had called from and the car dealer that sold him the car. Follow up turned up two different locations.

“You take the phone address, I’ll take the car sale information.” Solo had already thought that the phone wouldn’t pan out. The sighting of the car, however, was unplanned and a more solid lead. At least there was a name: George Oper. He set research on the name, sure it was a fake. They went separate ways in the garage with the understanding that backup would be called in if their quarry was seen.

Solo’s address took him out of the city and into an area of exclusive homes sitting in the center of large pieces of property. Most of them were fenced and gated. He drove by the address in question, noted the thick hedges and long, winding driveway that made a visual on the house impossible, and parked a distance away on a rise in the road that gave him a distant view of the layout.

The house looked to be partially built into the hill itself, and was surrounded by ample landscaping that hid most of it. He could see the hedge and fence line encircled the property completely, and the occasional foot patrol of a lone sentry. The best way in seemed to be in the back, where the trees were thickest.

He parked close to where he thought the back of the house was and had to sneak through the neighbor’s yard to get to the hedge. Wiggling through the hedge to the stone wall he heard his suit tear with every snag and did his best to ignore it. It was difficult to climb with a cast on, but the thickness of the hedge against the wall helped. He dropped on the other side disheveled but unsighted.

Running an evasive pattern Solo made it to the back of the house. The lack of security put him on edge, but reasoned that too much security in this neighborhood would be noticed by the neighbors. He was just about to check out the windows at ground level when his communicator went off.

Fumbling with the device, he quickly opened it and ducked back in the brush. “Solo here,” he whispered.

“Mr. Solo?” Waverly’s voice was brisk and to the point. “I have information on Mr. Oper. He is renting the house, and has been there for approximately six months. His rental application has his last rental being in Germany . Mr. Oper appears to travel quite a bit.”

“Anything else?”

“No, nothing yet. He paid cash up front for a year. Not many questions were asked.”

“I think we now have two aliases on our mystery man. I’m determined to find out his real name.”

“That makes two of us, Mr. Solo. Waverly out.”

Solo pocketed the device after switching it off. He listened for a few minutes until he was satisfied there would be no retaliation and again approached the ground level windows. Most of the rooms contained file cabinets, but one room was bare with a solid metal door as the only break in the walls. It was a cold-looking room and the only one with bars on the window. The agent found himself vaguely disappointed that it was empty.

He peeked around the sides, and saw the armed security man wandering around the front. Solo decided to enter via the back, and also figured that the empty room would be the last room anyone would walk into.

With a line of explosive, he burned through the bolts holding about half of the bars to the outside. The window opened easily and he dropped in. Echoes of his movements bounced off the bare, block walls.

After a moment at the door he determined the lower level was empty and slipped into the hallway and to the stairs. He was almost to the top when he heard voices from the other side of the door at the top of the stairs which caused him to pause and listen.

“I want him brought here immediately. Our stubborn visitor needs a little more convincing, and this just may be just what we need. Does he have a name?” There was silence during the expected reply and Solo realized the man was on the phone. “Interesting. That’s not the name I expected, but he is U.N.C.L.E., correct?” Another silence; Solo figured they were talking about Garrison, which meant that the stubborn visitor must be his missing partner.

Making the instant decision to stay close until he located Illya made it impossible to call for back up at this time. He must be so confident, he doesn’t think he needs security, Solo thought. That would be a plus on his side if it were true.

With a loud bang the phone was hung up. The agent heard footsteps fade off into the distance and then quietly bumped open the door. A quick survey revealed he was alone as he slipped into the large kitchen area. He was just deciding which way to go when quick steps behind him made him spin around, gun in ready position.

A small Mexican woman with an armload of potatoes glared at him from the back kitchen entrance. She didn’t give the gun a second glance, but chattered angrily at the agent in Spanish as she dumped the spuds in the sink. Solo quickly tucked the gun away and apologized, but the woman would not be silenced. She continued to babble while she continued her cooking chores. Solo quietly exited down the first hallway and put distance between him and the kitchen.

“Must be annoyed at the amount of food Illya puts away,” he mumbled to himself as he checked his progress down the dark hall. There were several doors that opened from the hall to various rooms, most of them empty. A couple of doors were closed, and Solo heard murmurs of discussion inside, but nothing that indicated the location of his partner. The hallway spilled out into a large entry hall that had an upward curving staircase on one side and two very ornate front doors. Marble floors sparkled brightly from the sunlight streaming in from the large glass dome above and made the crystal chandelier hanging over him glitter like diamonds. Art graced the walls and marble pedestals held classic sculptures in every corner. It was beautiful, but crossing the open

space to the hallway on the other side would put him in the wide open spaces. Solo quickly checked the area, and stepped out into the open.

“Hey!” The agent was halfway across the foyer when the voice stopped him. “I’ll cover you.” A beefy man dressed similar to Solo trotted down the stairs and stopped at the bottom. “What happened to you? Have to chase those damn cats again?”

Solo pocketed his gun and brushed at his damaged suit. “Yeah. They’re pretty quick.”

The guard tugged at his tie as he spoke. “Yeah, I had to dive in those bushes last week. I’m still finding holes in my other jacket. You should get reimbursed, but it’ll take awhile. HQ is slow at that kinda stuff.” The agent followed the guard down the hallway. The guard continued to talk. “I’m surprised they let you work with a busted arm. Must be short handed. Er, no pun intended.” He laughed shortly, and Solo did likewise.

The agent decided to take a chance with the chatty guard. “Um, what are we supposed to do? I wasn’t briefed.”

“Ah, it’s no big deal. There’s this shrimpy blond guy, some sort of scientist I think since that’s all that comes here, and we have to help him get around.”

“Is he here by choice?”

“I have no idea. The guy never talks. The boss wants two guys on him all the time, but I don’t know why. He couldn’t hurt a fly.”

Solo nodded knowing otherwise, and dutifully followed the goon feeling unbelievably lucky. The only other thing that could top his day right now would be to snag the mystery man and get a true identity.

The guard nodded at another man standing outside one of the far doors in the hallway. “Break time,” he said. He opened the door and waited for the inside guard to step out. “Which do you want?” Solo’s guide asked him. “In or out?”

“In,” Solo replied quickly, his feet moving before the word was finished. In a flash he found himself face-to-face with his astonished partner and the door closing behind him. He glanced back to make sure the door was solidly closed before he turned to his partner with a cat-ate-the-canary grin. “There you are. Vacationing without me?”

Illya looked terrible. The bags under his eyes stood out like charcoal on his pale face. He stood shakily, and Solo was at his side in an instant.

“You’ve been overdoing it again, haven’t you?” The American agent pushed his partner back down into the chair, then pulled out his communicator. “Hang in there, IK, the cavalry is coming.” He opened the device and called Headquarters. After telling Waverly his location and reporting Garrison’s capture, he closed it up. “Have you got a name on our man?” Illya shook his head. Solo chewed his lip.

“Now, shall we ride my luck and stay put until backup arrives, or would you rather leave now?”

Illya’s answer was to get to his feet and move to the window. He was half way out before Solo leaped to his side. “Slow down, partner, you’re to hurt yourself all over again.” His partner’s burning glare was enough make the American shut his mouth and begin to help the ailing agent over the sill.

It wasn’t far to the ground, but Solo could tell that when the Russian hit the grass, it hurt. Illya wavered on his feet, and blanched visibly.. His hand automatically pressed his temple. Solo was at his side in an instant and offered a supporting arm that was accepted without protest. They almost made it around the corner of the house.

“HEY!”

Solo glanced back and saw his chatty guide hanging out the window. A gun popped into view, and Solo fired in his direction. Illya twitched, but kept moving. A bullet zinged by their heads, and Solo returned fire. "Keep going!" He pushed Illya around the corner and kept the guard from jumping out the window.

When the blond agent finally made it to the back of the house, Solo pelted after him, pulling a clump of explosives from his inner pocket. "Head for the woods," Solo ordered as he smashed a lower window and placed a fuse in the explosives. He tossed the bomb in the window and snapped off a couple of shots at the man trying to follow them.

Solo made it to the woods on Illya's heels when the explosion rocked the back of the house and knocked their pursuer flat. Solo grabbed his friend's arm and pulled him into the trees and toward the rear wall. Illya wobbled alarmingly - there was no way he could make it over the wall.

"Wait," Solo panted. "We can't get out this way. We have to go to the front and wait for reinforcements."

Breathing heavily and with eyes narrowed in pain Illya still made it clear that he wasn't giving up. They both turned at the sound of pursuit.

"Split up," Solo ordered. "You have a weapon?"

Illya nodded and stumbled out of sight. Solo took off noisily in the other direction, hoping to draw the attention of the guards.

It was a heart-pounding game of cat and mouse among the trees for what seemed like forever to Napoleon. He was near the edge of the trees when he decided to make a dash to a line of shrubs near the wall. A few steps from his goal, he heard a gravelly voice yell, "Napoleon! Get down!"

Solo dropped immediately as a bullet split the air where his body had been a fraction of a second before. He rolled to a stop with his gun raised just in time to see his partner slit the throat of a large man from behind. Both men dropped in a heap. Solo jumped to his feet and raced over. The throat wound was as ragged as the home-made blade he saw in his partner's hand.

Illya looked dazed but otherwise unhurt as he crawled out from the motionless mound. Solo offered a hand and helped him up. "Thanks, tovarisch."

"You're . . . wel . . . come," his partner stuttered as he caught his breath. "Stu . . . pid . . . move." Illya's accusing look made it clear whom he was calling stupid.

Solo snorted. "You finally find your voice and you're already nagging me."

"My . . . job . . . is to . . . keep . . . you . . . out . . . of . . . trouble." The speech was slow and deliberate, but very clear as he weakly brushed off his sleeve.

"Yeah, well, there's still more of them out here, so let's be careful."

They both faded back into the thick brush and watched the chaos unfold before them. Several occupants of the house ran out the front door, arms laden with files, and began to load up the cars parked by the house. The U.N.C.L.E. force took them completely by surprise as they swarmed the compound and rounded them up with little gunfire. Solo saw Garrison among the forces, and was relieved to see that he had been successfully rescued.

"I hate . . . watching." Illya's words were beginning to slur and he didn't show much inclination to stand up and help out.

"Me too, but we're not duty certified yet, remember?"

The pale blond cracked a weak grin. "Right," he replied.

## THE MYSTERY IN THE SKY AFFAIR

They watched the events as a spectator sport, critiquing the weak moves and discussing the merits of the better agents. When everything appeared to be under control, the pair decided to test the thoroughness of the clean up crew and see how long it took for them to be found. The injured agents weren't disappointed in the time it took as they slowly rose to their feet.

"Looks like it's about over," Solo said to the agent that found them.

"Yes, sir, it is, except that we haven't found the main subject."

"What?"

"There's a tunnel in one of the lower floors. It opens up on the other side of the wall." The young agent pointed to the back wall.

The CEA gazed at the wall and clicked his tongue. "Looks like we'll never identify the mystery man."

Illya shook his head. "We're . . . on . . . injury list," he began.

Solo finished the thought for him. "Which gives us plenty of time to research. We'll figure out who he is." Solo threw an arm over his friend's shoulders and helped him walk to the front to the house. "Well, between therapy sessions with that new nurse, that is. I'm happy to help you out with that, partner."

Illya rolled his eyes and decided to keep his comeback to himself. Instead, he brokenly told his partner all he'd learned from his captor. He was visibly drained by the time he'd finished.

"So, with all the records destroyed, and all the scientists scattered, no one really has the knowhow on how to assemble the weapon. Except you, maybe."

Illya nodded painfully.

"But with him out there, he could start all over again."

The Russian nodded again, his eyes weary. Solo willingly took the weight of his sagging partner and suddenly laughed as a thought struck him. Illya frowned, tired of talking.

"Our mystery man doesn't know what he's done. Not only does he have us after him on a paper trail, he's going to have another very angry agent hot on his tail."

Confused blue eyes looked out from unruly bangs.

Solo laughed as he spoke. "When April realizes that she's been on that boring stakeout for Van Heisen for no reason, she's not going to be very happy. And I don't know about you, but I've been at the receiving end of an angry Dancer before. I almost feel sorry for him!"

Illya visibly brightened and started to nod in agreement, but the motion fired up the pain. He whispered, "Doesn't . . . have . . . a . . . chance."

Solo nodded and assisted his partner into the closest car. "Kind of makes me happy to be confined to Medical."

Illya's distasteful frown was cut short when he closed his eyes and relaxed in the car. "Green . . . Jello," he murmured distastefully.

Solo grimaced. "I take back my last comment." He slid in next to his partner and friend and closed the car door. "Driver?" he said, smartly tapping the seat in front of him. "My place!"

The tired grin on the Russian's pale face was a welcome sight as the car pulled onto the street.

***FINIS***



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