

## THE HOMELAND AFFAIR

### PRELUDE : The Target

*Habarovsk, Soviet Union  
June 10, 1967*

"Comrade General! It's a pleasure to see you again." The Russian's smile was obviously forced. *I'm sure you are here to check up on me once again*, he thought with a flash of fear.

The slender General strode into the small office like he owned it, his bearing one of a man who was familiar with command presence. His second and third in command trailed respectively behind.

"I'm sure it is," the General replied snidely, knowing exactly how the other man felt. He stopped to light a cigarette; the flare of the match illuminated his scarred face briefly in the dim room. He calmly shook out the match as he inhaled, then blew out the acrid smoke in the other man's direction.

The two men studied each other momentarily, each covering their true feelings with edgy politeness.

"You are here to observe?" the first man asked with failed lightness. *Of course that's why you're here*, he thought. *Always looking for a way to rise in the ranks on other people's work.*

"Yes," General Asikov replied shortly, his eyes taking in the room and the group of technicians sitting at their stations. Being the middle of the night, it was a skeleton crew; the best time to observe 'things'. "I hear you have a device that affects navigational equipment. Show me, Comrade Bratsk."

Wilhelm Bratsk fought hard to control his expression. He managed a sick smile. "Certainly," he said. *Thrush security leaves much to be desired*, he thought. *They were supposed to keep this under wraps. It was my only way out of this freezing pit!* "Over here, Comrade General."

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Bratsk showed his visitor a panel of equipment not much different than those in the rest of the room. "Here. Shall I explain the workings to you?" He bridled inwardly at the suggestion.

General Asikov eyed the panel, keeping his suspicions to himself. He didn't trust this scientist for one second. "No, Comrade Bratsk, there is no need. I know full well how it is supposed to work." He walked up next to the nervous technician seated at the console. "I am here to see it work."

Bratsk sputtered, "Impossible! I have no such authorization!"

"You do now," the General said calmly, locking his steely grey eyes on the scientist. Without an outward order, his two minions stepped up behind Bratsk, leaving no doubt in the scientist's mind that the General expected action. "Show me."

Bratsk's mouth opened for further argument, but read the challenge in the General's eyes and felt a chill overtake him. If there was a face of evil, that was it. The chilling grey eyes and long scars running down sallow cheeks was the picture of the Devil himself. Wordlessly, Bratsk dropped his head and turned to an adjacent radar screen. "I need a target," he mumbled, trying to cover the fear and anger in his voice.

"I have one in mind already, Comrade Bratsk," the General said calmly, puffing again on the cigarette. Just then a glowing green dot showed up on the extreme outer edge of the radar screen. "There."

## ACT I: Welcome Home!

The flight had been relaxing, really. As U.N.C.L.E. agent Illya Kuryakin stretched his legs out in front of him he recalled a joke about how his boss, Alexander Waverly, known for his penny-pinching ways and acid comments on questionable expense accounts, probably rose to the level of head of the New York Command by only authorizing coach class for all agent travel. He wondered if Waverly followed these guidelines when *he* traveled, but doubted the man ever flew a commercial flight with all the aircraft U.N.C.L.E. had at its disposal. Illya sighed, made himself as comfortable as possible, and was grateful for his smaller stature.

He was also grateful that he was alone in his row of seats. Not one for chatting or idle talk, Illya took the opportunity during the trans-Atlantic flight to read some technical manuals. It was always a good idea to keep up on the latest trends in weaponry and other gadgets; you never knew when they might come in handy. It was dark outside, as it was the middle of the night, and most of the other passengers were asleep, making it wonderfully quiet; a rare thing a field agent's day. He adjusted his reading glasses and settled down with an inner sigh.

"Can I get you anything, sir? Coffee? A pillow?" The smiling stewardess labeled 'Darla' had managed to sneak up on him once again, the over-zealous smile making him feel nothing but irritated.

"No, thank you again," he answered civilly, even throwing in a small grin. "I'm fine." Napoleon Solo, fellow agent usual partner, enjoyed watching the Russian deal with the come-ons of the female species. Illya was constantly perplexed by the reactions he received from unknown women; he thought it was perfectly clear that he didn't want any attention. Napoleon kept telling him that is exactly what drew them in. The whole idea was filed under the subject of 'ridiculous' in the stoic agent's mind, and he usually just suffered through the contacts. He turned his head towards his manual. In his peripheral vision he saw

the stewardess unconsciously pat her hair as she lingered a few seconds, then move on.

Illya sighed outwardly. He was glad that this assignment in Sapporo was one of research; he still felt some aches from his last field assignment, although he'd never voiced that feeling. He suspected Waverly may have known and sent him on this trek to let him heal up. The chief's powers of observation were much better than his curmudgeon appearance let on. Whatever the reason, Illya was looking forward to the exchange of ideas with the Japanese agents. Their take on miniaturization of components was intriguing.

Illya was near the rear of the commercial jet. He heard the quiet rattling of the stewardess in the small galley as she kept to her duties, then heard the intercom buzz in the area of the galley.

Illya heard the phone picked up. "Yes, Captain?" Darla said with a puzzled tone, making the agent's ears immediately perk up. "What?" she said in a dramatic whisper, followed by a long period of listening. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I understand." Her voice was quiet, Illya picked up the sense of fear. She hung up and walked briskly forward, meeting two other stewardesses as they came through the curtain dividing the coach section from first class.

One of the three was obviously the lead stewardess. She placed her finger on her lips, and motioned the other two to the back of the jet. Illya waited until they passed, then moved to the aisle seat to eavesdrop.

"You know the procedure," the calmer, lead woman said firmly. "Just make sure it's handled calmly."

"But it's Russia!" Darla said in a scared tone. "Most of these passengers, including us, are American! We can't land there!"

Illya sat up straighter.

"Either we land there or get blown out of the sky," the lead Stewardess hissed quietly. "If we follow procedure to the letter, we'll be fine. Now take a deep breath and calm down! These passengers will be relying on you!"

"Yes, ma'm," the other two women said respectfully.

"Just keep telling yourself that it will be all right. It will be. The Captain will make an announcement in minute or so, so start waking the passengers." The lead woman projected calm and confidence as she strode by Illya for the first class section.

*Russia!* Illya thought. Quickly he calculated the flight path and time traveled. They should be adjacent to western Russia airspace, not in it! His mind whirled. There were no U.N.C.L.E. contacts in Russia; and this end of the country was extremely paranoid what with Japan, China and the U.S. border of Alaska to keep an eye on. Since Illya had defected to America, and the KGB was well aware of his training and abilities, there was a standing warrant for his arrest as a traitor.

A death sentence was attached to that arrest order. He simply couldn't be found here.

Darla and her partner had split up and were quietly waking the coach passengers, Darla from the front and the other one, Celia, from the back.

"Sir?" Celia addressed Illya with controlled fear in her eyes. "We are making an emergency landing. The Captain will explain in a minute. Please check your seatbelt and follow instructions." She moved on, not waiting for a response.

As soon as she passed his row, the blond agent got to his feet and entered the rearmost lavatory. He began removing all documents with his name on it as the Captain addressed the passengers over the intercom.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we will be making an unscheduled landing at the request of the Russian military. Don't be alarmed by the jets you see outside. They are merely escorting us to the closest airstrip near Habarovsk. This misunderstanding will be cleared up upon our arrival, I'm sure, so please follow the Stewardess' instructions and stay calm. Thank you."

*Habarovsk.* Illya thought. *Great. Right on the China border.* He held his passport, U.N.C.L.E. identification and orders in his hand, along with his driver's license and any other papers containing his name. He had to get rid of them. Hopefully, it would give him a little time to get away if they didn't know who he was. He would rather they had his suspicions about him than his true identification. Now what to do with the papers?

He didn't even bother to eye the toilet; that had a holding tank that could be easily searched. As he looked around inside the lavatory, his eyes were drawn to the ceiling. Noting the rivets securing the walls to the ceiling, he saw the same rivets around the interior fan, which turned on automatically when the door was locked. He pulled out a pocket knife, climbed on the toilet and fell upon the rivets.

He didn't even react to the urgent rapping on the door. "Hello! We are on final approach! You need to be in your seat! Hello!" The rapping continued.

Illya spoke as he worked. "Yes! Alright! I'm .... sick ..."

"Please hurry!" the voice begged, then let him alone.

Illya worked quickly. The rivets were stubborn. He felt the sinking feeling in his stomach as the jet lost altitude, and there was a second of weightlessness. *They're descending very rapidly,* he noted.

As he worked he ran what he knew about Habarovsk through his mind. It was a very small city, with a military outpost on the outer edges. Illya doubted the runway at either place could handle a jet this size. He stopped running possible scenarios through his mind when they grew increasingly catastrophic.

"Crash positions, please," he heard over the intercom.

*Good. The Captain isn't taking any chances,* he thought as he worked. Over half the rivets were popped. Just a few more....

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He never heard from the Stewardess again. Apparently she had her hands full enough with the other passengers. Illya heard the wheels drop with a mechanical grinding, and the change of the air noise due to the flaps. They were slowing airspeed; touchdown wasn't far off. Illya worked with intense concentration, shifting his weight with the turbulence and sway of the jet to keep his feet. He heard and felt the roar of the engines. *Too fast.* Illya realized the desperation of the act the pilot had just committed; he was trying everything to slow down. *He must have noted the inadequate length of the runway on sight,* Illya realized.

*There!* The final rivet popped the vent loose just as Illya heard the squeal of the tires on the runway. He wrenched the vent loose, trying to get the room to stash his papers.

The jet's engines roared in a desperate act to reduce speed. Illya was hanging by his fingertips as the suddenness of the reverse power threw him off the toilet. He scrambled for footing, gained it, and reached for his papers. The jet swayed on the runway; the engines screamed; Illya braced his arms against the walls to keep from falling, making sure the papers stayed put in the vent opening. When he gained his feet once more, he worked at getting the vent back in place. He felt the aircraft slew left, and he was thrown against the wall. Dazed, he crumpled to the floor as the jet screamed and the sound of screeching metal reached his ears. The room bounced, and then it was dark.

Illya wasn't sure if he had passed out. When he became aware again, it was dark and very still. Acrid smoke touched his nostrils and he shook his head to clear it. Instantly he was on his feet, and went to work on the vent. *Smoke...fire...electrical fire!* The idea struck him immediately. Feeling for wires in the vent, he didn't even notice the sticky substance running down his face. He did notice that the fingers of his left hand weren't working correctly, and there was a throb of pain in his forearm. Ignoring it, he pulled several wires and worked them loose. His fingers felt for the ends without success. *Knife.* He dropped to the floor and felt around in the darkness. His hand and arm throbbed incessantly, growing more painful by the second. Finally, he found the knife. At the same time, he started hearing screams of the scared passengers outside the door. He leaped on the toilet again, his head swimming and causing momentary vertigo.

Desperately, he groped for the wires and cut several. He was greeted with sparks, which drove him faster. He touched several of the cut ends together until he re-created the sparks, then touched them to the stashed papers. *Come on,* he said, noticing feeling disappearing in his left hand. *I wasn't a Boy Scout, but I know it'll work!* Finally, he was greeted with a small 'Poof!' as the papers caught fire. He made sure they were fully engulfed before pushing the pile further into the



opening, then positioned the vent back into place, coughing from the smoke collecting in the small room.

He opened the lavatory door and, thanks to the emergency lighting, noted a layer of smoke on the ceiling. The aisle was crowded, as was the galley area where one of the emergency exits was located. The jet was at an odd angle to one side. Coughing, Illya mentally commended the pilot on a successful landing. *Any landing where you end up alive is successful*, he heard Napoleon's voice say in his mind, and grinned to himself.

Cradling his injured arm and trying to avoid bumping his sore head, Illya Kuryakin melded with the panicked passengers as they left the jet via the emergency slide. He paused for a moment at the top of the slide and took in the dark, barren landscape in one glance as the frigid air of the dawn struck his face.

*Welcome home*, Illya said to himself as a chill coursed his body.

*U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters  
New York City, New York*

The offices of U.N.C.L.E. take up the building fronted, in part, by Del Floria's Tailor Shop and Cleaners. There were several secret entrances, but the one used at this moment by Napoleon Solo was that of the Del Floria's. Old man Del, as Solo thought of him, gave the agent a nod when he entered. Solo made his way back to the dressing booth, and pulled the trick hook that opened the door to the hidden offices.

Solo had his most becoming smile in place as he greeted the receptionist in training. The trim girl behind the reception desk became instantly flustered and pink in the cheeks as she fumbled for his tag.

"Napoleon Solo. I don't think I've had the pleasure," he began, leaning on the counter and catching her eyes.

"Napoleon, meet Angela Wesson; Angela, watch him carefully. Especially when he talks." The speaker was an equally trim brunette standing behind and slightly back from Angela, grinning knowingly at the agent.

"Nice to meet you, Angela." Solo acknowledged.

"Thank you, Mr. Solo," the girl replied pleasantly, regaining her calm.

"You can call me Napoleon," he said sweetly, leaning towards her. "All my friends do..."

"Mr. Solo, Mr. Waverly wants to see you," the supervising woman said with a grin. "So quit distracting my trainee!"

Napoleon straightened, adjusting his tie with a playful grin. "Certainly, Lizabeth," he said agreeably. "Don't mean to get you off schedule!"

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"I don't believe that for a second, Napoleon. Now move along!" Elizabeth shooed him off with a wave of her hand and a smile.

Napoleon Solo whistled to himself as he walked the hallways to Mr. Waverly's office, bidding hellos to those he passed on the way. Being the number one enforcement agent in this Section made his face almost as well-known as his exploits in the field.

When he reached the office of Mr. Waverly he was greeted with a smile by Greta, his secretary. "Go on in, Mr. Solo, he's expecting you," she said pleasantly.

"Thank you, Greta, and you look wonderful today." She beamed as he let himself in his boss' office.

Inside was a circular table with the dowdy appearing Waverly sitting at the far end. Behind him were picture windows that framed the United Nations building in the distance. It always made Napoleon proud of his work when he saw that view.

"Have a seat, Mr. Solo. Look at this, please."

The table turned like a lazy Susan, and brought the file around to the Chief Enforcement Agent's seat. He picked up the papers as he sat down off to Waverly's right. The first paper was a photo of a commercial jet, with three other photos right after it of three smiling men in uniforms.

"TransContinental Airlines pilots Alfred Glenn and Gary Peters, and flight engineer Tony Chatham. Experienced employees on flight number 4504, New York to Sapporo. There are three other crew members, Darla Walker, Celia Oliver and Marilyn Pothier, that are well trained and qualified stewardesses. Also in your file is a passenger manifest."

Solo picked up and scanned the manifest, stopping at the 'Ks'. "Illya? He's on this flight?" The dark haired agent was now serious and all business. "Something has happened, I take it?"

"Twelve hours ago, Flight 4504 was forced to land near Habarovsk, Russia. There was little communication, as transmissions were jammed by the Russian military. It appears that the airliner strayed into Russian airspace, and was escorted by Russian MiGs to a military airstrip outside Habarovsk. There are no more details, but our intelligence shows that the only possible airstrips are inadequate to land a jet that size."

"Was it pilot error?"

"We don't know; the cockpit tapes may shed some light on that subject. All we do know is that there were some injuries, and the passengers are being detained on the base. Our government has just begun negotiating their return. There are no more details."

Napoleon's forehead furrowed as he thought. "I don't think U.N.C.L.E. is too welcome in that area of the world. And Habarovsk is rather back country. Does



Illya know that area?" His partner never spoke too much of his life in Russia. All Napoleon knew was that Waverly had recruited Illya from behind the Iron Curtain, and suspected that he knew more about the Russian's background than anyone else in the organization.

Waverly paused as he tamped his pipe with tobacco and proceeded to light it up. "I don't think so. What concerns me is *who* knows *him*."

Napoleon closed the folder. "How do you mean?"

"Mr. Kuryakin left his country under .. strenuous .. circumstances. He is considered a traitor. And being on a military base, especially in that part of the country, I fear for his safety."

Solo nodded, his lips tight in thought. "There's supposed to be a large Thrush satrap in that area, too."

"Yes. Our European and Japanese intelligence tell us that, but being isolated deep in the country and so close to China, we haven't been able to locate it. Strangers are quite obvious there. If our government isn't able to negotiate his release, we may need to have Mr. Kuryakin retrieved. We both know how resourceful Mr. Kuryakin is, and I have no doubt we will get him back. You will fly to the Sapporo office, monitor the situation, and be ready with a retrieval plan. I have the U.N.C.L.E. jet standing by."

*He really is worried*, Solo thought. *He doesn't offer the jet that easily!* The agent stood. "I'll be ready to go within the hour, sir."

**ACT II: "There's More To You Than Meets The Eye, Mr. Haverstock."**

The passengers had all been rounded up outside the jet. As they were led away, Illya saw that the jet had slid sideways off the end of the runway; one wheel was off in the dirt, and the plane was tilted at a grotesque angle. Smoke rose from various sections.

They were herded into an open hanger, which was very cold inside. The captain the first officer kept everyone together. Illya kept an eye on the man and was impressed by his leadership ability. He tasked the crew with counting the passengers and separating those that were injured. He got into the face of the military men right away, demanding water, food and blankets, showing the Russians that he was someone to contend with and was definitely in charge. Illya was happy to have him take the attention of the guards.

The agent managed to keep away from the crew for quite a while. He wasn't ready to be separated into a smaller group yet. Scanning each of the uniformed personnel carefully he concluded that he didn't know any of them, and that none of them held any upper rank. The officer in charge hadn't shown his face yet, and was probably supervising the search of the jet itself.

He was busy inventorying the equipment in the hanger when someone lightly took his elbow from behind. He fought down the urge to respond automatically and instead, turned slowly and found himself looking right into the face of a middle-aged woman.

"Here, young man. Let me help you." She directed him to the infirmary area with a determined pull on his arm. "You probably don't even know you're hurt. Here," she pulled a tissue from her cardigan pocket and daubed his forehead. It came away bloody. "Take this and hold it on your head." She stuffed the tissue in Illya's right hand and guided it to the injury. "There you go. I see you hurt your arm, too. Sit over here."

Illya felt like he was getting the bum's rush, but didn't fight back. That might raise more attention than he wanted. The woman made him sit next to a set of Japanese youngsters, obviously twins, that had scrapes on their arms.

"My name is Trudy, and I am a retired Navy nurse. Let me see your hand." She reached for his left arm.

"No, no, I think I'm alright, really. There's other people hurt worse than I am. OUCH!" Trudy had pressed a spot just above the wrist that showed a suspicious lump.

Trudy snorted. "I don't think so. It's broken, I'm sure." She positioned his arm against his abdomen. "Hold it there. I'll see about a splint and a sling."

Illya, one hand holding the tissue on his head and the other pressed against his stomach didn't argue so she would leave. After she left, he felt the eyes of the twins staring at him. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said to the children, slightly exasperated. When they didn't respond, he repeated it in Japanese and they smiled and nodded. His talking made him aware of his accent, and he quickly concocted a cover story.

Trudy came back with sections of cloth and a rolled magazine. "Well, this will have to do," she said. "I've been stuck with less to work with." She placed the rolled magazine as the splint and wound one cloth firmly around the forearm and wrist until it was rigid, then made a sling with another cloth. Then she wrapped his head. A bloody spot immediately bloomed into sight. "Head wounds always bleed like crazy. It'll stop."

"You are very good," Illya finally said. "Thank you."

Trudy squinted her eyes at him. "I can't place the accent. German?"

Illya tried to smile pleasantly. "No. Dutch. Armaand Haverstock." He offered his right hand. "Nice to meet you."

Trudy's wrinkled face brightened slightly with a smile. "Trudy Kidd. Nice to meet you." She shook his hand briefly. "And you were correct, Mr. Haverstock, you aren't the worst injured. So if you'll excuse me," she got up to go.

"Certainly," he said amicably, and she walked away. Illya let out a relieved breath, and continued to scan the hanger. He also made a mental list of the armaments tucked away by habit on his person. His gun was wrapped in his jacket and stashed in the overhead luggage compartment of the jet; another problem when they found it. He knew approximately where in Russia he was. If he could only slip away...

Some action at one of the hanger entries caught the agent's attention. The guards snapped to attention as a superior officer entered. It had been a couple of hours since the jet had touched down, so Illya figured they had finished their preliminary search of the aircraft. He edged closer, without appearing to do so, hoping to get close enough to overhear.

He saw the officer gesturing and talking, and Illya made out something about sorting the group. He saw some papers in the man's hand and wondered if there was a printed passenger manifest on board. The papers were handed off to a guard, who then cleared his throat.

"When I call your name," he said with a thick accent, "Please move over there." He pointed to an empty corner of the hanger. He raised the list and started reading. It was alphabetical. Illya watched as each person stood when they were called and moved to the indicated corner. There, the person's identifying papers were then taken from them, and they were again separated by nationality.

When the officer came to the name 'J. Clark', there was no response. Illya saw his chance and stepped forward, past the puzzled face of Trudy, who remained silent.

"Mr. Clark, please give me your identification," the guard asked, clearly bored.

"I don't have any." Illya replied. "It's all in my luggage on the plane."

The guard raised his eyebrows.

"And my name is Haverstock. I took Mr. Clark's place on the flight today."

The guard was now perplexed. "No papers at all?"

"No, none with me. If I could go back on the jet..."

"No, I don't think so. Go over there for now." The guard pointed to another spot, separate from the rest.

When the list was complete, there were fifteen others with Illya who all claimed to have identification on the jet. As the other groups were moved out of the hanger, Illya could just see out the hanger door. He saw the groups escorted across the tarmac to another building.

The jet captain voiced loud complaints about everyone being separated, insisting that they all be kept together. The guards and ranking officer were kept busy trying to placate him, and finally Illya heard him get threatened with arrest. The pilot backed off, and Illya was relieved. The sooner they were out of this hanger and away from such direct scrutiny, the better for him to escape.

A small electric cart came into the hanger, loaded with purses, papers and jackets. One by one, each remaining passenger was allowed to find his personal belongings and identification, then moved out. Illya was the last to approach the depleted pile. There were just a few guards left, and the ranking officer had already departed.

Illya pawed through the items. "My jacket is not here."

The guards looked at each other. One said in Russian, "Now what?"

The other replied in kind. "Don't ask me. He probably needs to be detained alone. Some items did burn in the plane."

"And there was that gun they found in that coat." They glanced at Illya, sizing him up.

"He doesn't look like he would even know how to hold a gun!" They both snorted a short laugh at that one.

"Yeah, maybe he's a hired killer!" Again, quiet laughter between them.

Illya understood everything, but kept his face passive. So far, so good.

"Let's put him in the briefing room. The Captain can figure out what to do with him."

Illya acted surprised when they took his arm and lead him off. Outside, he glanced around. The only security he saw was a wobbly chain link fence around the base. *The perimeter guards must be watching the passengers*, he thought as he gauged which way he would be the best way to escape. The bite of the wind reminded him of his lack of supplies, especially a coat. Maybe the briefing room would yield something.

The guards lead him through an entry door, which entered a hall lined with doors. Guards were outside several of the doors and Illya presumed that's where the passengers were being held. The guards pushed him into a small room and shut the door.

His hopes dropped. There were some tables and a bookcase but that was about it. He went to the small window to gauge his distance from the perimeter fence, and noticed two men just meeting outside; they looked furtively around as if they wanted to be alone. Illya noticed a smaller building behind them, which was topped with numerous antennas and radio dishes. His hopes perked up again; he felt along the hem at the bottom of his shirt and dislodged a lump, producing an ear piece with a box-like device attached. His left fingers didn't work very well, and he fumbled to press the box to the window. Now he could hear most of what they were saying.

"I don't like this. How did he find out about the device? I can't let him have it, understand? It was my way out of here! Is he taking the navigational tapes from the jet? There should be evidence on there! We have to move fast. Tell the Thrush contact that I need to meet this afternoon. If they want the device, they have to get it and me, out of here before the General!"

"Yes, yes, I will. Moving the timetable up should not be a problem. I will notify..."

The rattling of the door knob made Illya jump and palm the device just as the door swung open. The guard's Captain entered, alone, and the door was closed behind him. The two men regarded each other suspiciously.

"So, Mr. Clark, tell me .." the Officer started.

"I am not Clark," Illya corrected. "My name is Haverstock. Armaand Haverstock. I'm a salesman in the same company as Mr. Clark."

"So I am told," the Captain said slowly. "And you are Norwegian?"

"No," Illya said slowly, knowing the man was trying to trap him. "Dutch."

"Pardon my mistake," he said again, studying Illya. "You have no identification?"

"I did on the plane. I don't know where it is now."

The Captain walked slowly around Illya, sizing him up. Illya tried to look innocent, and held up his arm. "This arm hurts. Do you have some aspirin or something?" The Captain replied in Russian. Illya looked perplexed. "What? I don't understand..." The man then replied in Dutch. Illya smiled, and replied in same. "Thank you. You speak Dutch very well."

"I don't speak very much of it though," he replied in accented English again. "There were several names on the list with no one claiming them," the Captain said.

Illya waited, looking polite.

"Three looked Russian. We are checking them now."

*Wonderful!* Thought Illya, not letting his expression give him away. *I've got to get moving. I don't know where this fellow stands in his politics and I can't take any chances.* "I hope you find them," he replied politely. "Meanwhile, I think I need to rest. Between the shock of the landing and my arm, I don't feel very well. May I lie down in here?" He indicated the floor.

The officer cocked his head as if making a decision about this man in front of him. "Of course. I will notify your government that you are otherwise unharmed." And he turned on his heel and left the room.

Illya immediately zeroed in on the window and got to work. He didn't have much time. His communication pen was on the jet with his gun, and combined with the conversation he just overheard, the communication building out there was a tempting target. The latch on the window yielded easily, and he pushed it open. It was a tight fit, but he managed to squeeze through and drop to the near-frozen ground. His arm throbbed painfully, but he pushed the pain aside and ran to the communication building.

There were no guards on this side of the building. Illya knew they had plenty to keep them occupied, and carefully examined the target building. A survey through the windows revealed a less than skeleton crew inside. In fact, the only person inside was the man he saw earlier, who was hunched over a console and working fervently. Illya assumed he was trying to disconnect whatever it was that Thrush wanted, and the agent saw an opportunity.

He went around and quietly entered via the door and used one of the numerous consoles as cover. The man was swearing in Russian, mumbling about a lack of proper tools. It was quiet for a moment, then the man rushed by Illya and out the door. Now was the time.



The agent reached the console that was left open and peeked in. Recognizing radar emitters and tracking devices, he at first missed the small, green box attached to the assembly. Illya cocked his head, thinking, but couldn't figure what it was for. He finally realized it was a small power amplification device, and visually traced it to the radar tracking hardware, but still couldn't figure out what it did. Standing up, he found a log on the table and flipped through the last few pages. They were power readings, mixed with range and distance numbers, but something wasn't quite right. Illya slipped the logbook inside his shirt, holding it firm against his skin with his slinged arm.

Next, he made for a radio and dialed in the frequency for the Sapporo U.N.C.L.E. office. He dashed off a message in code, indicating he was following up a Thrush lead on an unknown radar device. Keeping it very short and not waiting for a response, he reset the frequency and exited the building. The quiet indicated that he wasn't missed from his holding room yet, and he took a moment to extract another device from the hem of his shirt, affixing it to the window of the radio room, directly across from his holding room. Then, he made his way between the buildings and climbed into the holding room.

He was just settling down again when the door to his room rattled and creaked open, letting in the Russian Captain. Illya tried to look like he was roused from sleep. Trudy was with the man.

"See to him." The Captain growled, then left.

"I have the painkillers you requested," Trudy said easily as the door closed. Then she moved in closer. "Captain Glenn is quite adamant about knowing where everyone is. I think our gatekeepers are getting tired of him, and will want to get us out of here soon!" She said, handing Illya some pills. "Aspirin. It's all we have right now."

Illya took them. "Thank you."

She reached over and started adjusting the sling before Illya could step away. She felt the notebook, and her eyes flicked up to his, but continued the adjustment. "There's more to you than meets the eye, Mr. Haverstock." She stated quietly.

Illya calmly regarded her with a noncommittal expression.

Trudy continued. "I saw you sneaking around outside. You're lucky I wasn't a guard."

"Yes, apparently I am lucky."

"What were you looking for? Better yet, what did you find?" she asked.

"Nothing of interest."

He held her eyes for a few seconds. Hers were skeptical, his, cool.

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"Alright. If you say so." She rose to her feet. "I need to report your progress to our captain." She stopped at the door and turned, with a small grin. "I will be keeping an eye on you, though."

Illya let slip a rare smile. "I bet you will," he responded. "But I think you'll be bored."

She knocked to be let out. "Somehow, Mr. Haverstock, I doubt I will be. It's just a feeling, you know."

Then she was gone.

Illya spent his time going through the notebook page by page. The implications of what he saw worried him. There were a few things missing, and he felt those items had been left out on purpose by the man who wrote this, but he was still able to make out the purpose of the log. It was a record of trials run on a navigational altering device.

That would explain the jet's drift into Russian airspace, but didn't answer the question of who ran the tests - the Russian government or Thrush. Simple deduction of an overheard conversation made the agent believe that the inventor, possibly the man outside earlier, was a government worker trying to buy his way into Thrush. So who was this General he spoke of? How did he fit in? And where was this device, exactly?

Stuffing the notebook back in his shirt he stood up when he heard murmurs outside. Peeking out the window, he saw the man and another person go inside the building. Illya connected his ear piece and aimed it at the amplifying device he had stuck on the window outside. Now he could hear the conversation in the radio building clearly.

"I've disconnected the device, and it's ready to go. The jet outside will have to be ample proof that it works! I need to get out of here now because it's now or never. If Thrush wants it, we need to go immediately! General Asikov is just now reviewing the flight tapes, and will take them and the device when he leaves. What is your answer?"

Illya didn't hear the response. "*Asikov!*" he whispered out loud. "Pietor Asikov is here?" He straightened up, stunned, and began tucking away his devices. With only one working hand, it was difficult to do that with any speed, but he didn't really notice at the moment. He had to get away. Now.

Illya Kuryakin started to work the window again with new vigor. Asikov knew him from another life, his Navy life. As a KGB officer Asikov especially knew him as an enemy of the people. Illya had slipped away from him before, and he knew that the grudge was still strong. That's the way Pietor Asikov was; unfinished business annoyed him, and that's exactly what the blond agent was to the man: Unfinished business.

Illya slipped out the window knowing dusk wasn't far off and he didn't have much time. He stayed low, and ran to the fence on the other side of the communication building. Luckily, the fencing material was old, and the bottom wires were loose enough for him to wiggle under. He shivered from the cold, and made a mental calculation as to the direction of the city of Habarovsk. He needed better clothing and supplies, but first needed some distance from this place before Asikov found the passenger manifest. Deciding on a direction, he took off at a run, hoping the guards were fighting fatigue from their unplanned guard duties involving the passengers and a very long day.

He was just to the edge of the open area around the base when he heard the sound of dogs barking; many dogs, and they were coming his way. He also heard the sound of shouting men and patrol trucks leaving the base.

Illya threw himself into the dismal brush that was dotted with snow. The dimming daylight was the only thing working for him now. As he fought his way through the failing light, he saw a spot of sun on the horizon and pushed himself even harder. The dogs were much closer, and he could hear trucks on two sides of him. He found a spot close to a large boulder and ditched the notebook, and took a moment to catch his breath. His arm was throbbing, and he knew that his head was bleeding again as it was running down his cheek.

He found himself next to a dirt road, and heard trucks coming his way. Illya looked around coming up with a plan. A weak one, but it was all he had. He took off the bloody bandage from his head and tossed it onto the middle of the road, and then crouched down behind a boulder next to it. He was counting on the truck being a two-man patrol.

He was able to catch his breath before the truck came to a sliding stop at the sight of the bandage. Illya went to the back of the rock, and peeked around it. His guess was right; two of them. The driver was just stepping out, and swung his rifle around. The passenger was in front of the truck, holding the bandage and talking on a radio. Illya heard him calling for back up.

The agent tossed a rock behind the truck, and the driver swung around and walked back to the noise. When he was next to the boulder, Illya jumped out and kicked the rifle out of the man's hands. Then he chopped him with his good hand, grabbing for the rifle now hanging by a sling around the guard's neck with his broken one. His arm screamed in pain, and his fingers fumbled momentarily, but he got a grip on the muzzle and yanked it free, swinging it around to the surprised radioman in one movement. One shot took the man out. Illya turned on the driver, who was just coming around, and knocked him out with the rifle butt. He took the man's handgun as well.

He jumped in the jeep and fired it up, discarding the idea of taking the men's jackets; he didn't have time. Throwing the small truck into gear, he shot down the road, his arm and head throbbing.

The dirt road intersected with a poorly maintained, two lane road, and Illya geared up. He heard the whizz of bullets go by his head and stole a glance behind him to see two trucks in pursuit. *Out of time!* he thought, jamming the pedal down. He returned fire with the handgun, taking out a windshield. The damaged truck swerved dangerously, but kept on.

The road was curvy and shooting haphazard. If anyone hit anything it would be from sheer luck. Illya shot off a couple of rounds, hoping to slow them down a little more, when he entered a long, sweeping turn around a hill. When he came around the other side, he saw that the road merged with a larger one, and that his lane was blocked by at least five military trucks. He wrenched the wheel to the left, trying to cut across to the road before the roadblock. The sound of bullets hitting the side of his vehicle made him duck, and then there was a gut wrenching drop and everything went black just as he noticed the last of the golden daylight striking the meager trees tops above him.



Napoleon Solo studied the unsealed files of Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin to try and get an idea of what his partner might do. Solo knew what he was capable of, as he had seen him in action for years now, but this was unknown territory for Solo. Illya was going to have to tap every resource he could find out of this one, and something in his history may give Solo a clue as to what would be available to his friend. The files, however, were pretty meager in the pre-U.N.C.L.E. part of the Russian's life, and Solo didn't know if this was because the organization didn't have the information, or chose to keep it sealed. He suspected the former.

He also studied the terrain surrounding Habarovsk, and tried to figure out which way Illya would go. There wasn't much choice, really; south to China, north or west deeper into Russia, or east to the sea with Japan the closest ally.

*So Illya will make for the coast,* he thought. *That's a long way, 200 miles at the least.* He was going over the geography of the coast in that region when his communicator beeped.

"Solo here," he said, eyeing the maps.

"Mr. Solo, we just got word from Sapporo," Mr. Waverly's voice said without preamble. "Mr. Kuryakin has managed to get a brief message to their office. He has discovered the possibility of a Thrush operative being responsible for the course change of the jetliner. Some kind of new device, right at the base, possibly without the Russian government's knowledge."

"Did he say anything else?" Solo asked. "Any escape plans?"

"No, I'm afraid not. It was very brief; we assume to avoid detection."

"Well, I guess we know that Thrush is active in that area now."

"It would seem so, Mr. Solo. Keep me updated on your plans."

"Yes, sir. Solo out."

Replacing the slim communicator in his pocket, the dark haired agent rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, the maps momentarily forgotten. He let out a sigh. "Ah, Illya, this is a game of hide and seek I wish I knew the rules to."

**ACT III: "Just Don't Get A Ticket."**

Voices drifted in and out, but the banging in his head was constant. Illya rolled his head aside, and was rewarded with renewed pain and some fireworks behind his eyelids. He moved his hand over his face, and was rewarded with a whole new set of aches in his upper body. On top of that, it hurt to touch his face, and the handcuffs were very snug on his swollen, broken arm.

The buzzing of voices was somewhat steady now, and he was aware of lying on his back on a cold, hard floor. He groaned, and rolled to his side to push himself up to a sit. His ribs had other ideas, and he decided to stay on his side.

Then the voices stopped, and he heard a low chuckle. Illya cracked his eyes, one being slightly stuck closed by what he figured was dried blood.

"My old friend Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin. Welcome home, comrade! We have missed you dearly!" The words were followed by another chuckle. "You have aged poorly, my friend. Your bones break easily!"

Another chuckle.

"Is this your idea of a homecoming party, Pietor?" Illya rasped, his throat dry. His vision settled enough for him to see the outline of General Asikov standing on the other side of the room, his foot up on a chair. There were two armed soldiers standing behind him.

"Homecoming party? You have picked up some bourgeois Western habits, Illya. There are no homecoming parties here; no one ever leaves!"

"I did," the dour agent corrected.

"Yes, you are correct. You did." The General pulled his foot down and walked over to the prone agent. "And now you are back! What a day this has been. Maybe it's a homecoming party for me! I've received all the gifts!" and he gave Illya a quick kick in the abdomen. "And you shall be my gift to the Kremlin. Everyone will be happy."

Illya blinked away the new fireworks and rolled onto his back again. "Not me, I'm afraid."



"That's alright. When you're dead, you won't be the wet blanket anymore. Meanwhile, that annoying American pilot insists that you get medical treatment. In the interest of international relations, I'm willing to allow medical treatment. I do want to make sure you make it to the Kremlin alive, after all."

Illya heard the shuffling of boots, and he was yanked into a sitting position. He didn't give his hosts the satisfaction of any groans of pain, and they pushed him back against the wall so he wouldn't fall.

The boots retreated, and the door opened, and through a fog Illya saw a familiar figure enter the room. The General told the guards to observe, and he left.

Trudy knelt by his side. "I knew there was something about you," she said quietly as she put down a bowl of warm water and began to wash Illya's face. "Why did you try and escape? Is it true what Captain Glenn was told? That you are Russian?"

"No," Illya said. "I was Russian. I'm an American now. I defected."

"That would explain their love for you," she commented, making Illya issue a painful smile.

"Don't make me laugh," he mumbled. "It hurts."

Trudy snorted. "I see. Let me check you over." She gave him as a thorough exam as she could, keeping a professional demeanor.

Illya watched her, giving himself time to think. This wasn't the end. It couldn't be because he wouldn't let it be.

"Well, your arm is still broken," she announced.

"Very funny. Anything else?"

"Concussion, some cracked ribs. This head wound re-opened, but looks under control now. Got a headache?"

"No. I have a head explosion."

"Not surprised. You'll live." Her tone was light, but her eyes told a different story, and Illya gave her a thin smile.

"Thanks."

"I get the feeling that you've been through this before. You have some...interesting...old scars, Mr. Haverstock." Her eyes shined as she grinned a bit.

Illya smiled, and tried not to laugh. "Illya Kuryakin. And don't make me laugh!"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Kuryakin." She gathered up her bowl, and glanced at the guards. "Captain Glenn is requesting regular visits to check on your health. Anything you need?"

"Yes. But I don't think you can get me what I need, so I'll decline the question." His eyes settled on her face as a thought crossed his mind.

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Trudy's eyes sparkled again. "You may be surprised, Mr. Kuryakin. You may be surprised."

Just then he made his decision. "Not much surprises me." He glanced at the guards, sure she had followed his motion. "Your hair. May I ask a question?"

Illya could see her mind working behind her eyes, but she covered it with a relaxed smile. She saw Illya's eyes flick down to the cuffs on his hands, and back to her face. "Sure, ask away," she said slowly.

"How long does it take to pin it up?" Illya was fairly certain the guards didn't understand English, but he wasn't taking chances.

Trudy hesitated a second, then realized what he was asking. She reached up with a smile and patted the pinned up braid curled on the back of her head, slipping a hairpin out as she replied. "Not long. My husband always liked long hair." She made the motion of patting his hand as she stood, and slipped the pin in his fingers. "I suppose hair this long looks silly on a woman my age, but I like to think my husband is looking down from heaven in approval." She gathered the supplies. "Until later, then." She turned and marched sternly between the guards and out the door.

Illya gripped the hairpin and tried to make himself comfortable. Now he had to succeed; if they discovered the pin, Trudy would be in big trouble. He rolled so his back was to the guards and worked the pin. It was difficult work, and painful to his swollen wrist, but he pushed the pain aside and continued until he felt the lock slip. He loosened the cuffs just enough that he could slip them off, secured the pin in his waistline, and sat up, facing the guards. His head swam from the effort and throbbing pain, but he had to get his bearings. He had to move before backup guards arrived, or before Asikov removed him from the base under heavier guard.

The agent was trying to concentrate on a plan when the door opened and a guard spoke to the other two.

"The General will be removing this one within the hour. The nurse will be sedating him. After he is asleep, move him to the truck outside. The General will be riding along with him to the train station in a separate truck. He is loading up some things from the communications room now."

The two men nodded.

*Asikov must be taking that device I saw; the one that brought the jet here.* Illya filed that information away in his mind as he formed his escape plan.

It wasn't quite an hour before the door opened again. Trudy entered with a frown on her face. She obviously was not happy, and wielded a small, towel covered tray with distain.

"Captain Glenn is raising a real stink about this, Mr. Kuryakin." She said as she came closer and stopped. "That General is insisting on drugging you with morphine and taking you away. I'm here to administer the dose; my doing it was

the only concession the General would agree to." One side of the woman's lip curled into a tight grin. "Captain Glenn has really been a thorn in that man's side!"

"Asikov needs thorns in more than his side," Illya said matter-of-factly. Then he met her eyes again, hoping she'd pick up on his signals. Trudy raised an eyebrow slightly; *she's sharp, this one*, Illya thought. "I need help sitting up and holding my arm still." He flicked his eyes to one of the guards, and raised his hands slightly so Trudy could see the loose cuffs. Her eyes widened, and she tried to keep from smiling.

She put the tray down and picked up the syringe, checking the dose. "This will knock you out fairly quickly," she said conversationally as she turned to the guards. "Hey, you! Some help here, please?"

The guards looked at each other, not having any idea what she was saying, but got the idea. One of them shrugged, slung the rifle around to his back and came over.

"Cushion," Illya said softly, nodding to the cushion on the chair next to Trudy. She plucked it up and sat it on his lap, covering his hands as he slipped the cuffs. He flicked his eyes from the syringe to the approaching guard, and Trudy's eyes gleamed in understanding. She tapped the bubbles from the syringe.

The next seconds went like they were choreographed. Trudy indicated that the guard should kneel to help her so his body would block the action from the standing guard, who was looking bored anyway. Illya mentally crossed his fingers and moved. His good had shot up and latched on the guard's throat with a deadly grip, quieting him as Trudy injected the morphine in his unsuspecting bicep. She was amazed at the power in the agent's hand. Illya grabbed the handgun from the guard's side holster as he sagged in his grip, then released him as he raised the muzzle to the other guard. He would have shot the other guard, but Trudy had sprung to her feet, a second syringe in hand.

"Tell him to hold still," she said quickly, not wanting any bloodshed.

Even though Illya's order was in Russian, Trudy had no doubt of the intent of the order. His tone alone was scary; the cold, gleaming look in his eye left no room for doubt. The guard froze, knowing his life was in real danger. She quickly injected him, too, and Illya didn't move a muscle until the guard slumped to the floor.

Illya shoved the sleeping guard off his legs, and painfully struggled to his feet. Stars floated in his vision as he tucked the handgun away and squatted to undress the downed man. He swayed on his feet, fighting back the stinging pain his every breath brought.

Trudy was quiet for only a moment. "Here, let me help you."

Between the two of them they switched clothes with the sleeping man and Illya. Trudy bandaged the guard's head to cover the darker hair, then studied Illya carefully. "You'll never be able to get him out there by yourself."

"And I can't endanger you anymore. I'll need to inject you, too, so it looks like I overpowered you."

Trudy raised her eyebrow again as Illya grabbed his ribs and took a moment to rest. "You couldn't overpower a flea right now Mr. Kuryakin."

He managed a grin. "Illya. Please, call me Illya. And don't make me laugh. It hurts!"

Without another word, Trudy stripped the second guard and donned his clothing and weapons. Illya protested, but she shushed him with look. "Do you think it's going to be easy on any of us when this is discovered? I'm sure the passengers will eventually get home, but I'm not so sure about you. This way, at least I'm doing something other than sitting here on my duff. Subject closed. Let's go."

Still not happy but accepting the reply Illya stood and started to gather up the smaller of the sleeping guards. Trudy was at his side in an instant, and between the two of them, got the body gathered up. "Wait," Trudy bent down, retrieved the handcuffs, and snapped them on the guard. "Everything's in the details," she said softly as Illya shook his head. They moved to the door.

Illya kept his head down as they dragged the guard along. He concentrated on putting one painful step ahead of the other, and glanced around when they got outside. He saw two small trucks parked by the communications building, and saw a technician loading a device in the back of the lead vehicle. He hoped the keys were in the ignition.

He could hear a man arguing with Asikov inside the building. Trudy and Illya threw the guard in the lead vehicle, and as Trudy got into the driver's seat, Illya slipped out a hunting knife he recovered from one of the guard's boots and stuck it in two of the second truck's tires. Quickly, he moved to the lead truck. He opened his mouth as he got in the passenger's seat.

"No argument. I'm driving. I drove through battlefields in Korea," Trudy said as she fired up the engine. "I can do this."

Illya snapped his jaw shut, and instead, pulled the rifle around. "Fine. Just don't get a ticket."

Trudy let out a short snort as she gunned the engine and headed for the gate. Her sideways glance at Illya showed the fear she felt as they raced to the exit. Illya gave her a quick smile and a nod as he raised the rifle at the two surprised gate guards, picking them off easily. Trudy slammed the truck into the aged gate, and it collapsed without even slowing them down. They heard gunshots, shouts and the whistle of bullets over their heads as they left a trail of dust behind them.



Solo's first hours in Sapporo were busy locating the radio operator that had picked up Illya's brief call, and familiarizing himself with the office set up. He got a car assigned to him, and made sure it was ready to go, and arranged to have the radio man meet him at a coastal office with comparable equipment. Solo knew that aircraft were difficult to come by in Russia, and that his partner would most likely need a pick up by sea eventually.

There was a short break as he drove to the coastal office, alone. Illya was very tight lipped about his time in his home country, but Solo was sure he had ways of getting around. After all, he had worked under the government's nose in an underground railroad-type group, or so he'd heard from others, and Solo knew the abilities and extent of his partner's wiliness. Still, there was a lot working against him, and he was alone in a large, under developed area. It all came down to stamina and determination, both qualities Kuryakin had in spades. Solo grinned to himself, adding stubbornness to the list.

On his arrival at the coast, he was glad to have the chore of locating a sea-worthy vessel that could be ready to launch in an instant. Napoleon Solo wasn't one for sitting and waiting, and he knew that's what this would come down. He had to be ready.

**ACT IV: "You Remind Me Of Someone I Work With..."**

Trudy careened on in the truck until she was sure there was a good distance between them and the base, and figured she'd taken enough twists and turns to throw off pursuers. She stopped long enough for them to shove the sleeping guard out, then continued on, off the main road. She noticed how her companion favored his left side, and was concerned at his obvious battle to ignore his pain.

Anyone following would have a tough time finding them in the stand of brush she eventually found. It had been a long, rough ride, and the quietness of her passenger was starting to worry her. As she came to a jolting halt, he slumped down, the rifle muzzle jammed in the floor and the butt against his chest, holding him upright.

"Mr. Kuryakin," she said firmly, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him. "Hey! Sorry about the rough ride, but.." she stopped talking when she realized that her hand was wet from touching him. Turning her palm, she saw that it was shiny with blood. "Hey! Soldier!" She said a little louder, taking both his shoulders in her hands. "Wake up!"

The only response she got was a slight groan, and a roll of the blond man's head. Trudy tore open the uniform jacket and discovered that he'd been shot. The projectile had entered from the back, just between the spine and the shoulder blade. There was no exit wound, and two possibilities crossed her mind as she tried to control the bleeding and bit her lip: Either the bullet was stopped by the collar bone or it had angled near or in the thoracic vertebrae. *I have to stabilize this. He's lost a lot of blood,* she thought, instantly going into emergency nurse mode. *And there's never a surgeon around when you need one!*

Trudy was thankful for the darkness as she stabilized Illya's left side. She kept glancing in the direction of the road, but there was no sign of pursuit yet. When daylight came, they would have to take better cover. She also knew it would be better to have him lying down, but didn't dare move him too much until he was more aware and she could determine where the bullet was lodged exactly. When he



was as secure as she could make him, she checked the rest of the truck for anything useful.

The box in the back had lots of exposed wiring and dials, and didn't appear to be anything useful to their predicament. She shoved it aside as she looked under the seat, where she found a green ammo box. Opening it, she found some flares, a small length of rope, and of all things, a hand grenade! She immediately shut the lid and shoved the box back under the seat with a shiver. The only other thing in the truck was a folded camouflage tarp just big enough to cover the small truck.

She was contemplating the possibility of making a shelter of some sort when her patient groaned. Moving to his side from outside the truck she gently lay her hands on his uninjured right arm to steady him. Immediately at her touch, his hand moved like lightning and grabbed her throat. She was unable to utter a sound, and breathing was instantly difficult.

As she fought to take in air, she saw the blond man slowly turn his head towards her. His blue eyes were icy and hard, sending a frightening chill through her body; *My God, he's going to kill me!* she thought in a panic, astounded at the strength in his grip. Both of Trudy's hands were now trying to pry his fingers off her throat, and she was able to let out a small squeak of panic. Illya blinked at the sound, and his eyes seemed to clear. When she saw them soften and widen slightly, the grip was just as quickly gone.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry! Forgive me!"

Trudy rubbed her throat as she took a step back, and gasped for breath. A few more seconds would have resulted in a crushed larynx, she was sure. There *was* more to this man, and for a second she was afraid. What had she gotten into? In her past battlefield nursing experience, she had defended herself against delirious soldiers before, but this man's attack had been calculated, rehearsed and well executed, and it frightened her. She was able to push the pain and fear aside when she saw him struggling to get out of the truck.

"No, you have to stay still," she whispered hoarsely, one hand on her throat and the other reaching out to keep him seated.

"I need to keep moving," he replied, brushing off the hand. When he swung his legs out and tried to stand, his knees threatened to give away.

"No, you need to keep still. There's a bullet in you somewhere, near your spine." She reached into her uniform jacket and pulled out several loaded syringes. "I have more morphine here. Don't make me use it, especially since you really need it anyway." Illya glared at her, but she had seen how frightening his look could be and this one wasn't nearly as scary. She just snorted a laugh. "Doctor's orders."

He narrowed his eyes. "You aren't a doctor."

"I'm closer to it than you, mister! I mean it! You move too much or too suddenly, and you could really be in trouble."

He studied her for a moment, then turned his attention to the back of the truck. "I have no doubt you'd use that on me, so I'll behave. For now. Let's see what we have here." Leaning heavily on the truck for support, Illya tried to reach for the electronic box, but couldn't quite reach it.

"Here," she said, her voice almost back to normal. "I'll get it." She reached in and pulled the box closer. "What is it?"

Illya turned the box over and fingered the wires. "I'm not sure if it's complete, but I believe this is the reason we're in Russia and not Japan."

"Come again?" Trudy replied, confused.

"If my reasoning is correct, I think this is all or part of a navigational warping device. It's not a jamming device, which stops readings. This alters the readings."

She brightened up. "You mean the readings in the cockpit were tampered with? This thing changed the readings of the navigational gauges?"

The blond agent nodded, wincing in pain at the motion. "Yes. I think our flight was a test run. If this had happened to a military aircraft, it could result in a war."

"But why? Who would want that?"

Illya let out a dry laugh. "It's one way to get Russia's hands on the latest technology of other countries. And the military wouldn't mind a war. Keeps them busy. Whoever has their hands on this could control air traffic anywhere." He pushed the device back on the seat. "I've got to get this to New York," he said softly.

It was Trudy's turn to laugh. "New York? From here? With this old truck and with you in that shape? I think that's going to take a bit longer than you realize."

He hesitated. "We'll see," he stated. "I have some...resources."

Trudy narrowed her eyes. "Who exactly *are* you, anyway? I think we've already established the fact you aren't a salesman." Her eyes sparkled.

"No, I'm not. I work for an international agency called U.N.C.L.E."

"Really?" Trudy said. "I've heard of them! My husband was in Army intelligence, and told me all about them." Her tone softened. "He was going to approach U.N.C.L.E. for work after his time was up in the Army. He died in Korea, though."

Illya tried to make out her face, but his vision was wavering. "I'm sorry," he managed to say as he wobbled his way back to the truck seat. "If he was anything like you, he would have been an asset."

Trudy caught him as his knees gave out. "You're weak from blood loss. We need to build you back up. Where to? Any ideas?"

Illya nodded, his eyes glassy. "Yes. There should be a couple of small towns around that supply the base. We need to get there and ditch this truck. It's too obvious. Follow the smaller roads east and south. We should stumble across one, but I'm sure they'll be heavily patrolled, so be careful. We'll park outside of town and walk in."

"Yeah, right." Trudy mumbled as she climbed in and fired up the truck, rubbing her throat. "We'll see how far you get on foot."

Illya spared a tight grin. "You remind me of someone I work with," he commented. "Always nagging."

Trudy pulled carefully out of the brush. "He must be a terrific person," she countered lightly.

"In his own mind, he is," Illya replied between gritted teeth as the truck hit a rough patch. It would be a long ride.



Early that morning Napoleon Solo departed for the docks with a couple of names of boat owners supplied by the Sapporo staff. He learned that three of the four were out on fishing runs, and weren't expected back for a day or so. He was down to the final name, and when he inquired as to the location of the boat from an old man at the dock, the old man scanned the horizon and pointed to a black dot in the distance.

Napoleon settled down to wait. The dot grew larger, and then became recognizable as a small fishing trawler. *Not too fast, but sturdy*, he mused. *If we can triangulate on that device as we think we can, that boat could get us in the area we want to be.* He was so deep in thought about how to pull this off in such a large amount of coast and water, he didn't immediately notice the person driving the boat. Finally, he stood up, waiting to greet the vessel, and was shocked to realize that the captain was a woman, and she was the only one aboard.

The Asian woman's hair was tucked up under a wide-brimmed hat, and she had on a large coat and boots, but when Solo saw her eyes studying him, he could tell she was a stunning woman. Her skin was clear, her eyes alive, and her expression one of aloof suspicion.

By the time she docked and threw the mooring rope to him, she knew he wanted to speak with her, and waited for the right moment to acknowledge him.

Solo tried to study her without looking like he was doing so. She was in her early twenties, he decided, and was lithe and sure in her movements. Working a trawler this size was second nature to her.

"My name is Napoleon Solo. Your name, well, actually I think it's your father's name, was given to me about a boat rental."

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She eyed him up and down, but her eyes softened. "Yes," she said slowly in heavily accented English. "He does rent the Empress out, but he is out fishing and won't be back for several days."

Solo straightened his tie in an unconscious act as he smiled at her. "Well, does your father allow *you* to rent out the Empress, Miss...?"

"Inturi. Stevie Inturi." She finished tying off the boat and brushed her hands together just before sweeping off the hat. Her long, black hair was shiny and thick as it fell over her shoulders. "Maybe. He leaves those decisions to me in his absence."

"Well, Miss Inturi," Napoleon said with a grin, "I belong to an international group call U.N.C.L.E., and we could use your boat. Can we discuss it over some tea?"

Stevie ducked her head slightly, and looked at him through her lashes. When she smiled, her brilliant white teeth made Solo fight to keep his composure. "I am familiar with your group. My father approves of it. Yes, we can have some tea. Excuse me, I need to change first."

She stepped back in the boat and shed the waterproof, hooded parka. Out of a bag she produced a dark purple, silk jacket that went perfectly with the simple black pants she wore. She also slipped off the rubber boots, and replaced them with simple black slipper shoes.

When she stepped off the boat the second time, Solo realized that this rescue mission wasn't nearly as grim as it was only 15 minutes ago.

### ACT V: "Others? What Others?"

Trudy tried to keep some talk going in an effort to keep Illya conscious, but she was unsuccessful. Finally running across a small road, she followed it out of the small valley. She stopped when the road crested a long, sweeping hill. Far below, she could see a collection of buildings she assumed was a town. Knowing her patient needed rest, she ventured off-road again to a small stand of trees and parked.

"Hey," she prompted, feeling his forehead. "You have to wake up soon."

"I am awake," Illya grumbled. "Just quite pounding on my head."

"Headache, huh? I'll just add that to the list." She got out of the truck and went around to his side. "We're near a town, I think. Are we going disguised as soldiers?" She held her arms out, indicating the uniforms.

Illya squinted at her, then looked around. "They are a dark color, and it will be night soon." He struggled out of the truck.

Trudy's every instinct was to jump to his side, but she held back, first, to judge his condition and second, because she knew he didn't really want any help. *He'll collapse soon anyway. Then he won't have the choice,* she thought. The determined Russian fixed his eyes in the direction she pointed. "That a-way," she said.

He made his way slowly to the edge of the trees and studied the gathering of buildings in the distance.

Trudy could see his eyes take in the town and surroundings, and could tell that his mind was hard at work. Instinctively she knew that this was his ball game, and she would trust whatever he came up with. She didn't know much about Mr. Kuryakin, but the collection of scars she had seen on his body attested to his survival skills.

"We have a couple of hours. Let's inventory the truck." Illya started to make his way back to the vehicle, but Trudy stopped him.

"I already have. I'll show you what I found." She made him sit under a tree and rest while she retrieved the ammo box and camouflage tarp. "There's this and the spare tire and jack. That's about it."

Illya raised his eyebrows and nodded at the contents of the box. "A grenade and flares! Actually, that's more than I was hoping for. This tarp can work for us, too. That box, though, is a bit obvious. We need to leave that. We can use the crank bar to the jack, too. And there's still a couple of rounds in the rifle, and I still have the handgun."

Trudy patted her pocket. "And I still have two doses of morphine."

Illya threw her pocket a suspicious look. "And there they will remain, Mrs. Kidd. Unless, of course, you're aiming for the opposition's blood."

She gave him a crooked smile. "We'll see, my friend. We'll see." She sat down next to him. "OK, we have a little time before dark. Why don't you teach me some of the language so I don't feel so left out?"

They spent the next few hours as student and teacher as Illya attempted to supply Trudy with some basic Russian. Illya knew he had a knack for learning new languages, and had a difficult time trying to break down Russian for a beginner. "Now I know why I never taught my partner Russian," he sighed. "It's simply a lesson in frustration for me!"

Trudy was undaunted. "Oh, come on! I'm not that bad. Here, listen!" and she said a sentence for her teacher. "See?"

Illya shook his head. "That's great, but you just asked me if a cow bit your fireplace. Not exactly a useful utterance."

"I did not! Did I?" she tried unsuccessfully not to giggle. "I wasn't very good in Spanish class, either! But I did say 'friend' correctly, right? 'Tovarich'?"

Illya winced at the pronunciation, but nodded. "Yes. And that in itself is odd because that's the only word my partner really knows, too."

"What's your partner's name?"

"Solo. Napoleon Solo. And if I know him, he's waiting for us somewhere off the coast." Illya pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes and sighed. "And I must be worse off than I thought. I shouldn't have told you that. Not at this point, anyway."

Trudy threw both of her hands up in a surrendering motion. "Consider it forgotten." Then she leaned in to him and dropped her tone. "You think he'll really find us? That seems impossible."

"I was able to get off a short message to U.N.C.L.E. and told them about that device in the truck. Hopefully, they'll figure out how to use that information to find us. If I can get that device to work, and if they can figure out what to look for, we can use it to lead them right to us."



"That's a lot of 'ifs'," Trudy pointed out. "Can you even get that thing to work?"

Illya grinned. "Add another 'if' to the list. I've worked with less." He turned his attention to the horizon. "It's getting dark. Let's pack up."

The rest seemed to have revived him a bit, and he moved a little easier, much to Trudy's relief. She knew it was short lived, though. They both needed water and food, and she knew it was deceptively quiet right now. The patrols were out there, and they had to stumble into them sometime.

They worked their way slowly towards the town. There were more times than Trudy could count when the noise of a vehicle made them drop into the brush; soon it was an automatic reflex. As darkness fell, to grew colder and she wondered out loud why they took the effort to hide from the vehicles in the dark.

"There is such a thing as ultraviolet binoculars. They can pick up figures in the dark. I don't think Asikov has access to any out here, but there are others to worry about.

Trudy's eye perked up. "Others? What others?"

The agent gave her a brief rundown on Thrush, and the possible tie in with the device. She gave the device a more respectful look-over. Illya had hauled the box with him, not without difficulty, and now she knew what was at stake: Worldwide dominance of air travel.

It seemed like forever before they made it to the edge of the town. Illya had Trudy stay while he circled the perimeter, looking for a haven in the collection of buildings. She was beginning to doze when she finally felt his hand on her forearm and jumped.

"How long have I been asleep?" She whispered groggily, wiping her eyes and longing for a drink of water.

"A few hours. It took me a bit longer than I expected," he replied, his tone a bit ragged to her ears.

Trudy tried to make out his face in the darkness, but wasn't able to see much detail. She could tell that he was at the edge of his endurance just by the sound of his voice and the fogginess of his eyes.

"You need to rest," she started.

"Later," he snapped. "Take off the uniform and roll it into a bundle." She did as she was told and tucked the bundle under her arm. She watched him roll the metal box in his uniform, using only his good arm. The broken one was cradled tightly against his body, and she knew it must be hurting. "There's troops all over the streets, but it doesn't look like they are searching. I don't think they believe we could make it this far. We're taking advantage of that." His breathing was uneven and ragged, but his grip was firm on her arm. "Let's go."

He guided her none too gently off in one direction so they would enter the town from a different direction. They finally came across a small, well used footpath.

"This path leads to some produce fields just outside the perimeter," he explained. "Every town in Russia has community fields. They can't rely on outside supplies a lot of the time. This way." He took her just off the path, then paralleled it towards town. He stopped her, and raised his finger to his lips, the universal sign for quiet. She nodded.

He slowed the pace to almost a crawl. When they reached the end of the brush, she saw that the first of the town buildings was just a few yards across an open space. Illya pulled her down to her knees, and he knelt beside her and put his face close to hers. It was then that she saw how ragged he really was, and knew he couldn't keep on his feet much longer. She wondered how he kept going now.

"Keep close and move quickly, but watch your step. There are patrols by the footpath, but none here. They could hear us. Understand?"

She nodded, her eyes locked on his. It was difficult to quell the fear, and she knew it was clear in her eyes. His, however, looked shiny with pain, but confident and ... deadly. Trudy wasn't going to let him down.

He led off, with her right behind, following his every move. The blond man moved like oil on water; fluid and completely silent. Her own footsteps sounded like thunderclaps in comparison, but it must have been an illusion to her because they made it safely to the alley between two buildings. He kept her moving until the hard packed dirt changed to ill-kept asphalt, then he slowed. She could see his breathing as little puffs of clouds due to the cold, and noticed that he was panting compared to herself.

Instinctively, she took his good arm and moved in to support him. He didn't complain. That's when she knew he was in a bad way.

"You have to rest," she insisted quietly.

"I will. Just a little longer," he growled, directing her.

Soon Trudy had no idea where in the town they were. Illya weaved and ducked between buildings as if every turn held imminent danger. She supposed it did, but was focusing on keeping him on his feet and let him take on that worry.

There was only one time that she actually saw a patrol. Illya had dropped suddenly, pressing both of them against a cold, brick wall, wet with night moisture. They huddled against a crumpled cardboard box and tried not to breath as a pair of military men strolled by on a cross street not six feet away. The men were chatting, and one laughed briefly. They both had rifles across their chests.

Trudy waited almost a full minute after the soldiers were out of site before she dared to look at Illya. His eyes were closed, and his head was leaning back against the wall. His breathing was in short gasps.

"Hey," she whispered, shaking his arm. His eyes immediately snapped open, and she felt him tense. She raised her hand to her throat without thinking, remembering the last time she woke him up. This time, however, his eyes focused more quickly and he began to struggle to his feet. She helped him, and they staggered off down one last, dark alley behind a larger building.

When they managed to make it to the door of the building, Trudy looked up, Illya now hanging on her arm. "This is a church!" She said between gasps.

"I know," Illya mumbled, concentrating on trying to keep his feet as his head swam.

"Aren't churches looked down upon by the government?"

"Yes, they are. And Asikov wouldn't think I would be brazen enough to hide here. What better place to hide out than one as conspicuous as this?" He sagged heavily against her as they stepped in the dark doorway.

It was a church, but barely. The Kremlin took the stand that the country should be agnostic, and the only church it barely tolerated was the Russian Orthodox Church. If a church ever proved to be a problem, it was immediately shut down, so they generally kept to themselves and didn't make waves. Illya was counting on that; the General would presume that the church would turn the agent away immediately to avoid problems. Illya knew Pietor Asikov thought only along Party lines. He was counting on that, too, and hoped the man hadn't changed much since their time in the Navy.

As they stumbled into the vestibule area an older man in a long coat appeared at their side out of nowhere.

"Let me help you, brother," he said, taking the load from Trudy and dragging the stumbling blond agent to a very small, dark room with a wobbly cot. Trudy was amazed the cot didn't collapse when he lay Illya down, but quickly brushed aside the thought as she began to minister to her patient.

"I need warm, soapy water and clean cloths," she said in a calm, but direct manner as she began to strip the shirt off the fading Russian. Illya mumbled a translation, and the man that helped them slipped away to comply without a word. Even in his depleted state she had to pry the wrapped box out of his injured arm, and placed it gently under the cot. She examined the purple, swollen hand, and loosened the splint to keep circulation to his fingers. She checked his shallow breathing, and noticed the ugly bruises on his chest from the truck crash. *It's unimaginable how painful breathing must be for him*, she thought. Checking his eyes in the poor lighting was difficult, and she wasn't sure about the uneven pupil response she saw. *I'm sure that's from the concussion*, she thought. There wasn't much she could do about that, but she could clean the open wounds and bind his chest.

The man Trudy assumed was a priest due to the robes returned with a bowl of warm water, a sliver of soap, and some clean towels. "Thank you," she said with a smile. The priest understood her tone and nodded.

The priest knelt on the other side of the cot and examined Illya with his eyes. Then he looked at her with a small smile. "I assume you are the reason for the soldiers on the street." He said quietly. She had no idea what he was saying, but Illya mumbled a translation.

Trudy's heart raced as she cleaned the blood from Illya's shaggy bangs, but kept an outer calm. *Will he turn us in?* She thought nervously. *Can we trust him?*

Out loud, Illya responded slowly, "I don't know about that. I hurt myself in the fields." As his eyes drifted shut, he told Trudy what he'd said.

After a silent apology to God for his lying, she risked a quick glance at the man and saw his eyes sparkle as a smile passed quickly over his lips. *Obviously, he didn't believe that one,* she thought.

He reached to help roll the agent on his side so she could reach his back. "God is the one that judges here," he said quietly. "And God is the one that brought you here. You are safe." Illya's voice trailed off as he lapsed into unconsciousness at the end of the translation.

She spared a grateful look and a smile at the priest. "Thank you," she whispered, knowing she was understood, then turned her attention back to her patient.



Stevie Inturi was a captivating woman. She carried herself with confidence and grace, and was a pleasure to talk with. Solo had enjoyed tea in her small house at her insistence, and found himself telling her more than he probably should have about the assignment.

"So, you need to set up some equipment to look for this radar anomaly?" She questioned after he explained everything.

"Yes. It is being done now at the hotel."

"Would it not be better to be closer to the boat?" She asked softly, indicating her small house with her hand. "That way, when you finally get the tri-ang-u-lation," she said the word slowly and carefully, "you can leave immediately?"

*She is sharp,* Napoleon thought, smiling and unable to stop staring at her dark, exotic eyes. "Well, that would be ideal, yes."

"Then I invite you and your team to set up here," she said in soft but final tone. "There is a life at stake, and my father always says 'If you do a job, always do it well.'" Her smile dazzled Solo with its openness.

"Thank you, Miss Inturi. I accept your offer, with the understanding that U.N.C.L.E. will reimburse you for your kindness." He stood, bowed his head slightly in thanks, and offered his hand to help her up. "And I would love to meet your father someday. He sounds extraordinary."

"Yes, Solo-san. I think he is," she said as she got to her feet. "Now I have some marketing to do. Please feel free to come and go as you wish. I must inform my neighbors that you will be setting up so they will not be alarmed."

"What are you going to tell them?" he asked curiously. He had told her of the need for secrecy.

Her eyes glimmered as she smiled and spoke with a grin. "I will tell them that you are testing a system for finding fish at sea. They know my father keeps up on the latest technology, and think he's wasting his time. They will not bother you."

The day flew by as Solo returned to the small hotel and retrieved the technician and his equipment. They were both glad to get to the quieter setting, and were soon finishing up the needed connections as Stevie assembled a simple yet filling dinner. After cleaning up from the meal, she studied the equipment piled in one side of her small living room area with a cocked head. Solo skipped the technical side of the explanation and went directly to the radar screen and gave her a verbal description of what they thought they were looking for.

"You see," Solo explained, "If we have a set radar reading in a set spot, and the reading changes three or more times, we can triangulate and possibly estimate where the device, and my partner, are." He pointed to the spot that designated Habarvrosk. "We know the device was there. When we get an altered reading now, we will note the difference between this set reading and the new reading. After three readings, we should have an idea where Illya is." He smiled at her frown. "It's rather complicated, really. I don't get it entirely. That's why he's here!" Solo nodded his head at the technician who let out a short snort of laughter.

"So this screen must be constantly monitored."

"Yes. We have it programmed to alert us when there's a change, however, so we don't have to stare at it all day and night."

"If this device is so new, how can your partner...Illya?...figure it out?"

Napoleon couldn't help but smile. "Because my partner has the brain of a computer and the tenacity of a bulldog. I know he'll figure it out."

**ACT VI: "I Think You Have Designed An Armless Straight Jacket."**

It was the better part of a day before Illya came around again. By then, Trudy had cleaned and probed the bullet wound as much as she dared. There were already signs of infection that mere cleaning wouldn't stop, and she told him as much. Still, he fought to sit up.

"It's hard to breathe with my ribs wrapped so tightly," he grumbled.

Trudy about slapped him. "You're lucky to be alive, mister. I'd stop complaining."

"I'm not complaining. I'm just making note. Where's the priest?"

"Gregory? He's out with his congregation." Trudy stretched out on the floor. "He has been very kind. I even learned the Russian word for 'water'!"

"You need to learn the word for 'gypsies'."

"'Gypsies'?" she repeated hesitantly. "There really are gypsies?"

"Yes, there are. And we need to find some to get to the train. It's the only way to cover the ground we need." He started to bend over the edge of the cot to retrieve the box under it, but wound up hissing in pain and slowly straightening. "I think you have designed an armless straight jacket."

Trudy reached over and plucked up the wrapped box with both hands and set it in his lap. "You need a straight jacket. I'll remember that the next time you're unconscious."

The curling of Illya's mouth on one side was the only indication that he had heard her as he unwrapped the box and examined it closely. "I need a power source," he mumbled.

She let out a short laugh. "The only power I've seen here is candle power. Don't they have electricity?"

"Sure they do. The power stations aren't too trustworthy, though, especially outside the major cities. They still rely on candles. Still, there must be an outlet somewhere."



He started to stand, waving Trudy back, when the curtain parted and Gregory the priest stepped in. "Brother Kuryakin! You shouldn't be up."

"We can't stay, Father," Illya replied softly in his native language. "We have put you in too much risk already."

Gregory's eyes shone with humor. "Yes. Injured field workers are certainly a threat to the authorities."

Illya couldn't help but grin. "Ah, yes. Exactly. I have an idea to get out of here, but first, do you have a place I can connect this?" He indicated the box.

The priest seemed to be weighing something in his mind as he regarded Illya with a tilted head. Then, he obviously made a decision. "Yes. Let me help you." He offered his arm, and Illya took it to stand. Once on his feet, he stepped next to Trudy.

"Oh, now you need me," she said jokingly. When Illya leaned on her arm, she could feel him shaking slightly. "You need food," she said seriously. "Ask Gregory for some broth. You need it."

"I'll be..."

"Ask him!" She ordered, cutting him off. "You won't get further than the front door if you don't eat soon."

With a sigh of resignation, he spoke to the priest, who replied immediately as he led them down a dark, narrow hall.

"It's already taken care of. You happy now?" Illya said through partially clenched teeth. It hurt more to walk than he cared to admit, even to himself.

"Fine." Trudy responded.

Gregory led them to a small room filled with books in bookcases. Trudy was impressed by the ancientness of the appearance of most of the leather bound volumes, many gold embossed, all well cared for. The priest motioned for them to stop, and stepped up to one bookcase. He felt along the wooden edge of one side, and one entire side of the case popped away from the wall. Gregory pulled the hidden door open, and motioned them inside.

"A secret room!" Trudy gasped, in awe.

"Not unusual, really," Illya stated, unimpressed. "My people have lots of secrets they keep from the Government." He followed Gregory into a tiny, dark cubicle that was filled with radio equipment.

"I'm sort of a ham radio fan," the priest admitted. "The antenna is hidden in the steeple. Will this do?"

Illya couldn't keep the grin off his normally stoic face. "Better than you know, Father! I would love to use this radio, too. I'll be very brief."

"Be my guest," the priest replied with a bow. "Now I will make sure the broth finds its way here."

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"Before you go, Father. Do you know if any of the gypsy tribes are camped nearby?"

The priest's expression turned thoughtful. "One of my congregation told me there were some camped near his farm. If that is true, they will come closer to town soon. They always obtain supplies before moving on."

"You mean steal supplies, right?"

The priest sighed. "They are a lost people. I always visit them with the word of God when they are close by. It is my duty as a servant of God."

When Gregory left, Illya gave her the summation of their discussion.'

"Again, why gypsies? Isn't there a train station here in town?"

Illya fiddled with the radio for a moment. "Yes. A heavily guarded one. The General may be predictable, but he's not stupid."

Illya turned on the radio, and tuned it to the desired frequency. Before he broadcast, however, he set the green box on the table and fiddled with it. Gregory had a nice supply of tools for fine work, and Illya made use of them. The broth was delivered, and Trudy had to force him to drink it. Fine lines around the agent's eyes hinted to the pain he still felt.

"You still have a headache, don't you?"

"It's getting better. Now hand me that screwdriver."

She knew he was lying.

Illya worked quickly, using what he could remember from the book he had read. He wished he had it now. After nearly an hour he lay the tools down. "Okay, now. I hope this works."

He checked the connections once more, plugged the box into the power source and turned it on. Other than a low humming noise, there was no indication anything was happening.

"Well, I was expecting more bells and whistles," Trudy said softly.

"I'm hoping that's at the other end," Illya replied.

"Excuse me?"

"If my partner is on the ball, as he usually is, he should be noting something at his end. Unfortunately," Illya reached over and disconnected the device as he spoke, "they'll note the same things at the place we recent left. They'll need at least two more readings to get a fix on us, however. We still have time." The shaggy blond looked particularly tired to Trudy. "One more thing, and we should close up here."

He checked the radio dials and frequencies once more and sent a brief message in yet another language. He repeated it twice over several minutes, and then turned the radio off.

"What was that? I don't speak Russian, but I know that wasn't Russian."

"Italian." Illya said tiredly. "I'm not very good at it. I thought it would throw off anyone monitoring this frequency." He had shut down the radio as he spoke, and gathered up the green box. He started to stand, but his knees wobbled enough to bring Trudy to his side instantly. He didn't say anything, but allowed her to help him close up the hidden room and back to the cot. He sank down on to it while she re wrapped and stored the box. He was asleep instantly.



Napoleon was having a guiltily delightful time going over maps of the Russian coastline with Stevie. She knew the seas in that area well, and some of the ports.

"We do not sell our catch to them very often. They usually contact us when they have a need, several times a year." She referred to the map again. "When we deliver, there is a train car nearby. You can see it from the dock. I don't know where the train comes from," she ran her finger along the indicated train line as she spoke. "But it looks like this line is the closest to our country."

Solo followed the line back and was able to make a wiggly, but fairly direct course from Habarovsk. "I'm guessing Illya will make it to somewhere in this area, then." He bracketed two sea ports with his fingers. "That cuts down the coastal area to about 75 miles. Better than 200 than I originally thought."

The flash of worry that crossed his expression wasn't lost on the astute Stevie. She laid a gentle hand on his forearm. "You worry that you are not the only one to figure this out."

Solo glanced up at her in surprise, and covered it with a bright smile. "You are very observant, Miss Inturi. I think you may have done this before!"

A soft beeping from the radar board caught their attention. Napoleon strode quickly to the technician's side. "Did you get that?"

"Yes, sir, I did." He was writing coordinates down as he spoke, the soft beeping continuing. "We have the degree of shift. Now all we need are two more readings and we'll have a line that will take us right to Mr. Kuryakin."

"It looks like your partner figured it out as you believed he would."

Solo patted her shoulder. "He hasn't let me down yet. You'll be meeting him soon, it looks like."

The beeping stopped, and the technician turned his attention away from the radar to log some figures. Napoleon waited a few seconds to make sure the beeping wouldn't start up again, and turned to go back to the maps. Just then out of the corner of his eye, Solo saw the technician sit up suddenly, and shoot his hand out to adjust a dial. Solo was at his side instantly.

"What is it?" he said lowly.

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"I'm not...sure..." the man turned up the volume a bit. All Solo heard was static. "Wait.." the technician said, then the message came again.

Solo broke into a grin. "That's Illya. We're on the right track, folks!"

Stevie cocked her head and her eyebrows furrowed. "What is he saying?"

"It's Italian. He's saying something that only I would understand." Solo was grinning broadly now. Both Stevie and the tech were looking at him expectantly. "He's saying 'the pen of my uncle is at the beach.'"

Stevie blinked, confused. The tech said, "That makes no sense."

"It does to me," Solo said lightly. "He started to learn Italian on his own using an old high school textbook when we were on a stake out. The only sentence he learned before the book was, ah, damaged, was 'this is my uncle's pen.' "

"That's a useless sentence," the tech noted.

"Pretty much." Solo agreed. "But he just told us that he is, in fact, going to the coast. We guessed right. That sentence has finally become useful. Now if we only knew who was pursuing him."

Stevie's expression brightened. "You mean, the fact that he used a language and code aimed at you indicates pursuit."

"Yes, and the fact that he didn't wait for us to reply, which may make his location known. It would be nice to know if it's Thrush or the military after him. Knowing Illya, I would suspect both!"

## ACT VII: "We Didn't Rehearse That Last Part."

A full day passed without word on the gypsies. Trudy was relieved, as it forced Illya to rest. He was unusually quiet and seemed to accept the down time. His condition, however, didn't improve. When he allowed her to probe the swollen arm, she suspected that it was a compound break, and probably needed to be set, as it wasn't healing as quickly as she expected. The head wound and ribs were better, but she could tell the bullet wound was probably infected. It refused to close, and drained constantly. That was the wound that worried her.

Finally, almost two days after their arrival, Gregory roused Illya with the information that the gypsies were packing to move.

"They will come to the area south of town," he said. "They always camp there."

Now somewhat alert, Illya spoke rapidly to the priest, obviously giving him a list of what he needed. Gregory smiled. Their visit was probably the most excitement the priest had seen in years, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. When Trudy mentioned this to Illya, he replied dryly, "Entertainment is a self-produced thing out here. The establishment frowns on fun."

She didn't know if he was serious or not.

Illya sat up, obviously with difficulty, and outlined his plan. "The gypsies will be set up by this afternoon. I plan to ride with them to a train station further down the line, away from the cities. They are heading that direction anyway, I'm sure. Asikov will be looking for the two of us together, so we will split up. Father Gregory is getting some parishioners he trusts to help. I was against that part, but he insisted." Illya looked rather pained when he said that. "You, along with the Father and a couple of other women, will go to the camp together, and I shall go alone."

"Wait a minute. You can't walk all that way the shape you're in."

Illya glared at her with his sparkling blue eyes. "I'll be fine. I'll be disguised, as will you." He indicated a bundle of clothes in the corner that he had been studying. "We'll start with that."

By the time the priest came back, Trudy was wearing a traditional black dress and boots, which were falling apart but useable. Gregory had with him more items, and soon she was properly attired, her hair up and hidden in a traditional head covering.

Illya's get up was more interesting. He was dressing as an old man, which would fit his gait. There was even a walking stick to top off the outfit. Illya removed the splint from his arm. "It's too obvious," he mumbled. With some ashes from the fire, and some wood splinters, he was able to make his hair look gray rather than blond, and added aged wrinkles to his face.

Trudy laughed. "I hope they don't look too closely! It's believable from a distance, though."

Illya put on a ratty old hat. "That should help," he added. "And it will be dusk." He and Gregory had a few words, and Illya nodded. "I think Gregory's plan will work. You need to learn a few words in Russian to make sure you stay safe."

Gregory left for a moment, and then came back with two other women about Trudy's age and similarly dressed. They each had a basket filled with bread rolls and an extra for Trudy.

"Here," Illya said quietly. "Take this, too." He showed her the grenade from the truck, then buried it in Trudy's basket of rolls, then buried the green box in another. The women looked blasé, as if this happened every day. With a little coaching, Trudy was able to make out and repeat the words 'bread for the heathens,' and understand the word 'what'. It would have to do for now.

As they were getting ready to go, a young man strode into the room with a grin, chatting happily. Trudy saw Illya's eyes get a little larger, and saw him begin to argue with Gregory. Even without understanding the language, Trudy could tell that Illya was losing the argument. Gregory was a rock, and it amused her to see Illya having to give in. The young man stepped up to Illya with a smile, undaunted by the agent's glare and terse response.

"What's going on?" Trudy asked finally.

Illya snorted, leaning heavily on the cane. "Apparently I now have a son to guide me."

"Good." She replied, ignoring the withering look. "Let's go."

Trudy, the women and Gregory went first. Trudy was well aware of the teams of men patrolling the street but managed to keep her pace with the other women, her head down. As Father Gregory lead them down the winding streets she noticed the poor condition of the roads and the quietness on the street. There were

numerous people out and about, but they seemed to quietly hurry along to avoid the attention of the patrols.

When they reached the edge of the town she could see some bright canopies in the distance.

"There they are," Gregory said. Although she didn't understand the words, she understood the body language.

As soon as their feet stepped on to the dirt road leading from town they were approached by two military men. The women huddled together, heads down, and appeared calm as Gregory spoke pleasantly to the men. One of them used his rifle muzzle to flip back the napkins covering the rolls in the baskets. Trudy tried not to think about the grenade buried in her basket.

After a moment, she realized that the man was speaking to her. She looked up at him, recognizing the word 'what'. Automatically, she rattled off the sentence taught to her, hoping it would work. The soldier flipped back the napkin on her basket, then turned to the other soldier. He said something that made the other soldier laugh, and plucked a roll from the pile. As he took a bite, he waved the group on. Gregory blessed them and continued on. Trudy let out a huge sigh and realized her heart was pounding like a drum.

Just as Trudy's group was allowed to pass, Illya and his guide started out, winding around to approach the same guards from a different direction. Luckily, they weren't the only people heading to the camp. Some merchants, knowing the gypsies' habits, were hauling some items out to sell. Illya and his 'son' Joseph walked casually to the edge of town.

It wasn't much of a stretch for Illya to hobble like an old man. His ribs still hurt, as did his arm, which he held snugly against his body, and the edge of the hat rubbed the wound on his forehead. They were all minor annoyances, and all handy for him to use to add believability to his demeanor. When they reached the hard-packed dirt road, the soldiers stopped them.

"Where are you going?" The soldier asked, studying Joseph. Illya had warranted a fast glance only.

"My father here wants to see the gypsy healer." Their story had been thought out before they left the church.

The soldier raised his eyebrow. "Why?" he asked, not so much with suspicion, but now curious and looking for a way to relieve his boredom.

"Warts," Illya said gruffly. "I heard they have a cure."

"Warts?" The soldier was grinning now, and motioned his partner over. "Hey, this old man says the gypsies can cure warts."

The second soldier released the woman he was speaking with and came over, grinning. "Really? What else do they cure?"

Joseph laughed, too, while Illya remained passive. "I'll find out for you."



## THE HOMELAND AFFAIR

"So you aren't getting warts removed, too?" The soldier asked, amused.

"Oh, no!" Joseph replied, and then he leaned towards the soldiers in a conspiratorial manner. "Actually, my momma insisted I go to keep him away from the wily ways of the gypsy women. You know."

That made the guards laugh out loud and they motioned for them to pass. "I hear you may have your work cut out for you, boy!" One soldier said as he clapped Joseph on the back.

Joseph nodded with a smile, and Illya scowled at him in a fatherly way as they moved along. The handgun and flares in Illya's waistband felt particularly heavy as they walked down the path to the bright canopies. "We didn't rehearse that last part," Illya said sourly.

The young man's sunny smile never wavered. "I know. The lady gave me the idea. I speak English!"

Illya set his jaw and logged the information away for future revenge. *She has to be related to Napoleon somehow*, he thought as he hobbled along.



The truck bumped along the decrepit street and Ivan Bratsk cursed his luck silently once again at the loss of his device. Once Thrush had clued him in to the identity of the blond agent, he was sure his luck couldn't get much worse as he miserably set out to find him. At the same time, he had to avoid General Asikov. Bratsk knew he wasn't cut out for this kind of work, but the device was his only opportunity to get somewhere in this world and he was determined to find it before the General.

Bratsk was an army engineer, but was able to carry himself with enough command presence to slide through the street patrols. He just couldn't run into Asikov. This little town was one of two possibilities the escapees would head towards, he figured. Although his gut told him he was on the right track, his systematic search of the town had yielded nothing. He stopped at the edge of town and pulled out the tattered, outdated map from his pocket to figure his next move when a motion in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

The gypsy tents were once brightly colored, but now were faded due to the elements. The wagons in the background were in the same shape. Bratsk at first dismissed the bunch as lowlife undesirables and went back to his map when a thought struck him. He turned back to the camp, and smiled. *Why not?* he thought. *I've had no luck in town.* Stuffing the map back in his pocket, he coaxed the sputtering engine back to life.

### ACT VIII: "Don't Tell Me You Are Related!"

Illya, Joseph and Trudy met up in the middle of the camp, which had the atmosphere of a farmer's market. Sellers and buyers of various goods were bickering in groups, and the smell of cooking permeated the air. Joseph's eyes were wide.

"My father never lets me get this close," he admitted to Trudy in accented English.

"I can see why," Trudy said dryly as she observed a pair of children no older than five, pick the pocket of an unknowing vendor. She held her loaded basket close.

"Well, you get back to your father," Illya said flatly, leaving no room for dissent. He took Trudy's arm. "Thank you for your help."

"Good luck," Joseph whispered with a cocky grin. Trudy saw he'd spied a curvaceous young woman on the other side of the camp, and he moved that way.

"Watch your pockets," Trudy advised as Joseph slapped away the hand of the thieving youngster on his way.

Trudy sighed. "Now what?"

"Come. We need to find the leader." He nodded towards the wagons parked off to one side. "He's probably over there."

Again, Trudy's curiosity was piqued as to how he would know that, but kept quiet. Illya's grip on her forearm was heavier than she would expect. She knew he was hurting, but knew now wasn't the time to get into that. She simply followed the direction he indicated and kept her mouth shut.

When they got to the wagons, she noticed the eyes upon them immediately. They weren't that obvious, but they were there in the shadows of the wagons and around the cooking fires. She also noticed as they moved deeper into the group of wagons that silent ranks of sturdy young men were closing off their retreat. They were quietly being surrounded.

"Illya," she whispered worriedly as she ducked her head.

"I know. Just keep walking."

Soon they were at a wagon that was in slightly better repair, and had the signs of fresh paint. By the time she and Illya stopped at the bottom of the steps, their exit route was entirely blocked. The young man casually leaning in the doorway of the wagon, although obviously waiting for them, had a relaxed air about him but steely eyes.

"Are you lost?" The young man asked in the dialect of his tribe. The surprise in his eyes was quickly masked as Kuryakin responded in kind.

"It is urgent I speak with the father," he asked.

"You are of our tribe?" the young man inquired, straightening.

"I have a .. relationship with your people," Illya replied vaguely. "Please. It is important."

The young man didn't have to make the decision. A much older man appeared behind him and dismissed him with a nod. The young man stepped down and aside, allowing the grey haired patriarch to study the newcomers from the doorway.

Trudy studied the interplay with interest. She didn't understand the words, but knew that Illya had raised their curiosity. He certainly has that knack with people, she thought.

The conversation was brief. The leader asked a question, and as Illya responded, the old man's eyes got bigger and soon he smiled broadly and stepped down, taking both of Illya's shoulders in his hands. What he did next surprised Trudy. The man kissed each of Illya's cheeks!

The ice was obviously broken and the others surrounding them became joyous and laughing, taking turns to greet Illya and her in the same fashion. Trudy was amazed at the amount of people that simply appeared from nowhere, as they were soon in the middle of a thick crowd. She found Illya and could see that he was fighting to control the pain of all the attention. Trudy pushed her way to his side, took his arm and pulled him to the wagon. The old man then saw the problem, waved off the crowd and indicated they should get inside as he barked some orders to the women.

Trudy could hear Illya sucking in his breath as she helped him up the stairs. "You have to tell me what that was all about," she said lowly. "Don't tell me you are related! Although at this point, I guess I wouldn't be surprised."

Illya didn't reply. He was too busy trying not to pass out as she lowered him onto the first bunk she found. "I helped the tribe once a long time ago," he replied cryptically. "They made me an honorary member in gratitude."

"Lucky us we got the right long, lost relatives," she mumbled as she checked his arm. Since the splint and wrapping had been removed, the swelling had spread from fingertips to elbow, and the arm was turning an ugly purple color. His

forehead was hot and bleeding, and she was sure the bullet wound was just as ugly as the arm. She had just finished uncovering the arm when she felt the close presence of a body.

A young and serious looking woman in bright clothing had kneeled next to her and began prodding the arm. Illya clinched his teeth and barked something at her, and she just gave him a patronizing look and continued her exam. Trudy smiled to herself and fell into an assisting nurse mode; this woman knew what she was doing.

The woman rattled off a list of things that sent a younger girl flying off. The examining woman completely ignored Illya's litany, of which Trudy was glad she didn't understand. The woman clicked her tongue at his temperature and the bruises, and nodded approvingly at the bindings on his ribcage. When her fingers found and prodded the bullet wound, and she turned Illya onto his side to see it more clearly, he simply bit his lip and dropped into semi-consciousness. She frowned at the obvious infection and swelling, and rolled him back onto his back.

By then, the little girl had returned with an armload of things. Trudy recognized the makings of another splint, many herbs, and some kind of ointment. The woman took the things and sent the girl off again with some more orders, then took a hold of Illya's wrist.

The woman looked at Trudy, and indicated with her eyes and free hand for her to hold the injured agent's elbow.

Oh, Lord, she's going to set the bone! Trudy realized as she nodded and did as instructed. The woman prodded the thick and discolored arm, finding the exact spot of the fracture. This caused Kuryakin to groan and completely pass out. That's actually a good thing at the moment, Trudy thought as she braced herself and the elbow.

The gypsy healer's brow furrowed in concentration as she felt the break with one hand, and gently pulled on the wrist with the other, twisting it a bit back and forth as she prodded. Then she started what Trudy recognized as a countdown, ending in a quick and expert jerk. The snapping sound of the bone clicking in place made Trudy's stomach turn. The healer felt the arm again, found a second break, and repeated the action once more. Then, smiling a satisfied smile, she quickly applied the splint and began to wrap. When the little girl returned again, the woman turned the wrapping over to Trudy and inspected the basket.

Trudy marveled at the handiwork. She could tell by the fingernails that Illya's circulation was already returning. It should heal quickly now. The smell of herbs as they were crushed added to the eerie atmosphere of the wagon, as did the joyful music that started playing outside. Trudy found herself leaning back and observing the woman and her young helper work on their patient. A dressing was

applied to the head wound, and a poultice of some sort was pressed to the bullet wound. That was the wound that made the woman click her tongue in worry. She knew there was more to that wound than she could fix here; the knowing glances she gave Trudy needed no interpretation, and soon she left to let nature take its course.



Bratsk nosed his vehicle into some bushes near the camp and climbed out. He felt very out of place amongst the bartering crowds, and pushed his way along as he looked for the blond agent. He didn't notice the looks he got or the intense scrutiny of several of the older natives. Quietly, using their own silent communications, they surrounded and followed him without him even knowing it as he first searched the crowd and began to inspect the wagons more closely.

One of the young men led Trudy to a discreet vantage point, and she remembered the military man from the base. There was no need to speak the same verbal language; her eyes, wide with alarm, were all that he needed. He escorted Trudy back to Illya, and motioned for her to keep low and quiet.

Bratsk was allowed to inspect several wagons, but as he got closer to the one containing the fugitives he was suddenly swarmed by a collection of youngsters whose hands picked at his clothing as they chattered incessantly in their language. Bratsk tried to wave them off, but they relented until he physically threw two boys aside. Then he was surrounded by yapping mothers noisily rounding up and collecting their brood. Next were young women batting their eyes and touching his uniform in admiration, showing plenty of cleavage. This caused him some alarm as he tried to brush away their hands. He was right in front of the refuge wagon when two young men pulled away the women and then began to argue with each other, keeping Bratsk between them. They threw questions at Bratsk, trying to engage him in their heated argument, but Bratsk didn't understand the language. Soon the young men were pushing each other and Bratsk figured that he didn't need to be in the middle of this debacle. The crowds were starting to look his way, and he didn't need the patrols interviewing him.

As Bratsk backed off from the confrontation and turned, he saw one of the young boys waving his wallet at him. Bratsk slapped his pocket, realizing it was now empty, and chased the boy. By the time the boy dropped the wallet and disappeared, Bratsk was well away from the unconscious agent and his concerned partner. Giving up, Bratsk retreated to his vehicle and left as the gypsies watched him go with confident smiles..



Night fell as Napoleon stood on the dock where the Empress was moored. Although he looked like he was inspecting the ship, his thoughts were much farther away.

After the initial setting up of all the equipment both in Stevie's home and on the Empress, all that was left was the waiting. That was the part Solo hated the most. He knew that somewhere out there his partner was doing his best to survive and get within rescuing distance; there was nothing Solo could do until then. The reports on the news of the release of the other hostages made it even more difficult. The missing Russian was never mentioned publicly, and to the rest of the world, never existed. It had been several days since Illya's message, and Solo couldn't help but wonder how he was faring. Would he, Solo, even know if he was caught? Or killed? At what point would Waverly pull him from this duty?

Part of his mind heard the soft steps of Stevie on the dock behind him, and he welcomed her hands on his elbow. She sensed his need for thought, and didn't interrupt them with words. They both gazed off to the west as darkness fell, deep in their own thoughts. After a while, Napoleon put his hand on hers and smiled.

"I hate waiting," he said softly. "But it's much easier with company."

"I stand here often, waiting for my father," Stevie replied. "He has always returned safely. It will be the same for your friend."

"Keep those thoughts. It's all I have right now, and I appreciate it." He turned towards the shore and they walked arm and arm along the path to her home. And good thoughts are all I have to offer Illya right now, too.

**ACT IX: "I'm Aging Faster Each Day I'm With You!"**

General Asikov sat in his truck on the outskirts of town deep in thought. The search for his old shipmate was proving to be an exercise in frustration. Kuryakin had embarrassed him once before, a long time ago, and he was not about to let it happen again. Besides that, the device he had stolen was the General's key to a promotion out of this region.

Asikov realized his hands were clenched in anger as he thought about his quarry and forced his fingers to relax and open. His driver, sitting nervously beside him, tried not to fidget and kept his hands on the steering wheel.

"This is futile," Asikov stated. "They could be anywhere, but I know that they have to use the train sometime. It's the only way out of here. Driver!"

The young man jerked in surprise. "Yes, sir?"

"Take me to communications. I'm calling in the patrols and re assigning them."

"Yes, sir." He fired up the engine and left the area in a cloud of dust, heading to the communications tent.



Trudy stayed in the wagon, out of sight and by Illya's side, for the rest of the afternoon and night. The gypsies were wonderful; they treated her like one of the tribe, making sure she was fed and comfortable. It was the first true restful night she'd had in days.

The gentle noises of people tending to the animals in the early hours of the morning woke her. She heard goats, roosters, horses and pigs happily receiving their rations, and the sing-song voices talking to the beasts and amongst themselves. She pulled a brightly colored window covering aside and saw that most of the canopies were gone, and everyone was in the middle of packing up the camp.



"Well, they certainly don't wear out their welcome," she said softly out loud as she watched the action.

"Their welcome is worn out the moment they arrive," Illya's equally soft voice commented in return. "There is no doubt that they are leaving with more than they arrived, with items obtained both legally and otherwise."

Trudy dropped the curtain, sat up and stretched. "How are you feeling? Oh, wait, you're fine, right? You're always 'fine'."

She felt rather than saw the amused smirk on his face. "Well, actually, I am fine. There's a lot less pain in the arm, right now, anyway." He held up the arm and wiggled his fingers. "The marching drum brigade in my head seems to be taking a break, and your wrap work on my ribs is more uncomfortable than the ribs. "

"That's three out of four, anyway." She put her feet on the floor and leaned across the narrow aisle to check his eyes and forehead. "Your pupils are fine, but you're still a little hot. You need rehydration. And how are your extremities? Feel any tingling?" All she really had to worry about now was the bullet lodged somewhere near his spine and the infection. If he would only stay still!!

His eyes immediately turned darker. Trudy could feel the personal wall come down between them. "I said I'm fine." Illya replied sternly, trying to sit up. "I need to speak to Favia." She looked at him blankly. "The leader. Favia. Can you find him?"

"Sure." She knew that any further conversation concerning his health would be pointless, so she helped him to sit and gave him some bread that was left for them as well as a flask of water. "I'll be right back."

When she stepped from the wagon she was amazed at how quickly the camp was being broken down. Everyone had well-rehearsed tasks that were completed with flair. The chatter was light and carried a teasing tone that she could pick up even though she didn't speak their language. Letting her instinct guide her, she headed towards a group of men gathered in the outskirts of the camp. Their chatter stopped immediately as she approached them. The man she remembered as the patriarch Favia regarded her with a glow in his eyes and a kind smile as he acknowledged her arrival. The other men fell aside, giving her a clear audience. Using her hands to indicate that he was wanted back at the wagon, he nodded, clapped another man on his shoulder as he spoke some last words, and then followed her.

Illya had managed to swing his legs over the edge of the bed to look somewhat recovered and a bit more respectable. Favia greeted him quietly and sat across from him, then looked expectantly at Trudy.

Illya looked her way. "Ah, he expects you to leave us alone," he said evenly.

"Oh, sure," she said, taken aback. She left the wagon quickly. "There's plenty to look at out here anyway. I'm starting to feel like an Army private," she mumbled.

She watched the packing up process a little longer, and accepted a warm cup of what she figured was tea from an old woman who was missing many teeth. The concoction was both warming and relaxing and by the time she saw Favia leave the wagon with a wave almost an hour later, Trudy was in a much better mood. Even the cool Russian couldn't annoy her now! Confidently, she stepped back inside the wagon.

Illya was standing in the narrow aisle, his back to the wagon door, gazing out the small window in the back end. Trudy immediately noticed that he was flexing the fingers of his good hand as it hung by his side as if it was bothering him. When he turned to face her, he stumbled slightly. She noted all this, but kept it to herself. Illya straightened up when he saw her and began to explain what was going to happen.

"Favia has agreed to take us to a place where we can board an eastbound train. It will take a few days, but the spot he has in mind is our best bet. It's away from the prying eyes of the cities and towns." Illya sank down on the narrow bed. "We will be moving to another wagon, though, one that has special compartments for concealing special items."

"Like us," Trudy finished.

"Yes, like us, if need be. I told him that we were being pursued, which pleased him to no end." Illya leaned over to reach under the bed for the navigation device and nearly fell onto his head.

Trudy was next to him instantly, pushing him back into a sitting position. "I'll get it," she said in a no argument tone.

"I guess I need some more food," Illya said softly. "Favia said for us to stay put. His daughter, Maska, is bringing us some breakfast. We will change wagons just before they move out."

It wasn't long before Maska returned with some more hearty fare. Maska was the young woman who set Illya's arm, and the fact that she was giving Illya a critical once-over with her eyes wasn't lost on Trudy; she could see the concern in the medicine woman's eyes.

Maska noticed Trudy looking at her, and also read the concern in Trudy's eyes. The two nodded silently, acknowledging their worries.

Soon after the meal Trudy heard the clapping sound of horses' feet and the wagon shook. Voices shouted outside, and the excitement grew as the wagons were readied to move. Soon a small crowd gathered outside their wagon, and Illya and Trudy were invited to step into their midst. In the center of the crowd, any

spying eyes could be blocked, and this was the way they were escorted to their new wagon.

Maska met them in the new lodgings with lots of quilts and pillows, and a small stash of food. She conversed quietly with Illya, obviously giving instructions. Trudy could tell not so much from her tone, but from the pained expression on Illya's face - it was the same one she got whenever she told him to rest. When Maska was finished, Illya replied in a short sentence that made Maska frown. Trudy was sure it was 'I'm fine!' in whatever dialect they spoke.

The new wagon was packed with boxes and other goods, obviously a storage wagon of some sort. Maska pointed out the loose slats on the floor and how, when removed, they opened a space just big enough for one person. She replaced the boards and left. The wagon was in motion within minutes, and the drivers, an old woman and an old man, pushed the curtain aside for a moment and uttered what Trudy thought was a greeting. Illya returned it politely. Before dropping the curtain again, the woman pointed at Illya and one of the baskets of food, and rattled off what sounded like an order. Then she released the drape and they were alone.

"If anyone else tells me to eat up, I'll ..." Illya growled, poking at the indicated basket.

"You'll what? Starve to death? Now's the time to start building up some energy. Looks like we have a little break."

Illya glowered at her. "You're in this plot with them."

"What plot?"

"The one to fatten me up. That's what the old lady up there said, that I needed fattening up."

Trudy giggled. "Well, you do! And what else do we have to do right now?"

Illya shifted as if he was in pain. "First, we'd better make a plan. Obviously, I'm the one going in the hiding space there if the time comes, so you need blend in with the others." He grinned a bit. "Adding some pounds and some years to you will be entertaining, don't you think?"

Trudy saw that his hand was shaking a bit as he reached for a bread roll. "I'm aging faster each day I'm with you!" She quipped as she pulled some pillows over, and they started in on her disguise.



Bratsk left the town on the train. He'd heard enough from the patrols to realize that the train was the only viable way to get anywhere, and that there were several eastbound trains due to pull through this area within the next several days. He figured he could search this train before the next stop, get off at the stop, and

then board the next train and search that one. By the time they would be near the coast, he figured he could search all of the four trains going to the area Kuryakin was suspected to be aiming for. He also had a contact at a radar station near the coast that he could telegraph to look for the anomaly his device would create. If Kuryakin used it at all, he could get a good idea where he was.

Bratsk started at the head of the train and began to work his way to back, and no one escaped his scrutiny.



General Asikov also realized he need to widen his search perimeter, and also focused on the trains. His plan was to dispatch patrols to the various stations between here and the coast, and slowly extend additional men in a larger and larger circle from the town. He knew how sneaky Kuryakin was; anyplace along the train tracks was suspect. Asikov himself boarded the first eastbound train he could find, and decided to take it to the coast, where he would make other preparations in case the crafty blond made it that far.

There was nothing like a hunt to get Asikov's spirits up. He knew the prize would eventually be his.



And as far as trains went, Napoleon Solo would be very happy to never see another train schedule again. He had poured over the schedules, routes and any other information he could find. He even knew where the unused tracks were, and the names of all the Russian seaports for nearly 200 miles of coastline, and had everything plotted on a big map taking up most of Stevie Inturi's living room wall. He had to do something. The waiting was killing him. If it hadn't been for Stevie's gracious style and wonderful conversational skills, Solo would be out of his mind.

Stevie could talk on any subject, and they managed to cover quite a few in the time he was there. She knew how difficult it was to wait, and made it her goal to try and make the time pass a little easier. And, she found Napoleon Solo to be quite interesting, so it wasn't really a chore.

### ACT X: "Well Aren't You A Man Of Many Talents!"

During the next couple of days Trudy and Illya made sure they were in disguise anytime they left the wagon. Trudy could tell the rough ride in the wagon was wearing the agent down as the shadows under his eyes were darker each morning. She saw him rubbing his fingers and rotating his ankles as if to bring circulation back into them. He didn't say much; most of his time was spent studying the navigational device and transferring his knowledge to paper. Trudy spent most of her time making sure they were fed and pitching in when she could with the driving. The old man was quite cheery and taught her how to handle the team of bays.

*If my husband could see me now!* She thought, feeling the pull in the reins and the blisters starting on her hands. If the situation weren't so dangerous, she would have been thoroughly enjoying herself.

Long into the third day, Illya stuck his head out into the driver area. Trudy glanced at him, and knew that the face of the old woman sitting with her mirrored her concern.

"There are overhead wires up ahead." The agent noted. "Where do they run from?"

"They are telegraph lines that run alongside the tracks starting at Amursk and stopping at Sovetskaja. It's a sign that we are almost half way to the coast and that we are almost to the spot where you are to be dropped."

"Are there power lines anywhere with the telegraph lines?" Illya inquired.

The old man grinned showing stained and missing teeth. "Only along a short section between the next two towns. Shall I show you?"

Trudy was amazed to see her blond traveling companion actually smile, and was dazzled by it. *He needs to do THAT more often!* she thought.

The caravan message to stop was sung along the line of drivers, and Trudy thought it was a wonderful thing to hear. The way they communicated in their sing-song voices was musical to the ears, and didn't require knowledge of the

language. Illya was collecting his gadget together as he told Trudy what was going on. The break from the wagon would be welcome to both of them.

The old man rolled back and forth as he walked as if he was still riding in the wagon. Illya and Trudy followed him stiffly. They stopped at Favia's wagon to tell him what was going on, and the patriarch, always careful, dispatched some young men as lookouts. Illya insisted they stay behind, and started out towards the lines with Trudy following doggedly. It was a bit of a hike up to the tracks, and when Trudy saw where the wires were, she protested loudly.

"You can't get up there!" she argued, pointing up at the wires.

Illya simply raised an eyebrow and looked inscrutable as he unrolled his pack. Wrapping a large belt around his waist and the pole and stuffing the box into his shirt, he let her rant without comment. When he was ready, he simply started working his way up the pole. The only time Trudy had ever seen this technique was in a National Geographic Magazine article on coconut trees. This was how they scaled the trees! For a moment her mouth hung open in surprise.

"Well, aren't you a man of many talents," she said in exasperation. "Remind me to make sure you're with the next time I'm on a deserted island that has only coconut trees. And you'd better not have a bullet in you then."

"Gladly," he replied dryly as he began to hack into the lines and connect the device. He didn't stay up there long. In a matter of minutes, he was back on the ground, walking a bit more stiffly than before. "We need to get moving. If we're being monitored by Asikov, this won't help Favia and his people." He stuffed everything back in his shirt and turned to go.

As Trudy fell in behind, one of Illya's knees seemed to buckle. If Trudy hadn't been so close, he would have fallen. He immediately straightened up and pulled his arm away. "I'm fine," he growled. "Let's go."

Trudy put her hands up in a surrendering motion. "Whatever you say," she replied, but she knew better. Before the personal wall slammed down again, she was sure she saw a flash of surprise in his eyes. She also saw that he was dragging one foot slightly; it would have been unnoticeable to anyone else, but she knew he usually walked like a cat. She stayed close behind all the way to the wagons.

Favia was waiting for them on their return. "The place to hop the train is just ahead. We will camp over there, in the foothills, and Joseph will take you up to the site tomorrow. The next train is due mid-morning."

Illya moved a bit more carefully when he entered the wagon, Trudy noticed. Again, she simply stayed close and silent.





"Comrade General! You have a call on the field phone," the soldier said briskly.

Asikov nodded and jumped from the truck. At the communication post he snatched the field transmitter from the soldier. "This is General Asikov," he snapped. He listened, and the scar on his cheek crinkled when his lip curled into a smile. "Excellent. Asikov out." He tossed the phone aside and stepped up to the map pinned on the tent wall. "Send a patrol to this area here," he ordered, stabbing at the map with a gloved finger, "and another over here. Have them search east and west, respectively, along the train tracks until they meet. The suspect should be in that area. I'm on my way."

"Yes, sir!" The Communications Officer barked as he readied to transmit.

Asikov strode back to the truck. "Let's go," he ordered as he pulled out a smaller map. "Here. This is the area we are going to." The driver nodded, and they took off.



Bratsk was really tired of searching trains. He was now on his third one, just finishing up the last car when a young porter slipped him a note. "This just came for you, sir," the boy said, retreating quickly. The uniformed man made the boy nervous, and he didn't wait for a response.

Reading the note quickly, Bratsk did some fast mental calculations. His contact had picked up an odd blip on his screen, and the military engineer was right in the center of the projected area of origination. It was a huge area, but the train tracks were right in the middle; Bratsk knew he was close. It had to be the next train. His smile looked somewhat wolf-like, and he worked his way back to his seat to collect his things. He had to get off at the next station and wait for the next train, which would be about 18 hours behind him. He should be boarding it by mid-morning tomorrow, and have the device before noon!



When Napoleon Solo was called by the radar technician, his heart rate rocketed. Illya was still out there! He and Stevie studied the maps as the tech used his slide rule to calculate some figures. The tech's finger drew a pie wedge on the map, using Habarovsk at the base of the lines. "That's how far I can narrow down the area so far," he commented.

Stevie looked closer and frowned. "It looks like he's taking the northern track. The more southern track would be here," her delicate finger pointed to an area outside the wedge.



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"We need to move further north," Solo said quietly. "This information halves the coastal area we had plotted out, but it's further north than we anticipated." He looked at the map again. "This river mouth here, between Nelma and Perefyciha. We need to be closer to that area." Trying to think like the wily Russian was risky, but Solo had a feeling and he acted on it quickly.

Stevie frowned. "It would be more advantageous for us to move north to the area of Wakkanai near the north coast of Japan. That would put us much closer to the river mouth. There is a large fishing port near there. My cousins are in that area. We can go there."

Solo smiled and put his hand on her forearm. He had grown very fond of this woman, and admired her way. His normal Lothario urges stayed easily under wraps as his respect for her grew. "Stevie, I don't want to inconvenience your family any more than we already have."

She smiled that dazzling smile of hers. "Helping save a life is not an inconvenience Solo-san. It would be a disgrace to turn you away, and honorable to help. I will make the arrangements while you load up the Empress." She gave him a dainty bow as she left.

Solo watched her move away, admiring the way she seemed to float as she walked, then sprang into action. First, he radioed Waverly of the update. The days of waiting had allowed him to store up a lot of energy, and the work of packing up was welcome. Solo sprang into the job happily.

### ACT XI: "You Are A Stubborn Man."

It was growing dark when Illya saw a young man of the tribe run to Favia's campfire, and speak with the leader as he gasped for breath. In the failing light, Illya saw Favia look their direction and lock eyes with him. The old gypsy's eyes shone with the reflected firelight. He didn't need to say anything.

Illya turned quickly and looked for Trudy. She was sitting with some other women, learning how to braid a belt like they wore, while the others prepared dinner. Kuryakin stepped up and took her elbow. She looked up into his eyes and knew it was serious.

"What?" she said softly, getting to her feet.

"It's show time," Illya responded nodding towards the wagon.

"Oh, God!" She said simply as her stomach lurched to her throat and she hurried behind him.

Illya was on his knees removing the floorboards that covered the hiding spot when Trudy got in the wagon. She had been wearing the gypsy clothes, but needed to fill out her disguise with the things they had discussed. Extra padding and some charcoal lines were needed to add age.

"After this adventure I won't need makeup," she mumbled. "I'm aging from fright alone."

Illya was standing in the well of the false bottom. He hesitated, and took a moment to take her arm. "You are doing very well," he said firmly to her. "You'll do fine. Are you all right?"

She took a moment to let out a shaky breath, nod and smile. Her eyes were still full of fear, but he could see she was under control. He squinted at her face. "Here," he said, taking the bit of charcoal. Trudy sat on the floor as he stood in the well and touched up her age lines with a shaky hand. "Now cover up the floor boards with something. Some sacks, or boxes or something after I'm closed in, then go sit around the fire. The bad lighting will only enhance this disguise!"

Trudy nodded nervously, and smiled a weak smile. "Are you going to be all right in there?"

It was his turn to nod. "Yes. Now let's get moving. I hear vehicles." He tucked the device under his arm and lay flat in the meager space. He had to bend his neck and knees slightly sideways to fit. He helped as much as he could to replace the boards, but Trudy finished the job and drug several sacks of onions and a couple of heavy boxes over the loose boards. Just before stepping down from the wagon, she grabbed a couple of onions.

When she saw Asikov at the fire it was all she could do to keep from fleeing. Her nervous shaking actually helped her disguise as an old woman as she shuffled along to the fire and blended in with the rest of the women. They made room and she began chopping the onion along with the other food preparers.

Asikov obviously understood Favia as he spoke, and wasted no time in having his patrol search the wagons as the old man protested. Asikov waved him off to a subordinate, and strolled around the wagons, peeking inside as his troops searched each one. He studied the women at the fire, and came closer.

He was right next to Trudy when Maska stepped next to him and dumped a handful of onions on a very hot iron skillet. The first of the fumes hit him full in the face and his eyes began to water immediately. He swore at the woman as he backed off, rubbing his eyes, and Maska began to apologize profusely. She offered him a towel, which he threw back at her. Then she offered him a small bottle of what Trudy thought was liquor, and he took it with a disgusted snort. He handed the bottle to his subordinate, and walked back to the wagons. Maska turned back to the fire with her head bowed and a small grin, looked at Trudy and winked. Trudy had to duck her head to hide her laugh, and was glad of the darkness.

After almost an hour, the men finished with the wagons. Trudy had held her breath when Illya's wagon was searched, and let it out slowly as the patrol moved on. Asikov lectured Favia sharply, and signaled his men to move on.

As they got in the trucks, Joseph came trotting over to Trudy and spoke in heavily accented English. "The General says that there are two other gypsy tribes in the area he needs to search. We are lucky this route is rather busy this time of year."

"I need to get Illya out." Joseph stopped her as she started towards the wagon.

"Not yet," he said quietly. "Our watchers will let us know when they are gone completely."

The next hour seemed to crawl by Trudy sat with the other women and pretended to eat and clean up after the patrol. All she wanted to do was lunge to the wagon and get him out of the cramped space, but she was able to control herself until word came in from the watchers that the patrols were, indeed, gone. She

didn't need to know their language to figure out when it was clear; Maska just beat her to the wagon steps.

The women shoved everything aside and plucked up the boards, then reached down for Illya. He wasn't moving too well. He had to sit for several minutes after he finally got his neck straightened, massaging his arms. His legs seemed shaky as he struggled to his feet. Trudy noticed Maska's eyes looking him over with concern, and she tried to get a look at where the bullet wound was, but the stubborn Russian pushed her off. He snapped something at her that Trudy knew was "I'm fine!" in the gypsy language. She'd heard that tone thrown in her direction many times. Maska simply nodded and moved to clean up the wagon.

"You are a stubborn man," she said lowly.

"So I've been told," he replied darkly

Illya was unresponsive and aloof after the searching incident. Trudy decided to try and sleep after the evening meal was finished, noting that Kuryakin didn't eat much. She wanted to check his temperature, but knew she'd better keep away. Soon they were both asleep in the wagon, a bare minimum of words spoken since the patrol left.

The next morning, Joseph wakened them at the crack of dawn with some hard rolls, cheese and tea. "We must go now," he said softly, leading them to a pair of horses. Favia was waiting to say his farewells, as was Maska, who slipped a bundle of food into her arms, along with a small jar of ointment. No words were needed; Trudy knew who the ointment was for. Favia kissed both of them on both cheeks, and Joseph helped Trudy up on the massive draft horse, bareback, behind Illya. Joseph started off briskly towards the foothills.

As they moved away from the caravan Trudy spotted the young men acting as sentries, one by one. Each stood in plain sight to acknowledge their departure.

"You must tell me the story of how you helped these people," she said, her arms around Illya's waist. "They certainly have a long memory."

She could see his smirk in her mind's eye.

"It's a long story, and I don't like to talk that much," he replied.

"No kidding," she answered with a laugh. "I guess you'll just remain the mystery man." She lay her head on his back, and could feel the lump of cloth over the bullet wound and how hot the back of his neck felt. She also felt him shift his shoulders uncomfortably and knew that he realized exactly what she was doing, but could do nothing about it. *Gotcha cornered now, Mr. Kuryakin*, she thought smugly.

The horses trotted along smoothly up a valley of the foothills. Soon, the long, gradual slope had them huffing and nodding their heads mightily to make the grade. Eventually they came to a section of the foothills where the train tracks took

a wide, sweeping turn uphill. Joseph had them stop in a stand of trees, hidden from view.

"The train slows greatly up this hill and is easily hopped. Not many hop the eastbound train here because there is a station just a few miles away. They usually hop it beyond the station, so you should be fairly safe from search until then. Conceal yourselves well, and you can even ride through the station without a problem. It is a passenger train, with a few cars designated for cargo. We will get you in a cargo car." Joseph's explanation was part English, part Russian, but Trudy was able to understand it all.

"Do people do this often? Hop trains like this?" She asked.

Joseph nodded. "Citizens hop on for short rides to the next town quite often. Not usually for the long haul." Illya had to interpret the last part for her, and she nodded. "We are just in time. Feel the shaking?" Trudy lay her hand flat on the ground like Joseph, and could feel the rumbling. Joseph gathered up the reins. "I am happy to know you," he said with a sharp bow and a grin just as the train could be seen slowly laboring into sight. "I will stay to make sure you are safe."

Trudy and Illya thanked him, gathered their bundles of food along with the other things, and crept up as close as they could to the tracks. The train lumbered up the sweeping turn and past them, and they waited until the leading engines were out of sight.

"There!" Joseph yelled. "Here comes a cargo car! Good luck!"

Illya could see the windows of an approaching car blocked by boxes and other cargo. He pulled on Trudy's arm wordlessly, and they ran out to the tracks and alongside the slow moving car. When the doorway pulled next to them, he pushed Trudy on. She grabbed the step rail and climbed on, then turned to help Kuryakin. He had grabbed the rail right behind her with his good hand, but his grip was slipping. She clamped onto his wrist with both hands and fell back up the stairs, dragging him up. He collapsed on top of her, then rolled aside, gritting his teeth with a hiss. Trudy was already sitting up when she noticed her companion was having difficulty pushing himself to a sit. When he finally was seated next to her, she noticed him rubbing his hands wordlessly, his face a mask.

He caught her look and immediately struggled to his feet. "Let's get inside," he said gruffly.

"You're losing strength in your hands, aren't you?" Trudy accused as they wormed their way into the car. "And don't tell me you're fine. You're not. Are you experiencing numbness in your hands and feet?"

"I'm fine," he snapped as he pushed aside some feed sacks.

"Are you?" she said, a bit louder. "I need to know!" She grabbed his upper arm and made him face her. "Well? Are you?"

The personal wall around him could almost be felt. They locked eyes; hers dark and smoldering, his guarded, frigid blue. They stood that way, breathing heavily, for almost a full minute.

"And what difference would it make if that were so," he finally said quietly, "here and now?"

Trudy blinked. "Well. None, I guess. But I'd like to be prepared if you suddenly are a quadriplegic." She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw a flicker in his eyes when she said that.

"I could be shot and killed in the next minute, too, Mrs. Kidd. There's nothing you can prepare for, and you know it. Our only focus right now is to get to the coast, and I will get us there barring any other unfortunate events." He turned and continued to make a hiding spot for themselves and their bundles. "Until then, my health is not an issue. Subject closed. Let's stop attacking this dead horse." He pushed aside a bundle of blankets, and looked at her again. His eyes this time were carefully neutral.

She felt her anger drain away when she realized how useless this questioning was, and heaved a big sigh. "That's 'beating a dead horse.' Well, then, I'd say it's story time, then." She plopped down in the little cavern he'd made in the cargo, pleased at his pause and guarded look in her direction. "Tell me about the gypsies and you, Mr. Kuryakin. We have plenty of time now!"



**ACT XII: "Now What?"**

Comrade Bratsk moved easily in the crowd at the station. His uniform, although not a high ranking one, commanded enough respect for the crowd to give way to him and offer no resistance to his train hopping. He waited on the platform for the next one, bouncing slightly on his heels. Something inside told him this was the one; his very own device had told him so. He patted the detailed manual tucked inside his shirt. When he had the device in hand, he could go directly to Thrush with everything and leave this demeaning assignment. He hadn't seen Asikov in days, but his patrols had been evident everywhere, which had worked for him. The public assumed he was part of them and kept silent. The patrols had been searching the crowds at the platforms, but not the trains.

He heard the train whistle in the distance and moved to the front of the platform. He'd searched three trains so far, and now had a system, confident that every square inch would be covered.



The train had come down the other side of the foothills and was traveling along at a nice clip. After a cursory search, they had settled into the car to wait. Illya had reluctantly agreed to tell Trudy some of his history with the gypsies. He hoped it would be enough stop her from prying into his past; she hoped to figure out what made this man tick.

His story was short and vague, as she expected. Apparently Illya had helped the clans navigate around the military squads that, at one time, had been assigned to 'clear out' the gypsies from certain parts of the country. The exact meaning of 'clear out' wasn't defined, but Trudy figured it was not a pretty procedure if they were that indebted to this mysterious man. Curious, she peppered him with questions.

"How did you help them get around?"

"I didn't. As you saw, they get around quite well on their own."

"No, I mean, did you offer information? Services? Maps? Guides? What?"

"Yes."

"You physically helped them? You acted as a guide?"

Illya began to squirm under the questioning. "Sometimes. Don't you have something else to do? Interrogate the passengers, perhaps?"

"But this is interesting! Were you armed? Did you ever have to fight? Were you ever caught?"

"Yes, yes and almost. I don't recall the details. It was long ago."

Trudy laughed shortly. "I think you remember more than you want to. How long ago was this? How long did you do this?"

"It was when I was young and a lot more idealistic, and I did it until I was not in a position to help them anymore." The Russian had settled back into their little cavern, unconsciously rubbing his fingers and hands, his mind wandering. He saw Trudy looking at his hands, and immediately stopped. "Joseph said the next station was fairly close. I think the train is slowing."

Trudy agreed and they began to conceal themselves better. *We will return to this subject someday*, she thought as the train whistle shrilled, announcing its arrival at the station.

The train slowed and bumped to a stop. They could hear the shouting and general talk of the people outside as well as the milling of the crowds as they moved off and on the train. Some things were taken from their car. Illya had guessed that the things to be removed would be near the doors and the items going all the way to the coast were in the middle. He had guessed correctly, and after what seemed like forever in the cramped space, the train moved again.

Illya crawled out first and inspected the car. "It's clear. The next stop won't be for many hours, so I think we can move around a bit. There should be other food and water to buy in the other cars if you want to stretch your legs.

Trudy touched her face. "No disguise?"

The corner of Illya's mouth turned up in a small grin. "Not if we are careful. Head scarves will do if we keep our heads down. We can find appropriate clothes around here. These things are a bit too bright for the regular crowd.

They found bundles of clothes packed for shipping and sales, and selected a few items to cover up. "I feel like I'm shoplifting," Trudy said as she tied a scarf over her head."

"We can return them before we leave. Or leave an IOU," he replied in a dry tone, not missing a beat as he changed. Trudy laughed when she finally realized he had told a joke.

Illya stashed their things in the small opening, hesitated, then picked up the grenade and stuffed it in a pocket.

"Blowing something up?" she asked.

"I always like to be prepared," he said lightly.

Trudy shook her head. "I am glad that I don't have to think the way you do, Mr. Kuryakin."

"If you did, you wouldn't be here in the first place," he instantly replied as he moved off.

Stumped, Trudy's mouth fell open, and then she closed it with a nod. "You are probably right," she mumbled. "Does your partner think like you?" she asked conversationally.

"No. And that delights him to no end."

Trudy fell in behind the stoic Russian. "I like him already," she quipped. "And can't wait to meet him."

Following the slim Russian was not easy. He seemed to blend in with the crowd immediately, and moved easily, his eyes not missing a thing. Trudy likened him to a cat, but also noticed that he still tended to drag one leg a bit; he wasn't moving as easily as the Oil-on-water figure she remembered from days ago. That's not saying he wasn't getting along. He weaved expertly in the packed car and took advantage of every opening with hardly a pause between cars.

The amount of people packed in the car was amazing. All the seats were full, and there were families camped out in the aisles and in the spaces between the cars. Three cars up Trudy finally saw him approach a small gathering of young men clustered in the small space between the last row of seats and the door way. By the time she worked her way up to him, she saw their hands flash in some sort of exchange, and Illya came away with something wrapped in cloth and a flask. He nodded, shook hands with one of them and turned to face Trudy.

"Some local fare you may enjoy. It's strong, but filling and flavorful."

She took the wrapped food from him. "Strong?" She sniffed it. "It smells like some sort of bread."

He smiled at her, and it took her breath away. "I wasn't talking about the food. I was talking about this." He held up the flask and popped the end open. The alcoholic fragrance hit her nose a foot away and brought tears to her eyes. "Vodka from the fields."

"Good lord, you aren't going to drink that are you? That smells like paint thinner! I come from West Virginia and the White Lightning there smells better than that!"

As she spoke, Illya's glance drifted over her shoulder and his smile faded. There were small windows in the doors at the ends of the cars, and he could see through the two windows into the next car. A man in a military uniform was working his way in their direction.

Trudy saw his expression harden and glanced back. "It's the man from the camp and the airfield," she whispered.

"Don't look. Come." He grabbed her arm and steered her back the way they came, trying not to look like they were hurrying. "Keep your head down."

With him guiding her by the arm they managed to ooze their way back to their enclave without garnering unwanted attention.

"Now what?" she said stripping off the extra clothes so she could move more easily. Illya was watching the doorway and working with quick, efficient moves. He took her arm and directed her to their little cave. "Hide? We're gonna hide? Is that your best plan?"

"No. You're going to hide." He had her sit as he arranged bundles around her with his good hand. Trudy saw the grenade hooked on the pocket of his loose shirt, and the stiff way he worked.

"You took off the wraps around your ribs, didn't you? When did you do that? You could puncture a lung!"

He continued to work as he replied. "No, I won't because the ribs were only cracked and I took the wraps off days ago. Now be quiet."

"You're going to kill him, aren't you?" she said softly.

His eyes flashed on her for several seconds, but he didn't slow down. Before he placed the last few bundles in place he replied. "I said I would get us to the coast, and I will." Then he blocked her view with a bale of brightly colored cloth.

It seemed like eternity being huddled in the darkness. The gentle rocking of the train made her head bump a box by her ear in a rhythmic motion. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs, and buried her head in her knees. The clanking of the rails kept time with her heart as she waited.



Bratsk made his way slowly through each car, making sure to look at each and every face, and to check every spot that looked big enough to hold a man. He had no idea if the woman was still with him, but she didn't matter. It was the U.N.C.L.E. agent he wanted. No one in this car looked anything like him, and he sighed.

When he reached the end of the car he turned back and gave the crowd one last look. Satisfied, he stepped out the door and into the space where the cars were connected. The door to the other car bounced back and forth out of rhythm with where he stood. His first look in the next car showed him it was full of cargo. He knew there were a lot of places to hide, and steeled himself to be careful.

He stepped over the space between the cars and entered the cargo car. Just inside the door he stopped for a moment and noticed that stacks were higher in the

center. He checked the area around him first, methodically moving right to left. When he reached the center he put a hand on a stack of brightly colored baled cloth and pushed. It gave more than it should, and he was instantly suspicious.

Bratsk drew his gun and tugged on one of the bales. A motion from the top of the pile, just within his peripheral vision, caught his attention and he jumped back, firing wildly. He was hit full in the chest and bowled over into a stack of boxes, which collapsed down on him and his assailant. He swung wildly, the gun lost, but the boxes interfered.

Arms were flying as they rolled over into the narrow aisle. Bratsk's swinging fists managed few flesh-to-flesh connections. It was all over when he felt a firm bar shaped object lock over his throat from behind. Bratsk managed two well-connected jabs to the torso with his elbows and heard a satisfying exclamation of pain, but the bar tightened over his windpipe anyway, and was soon underscored with the cold, sharp edge of a blade just under his Adam's apple.

Bratsk froze. As he wheezed in air he felt a dribble of blood crawl down his neck and chest. Then he heard a chilling voice in his ear.

"I should slice you open right now but then I'd have a bigger mess to clean up." Although the breath was warm on his neck, it felt like ice trickled down his spine.

Through his fear Bratsk realized that the bar across his throat was actually this man's arm, and recalled that Kuryakin had broken his arm in the plane crash. "You won't get out of Russia," Bratsk growled. "Thrush knows you're here and what you have."

"The same goes for you," Kuryakin replied softly as he dug the blade in a bit deeper. "If I get rid of you and the device, no one wins."

A commotion amongst the baggage gave way to a woman's voice. "Don't kill him, Illya. Please," the voice pleaded. "I have this."

Bratsk heard a click then felt a sharp prick in his bicep. Soon, his world went dark.

When the body sagged in Illya's arms, he rolled away to the side and lay on his back gasping both in pain and for breath. He clenched his teeth, forcing control to his breathing. Trudy knelt beside him.

"Are you hurt?" she asked firmly. "I'm fine!" they both said together. She shook her head in frustration. "What about him?" She rolled the body over and clicked her tongue when she saw the fine slice in his neck. She applied a cloth to it to stop the bleeding. "Thank you for not killing him," she said softly.

Illya sat up slowly and wiped the knife blade on Bratsk's chest, then frowned. He felt the shirt front, then reached in and pulled out the manual and grinned slightly.

"I think Solo's luck is with us. This is the manual I had to leave behind."

"Is that the manual to that device?"

Illya nodded and stuffed it in his shirt. He waved off Trudy when she tried to check his ribs. It felt like thousand needles poking him when he breathed, and he moved slowly and stiffly. He removed a knife and extra ammo from the sleeping figure, and recovered the gun. "We have to hide him, and keep him quiet. You only have one more morphine dose, don't you?" She nodded, and he thought for a minute. "OK, in about 18 hours we're getting off this train. That's when we'll be crossing a river. We'll take the river to the coast, and leave him on the train. With luck, he won't be found until this car's unloaded 20 or so hours later."

"The morphine won't last that long," she said quietly.

"I know. "

They secured Bratsk's hands and feet, and gagged him, then stuffed him in their little cubbyhole.

"What about this Thrush group?" Trudy finally asked when Bratsk was stowed away.

"They want the device, not me." Illya said as he sat and leaned back on some boxes.

She looked at him skeptically. "Really!" Illya tried to look innocent, but she wasn't falling for that. "The Army is full of scammers, Mr. Kuryakin, and I can spot one a mile away. Thrush wouldn't mind having you along with the device, would they?"

Illya rubbed his fingers for a second, chastised. "They would prefer what was in my head, I think." He looked up at her through his shaggy bangs. "No matter. I plan on being away from here without any more confrontations."

"What about that General guy? His patrols are still out and about."

"Asikov still doesn't know where to look and I intend to keep it that way and leave no clues." He was looking at Bratsk when he spoke. The idea of an execution sickened him, but he knew it was a possibility.

As if she could read his thoughts, a chill coursed down Trudy's spine.



Napoleon Solo finally felt like he was close. The move to the northern edge of Japan felt right, and he simply knew that his partner would be back very soon. The physical part of the move also helped to cut the edge off his restlessness.

Stevie's relatives were just as delightful as Stevie. They didn't speak as much English, but they weren't shy about trying to communicate. Between the family meals and the off shore patrols disguised as fishing ventures, he was busy and enjoying himself more than he felt he should be.



## THE HOMELAND AFFAIR

His thoughts, though, always fell to his partner. How was he faring? It had been nearly two weeks since the jet had gone down. The other passengers and crew had been returned, and the news releases never mentioned the two Americans that Solo knew were unaccounted for. That made him wonder, too; the flight crew had told U.N.C.L.E. that the woman had left with Kuryakin.

Who was Gertrude Anna Kidd? Solo had a report about her in his hand and had studied it closely. He recalled many nurses from his Korea days and admired them for more than their physical attributes. The thought of a woman tagging along with his stoic partner was somewhat amusing and he wondered how it was going and why she left with him in the first place.



General Asikov was running out of patience. The longer his patrols came up empty, the further away he knew Kuryakin was. That man had an irritating way of completing whatever task he put to himself.

Asikov was well ahead of his patrols, almost to the coast, trying to predict Kuryakin's movements. It was looking like he would make it to the coast after all, and Asikov had to be ready.

Decision made, he barked at the driver to take him to the communications tent where he arranged for an attack submarine to start for the nearest seaport, and a helicopter to take him there when it arrived.

If Kuryakin had to be stopped in Russian waters, he would be ready.

### ACT XIII: "I Want To Be A Secret Agent!"

Illya and Trudy took advantage of Bratsk's drugged state and settled down for a rest. Trudy had no qualms about taking a hit or two of the home made vodka now, and didn't mention if it tasted anything like paint thinner. The agent doubted she even really tasted it.

"I will sleep first," Illya said. "Then I will be sure to be awake when our friend comes around."

Trudy nodded, glad for some quiet time to gather her wits. This had been a close call, and this wasn't even the guy that had a personal grudge against Kuryakin. What more could happen? Even though she felt a buzz from the vodka, she had no problem keeping awake because of the scenarios that kept popping into her mind. *This is like being on a runaway horse!* she thought, taking another slug to stop her hands from shaking.

After five hours she moved to awaken Illya and found herself studying him. Other than unconscious, this was the most relaxed she'd seen him. The fine lines of pain around his eyes were relaxed and gone, and his breathing seemed easier in spite of the punches Bratsk had landed. She tilted her head and looked at the fingers of his broken hand - good circulation there. She fought every urge to feel his forehead for a fever, knowing he would strike out blindly at her first touch. Instead, she gently tapped the bottom of his feet with her toes.

"Hey! Wake up!" she spoke, surprised he didn't respond to the kicks. When he jumped at her voice and his eyes blinked open, she realized that it was possible he didn't feel her taps. Now she had a whole new set of worries, and wondered if sleep would ever come.

"How long before Sleeping Beauty wakes up?" he said rubbing his eyes. It took him a few seconds to get his legs under him, but he managed finally and stretched when he stood.

"I'd say anytime," she replied, trying not to look like she was watching him carefully as she settled into his spot. Her fears of sleeplessness left immediately with a huge yawn. "Don't kill him while I'm asleep. Promise?"

"I promise," he said in a disappointed tone that made her giggle, and she was asleep in seconds.

Ilyya nibbled on some of their provisions and sat down directly across from Bratsk waiting for him to wake, and began to count down the thirteen hours remaining in this leg of their journey.



When Bratsk finally came around nearly an hour later it took him several minutes to focus his eyes and get his brain working. When he finally could see clearly the first thing he saw were two glacier-blue eyes that seemed to be searing themselves through to his soul. He only noticed the gag when he tried to speak.

Kuryakin's voice stopped him. "Sit still, be quiet, and you may live," he said lowly, eyes unwavering.

Bratsk sat for several hours, his watcher patiently guarding him. He wondered where his device was, and assumed it was hidden in the car somewhere since he didn't see it in plain sight.

Finally, after what seemed like ages the woman woke and spoke in English to his watchdog. She gave the prisoner several concerned looks and she and Kuryakin appeared to engage in an argument; they disagreed about something. She apparently won, as she started towards him, but the blond man stopped her with his wrapped arm. Pulling Bratsk's own handgun from his waistline, Kuryakin aimed it right between Bratsk's eyes.

"I never miss," he said simply in Russian, his hand a rock.

The woman rolled her eyes. Bratsk had no doubt about the comment.

She checked his feet and legs for circulation, then loosened the bonds until the feeling came back. She did the same for his arms. Kuryakin never moved or blinked.

The routine was kept up for several hours. The woman ministered to his physical well-being as Kuryakin stood guard. At one point, Bratsk dozed, and heard the two engage in quiet conversation. He cracked his eye a bit and saw the agent looking out the window. He spoke again to the woman, and she pulled a syringe from her pocket. Bratsk knew they were about to do something, and this would be his last chance to get his device back. He had to move now.

Bratsk kept his eyes closed, hoping that the woman would loosen his hands just enough to roll the heavy sleeve up his arm for the needle. He smiled inwardly as she did just that, and he moved.

In an instant he had her in a choke grip with his elbow. By the time the agent raised the gun Trudy was a shield between them. The agent was upon them a heartbeat later, but Bratsk had been able to roll back enough to kick his attacker soundly in the chest, and was rewarded with the sound of pain. It gave Bratsk enough time to get to his knees, and with his back against the between cars door he squirmed his way to his feet.

Kuryakin scrambled to his knees and he raised the gun, his eyes squinted in pain. Bratsk tightened his grip and the woman's struggling grew weaker. He was slowly cutting off the blood to her brain; a bit tighter and longer, and she would be dead. With one eye peering around her head, he made his demand clear to Kuryakin without speaking: The device for her life.

The agent's eyes flickered for a second at the standoff, and he dropped his gun hand. With the other he reached into his shirt and pulled out the manual. His eyes never left his target.

"This is what you want?" he said calmly, ignoring the fear in Trudy's eyes.

Bratsk nodded and glanced at the gun. Kuryakin dropped it, kicked it in Bratsk's direction, and then raised both hands to head level, still gripping the manual.

"Let her go," Illya said in a tone that could freeze fire.

Bratsk grinned under the gag and tightened his grip just enough to stop the woman's struggling. Right now, she was beginning to black out. Bratsk held his grip, and stooped to pick up the gun.

Kuryakin didn't move.

Bratsk wiggled his hands out of the restraints, and reached out with his free hand to the gun. When he thought he was close to it, he dipped his eyes for a fraction of a second to guide his hand.

In that same moment his hand was skewered by a hunting knife thrown with unimaginable accuracy and power.

Bratsk screamed even through the gag and Trudy slumped to the floor. Illya tackled him with such force that it sent him careening off the back wall, and down the steep stairwell of the side door. With one well-placed kick, Illya sent him through the glass door and out of the train completely.

Breathing heavily and painfully, his face nicked by bits of flying glass, Illya Kuryakin watched his adversary hit the ground and doubted he would ever get up again. He turned to Trudy and knelt down to help her sit. Her eyes were watering and she was gasping for breath, but Illya knew she would be all right. She fell into his arms and cried.

He waited until he could breathe without seeing stars and her crying subsided before he leaned her back against the wall. When he had recovered the gun and stuffed it in his belt, he helped her to her feet.

"We don't have much time. Are you ready?"

Trudy nodded, brushing the last of her tears from her cheeks and her voice barely audible. "Yes."

Illya forced the broken door the rest of the way open and brushed the loose glass off the stairs. The train was moving at quite a clip, and he had to find a good place to jump. Trudy got the device and the remainder of the food and vodka and tied them tightly into a bundle. Rubbing her neck, she moved in as close as she could to the Russian on the stairs and waited without comment for his command to jump.

It was late morning, and there were no signs of civilization in any direction. The hills in the distance still had a dusting of snow on their peaks, and the tundra was a dull mix of green and brown. They were entering a long curve in the tracks and could see a bridge going over a river in the distance.

"That's our route to the ocean." Illya noted. "We need to get off near there." He studied the bridge. "Can you swim?"

She nodded, unsure of her voice.

"I think we'll jump into the river. It's deep enough, and we aren't that high above it. Here, let me have that." He took the bundle from her. "Get some of those blankets. We'll need them. And take off your shoes and wrap them in the blankets."

Trudy collected the blankets they had removed from one of the bales and handed everything over. They were very close to the bridge now, and Illya tossed the bundles out, and then took her hand with his good arm.

"We'll go together. Ready?" She nodded and decided to shut her eyes tightly. The train whistle blew just before the sound of the track changed. What was once a sharp and steady clackity-clack now sounded hollow, and she knew they were on the bridge. She gripped Illya's hand so hard she wondered if it would break, and he spoke. "On the count of three. One, two, three!"

He pulled her arm and she pushed herself off and felt herself free fall. Opening her eyes she saw the water rush up, and she hit feet first, plunging deeply into the dark water. Instinct kicked in, and she paddled madly for the surface. A vision of her father insisting she take swimming lessons crossed her mind, and she kicked with renewed vigor.

When her head cleared the surface she sucked in a welcome breath and looked around. "ILLYA?!" She yelled, her throat raw and scratchy. "WHERE ARE YOU?"

Treading water, she let out a huge sigh of relief when a blond head popped from the water several yards away. After he, too, took in a welcome breath, he found her and nodded towards the shore. When they got there, shivering from the frigid water, Illya took her elbow and directed her to the area where he'd thrown the bundles.

"No one is ever going to believe my vacation this year," she croaked as she climbed up the incline to the open fields. Her hands were shaking and her knees felt weak, but she persevered.

"Maybe you should become a travel agent," Illya said between chattering teeth.

Trudy laughed at the idea, then thought back on the back-to-back-near death experiences, as well as the fire fights and general creeping around of the past days. There was some sort of rush to this kind of action, and she had to admit to herself that maybe she was an adrenalin junkie. "Travel agent my eye," she croaked. "I want to be a secret agent!"

Illya shook his head in resignation. Wherever he went, the Napoleon Solo types would find him. It had to be a curse.



*This time of year was hardly any better than winter, the man thought as he rode his skinny barely-a-horse along the path to the river which paralleled the train tracks. At least I can be home by dinnertime with some fresh fish and not get frostbite.* The animal snatched at a tuft of grass and the rider impatiently kicked its sides. *Although it may be next winter before I get home thanks to this slovenly beast!* He kicked it again and the horse pinned his ears and entered a slow jog. It was almost dark, and he still had some miles to go.

Suddenly, the animal's ears pitched forward and it came to a stop so suddenly it nearly unseated his daydreaming rider. "Hey!" the young man yelled. He almost kicked the horse again, but noted the tense ears pointed toward a lump in the grass. The horse wouldn't move any closer, so the man slid down, his heart pounding, and pulled the creature behind him. He got just close enough to realize it was the figure of a man when the frightened horse snorted and pulled back. When the animal was somewhat calm again, the man again faced the figure and walked towards it, the frightened horse following reluctantly. Eventually he noticed the army uniform, the odd angle to his neck and the out flung arm with a knife imbedded through the hand.



Asikov was settling in for a meal in the Officers' tent when a runner came to him with the field phone.

"What?" snapped the General as his steak was placed on the table in front of him. "Where?" he barked, slamming the knife down on the table. "I'm on my way."



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He returned the phone to the officer, picked up his knife and issued orders as he cut the meat. "We will leave immediately for the base at Peretyciha. Send for the helicopter, and have the patrols search both sides of the Anjui River. Dismissed."

Asikov finished his meal with zeal, knowing this hunt was almost over.

**ACT XIV: "This Is An 'Us' And 'Them' Society."**

It was a cold night, but Illya managed to make a small fire by the river to dry their clothes. They had enough blankets and food to be comfortable, and Trudy wasn't too hesitant about the vodka. Illya was amused as he watched her practice shooting the liquid from the soft flask into her mouth.

"Just keep it away from the fire," he said levelly, covering his amusement.

"Aw, come on," Trudy said, aiming the spout at her companion's mouth. "Open up." The smile she got in reply made her forget what she was doing. "You have a great smile," she said with a slight slur. "Why don't you do it more often? You're so serious!"

Illya let loose with a rare laugh, and Trudy about fell over. "I can't help the way I look. It comes in handy in my line of work. Now perhaps you should go to sleep."

She settled down next to the fire and looked at the Milky Way spread across the black sky and realized that this was a rare clear night. It had been overcast for days. "Tell me a story. One about the General. How do you know him?" She was serious now, but was having a difficult time keeping her eyes open.

Illya let out a soft chuckle. "I don't want to give you nightmares. I knew him in the Navy, that's all. He was my superior for a while."

Trudy's eyes drifted closed and her breathing became soft. "Somehow I think there's more to the tale than that. I'll get it out of you." Her voice trailed off, and she was asleep.

Illya looked down at her and made the fire ready for the night. "If your husband could see you now, Mrs. Kidd, I think he'd be proud," he said softly.



Illya shook her awake before it was even light. "Wake up, sleepyhead, we have to go. It's too risky to stay here."

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Trudy groaned and sat up with her hand on her head. "I think a horse kicked me during the night."

"It wasn't a horse, trust me. Here are your clothes, and here is something to eat." He handed her a bundle of things and she frowned at it.

"Did the maid wash our things last night?"

Illya snorted. "Yes. And she told me that checkout time is now, so let's go."

Trudy grumbled as she dressed, and Illya waited for her at the edge of the river. He said that there was plenty of boats further downriver to hitch a ride, so all they needed to do was walk and avoid the road that ran parallel. Navigating the river's edge was easier with the full moon, but the terrain was tricky. By the time dawn touched them, they were both tired and looking for a ride. It didn't take long to flag down a medium sized boat headed east; the coast was where the work was, and the habitants of this area were always willing to help each other out.

The ride was accented with the gas fumes from the engine but at least they were moving. Trudy huddled next to Illya and gave him a critical look.

"Now that my head has stopped pounding, I can concentrate on you," she said. "Do the ribs hurt?"

Illya frowned. "Of course they hurt. They keep getting pounded before they are completely healed, but I can still function."

"How about your arm?" She reached out unexpectedly and squeezed his forearm. He didn't react.

"Amazingly enough, it seems to be doing fine. So is my head. So is the rest of me. Barring a few bruises here and there, I'm just.."

"...fine. I know." Trudy finished for him. "How about the tingling in your hands and feet?"

Illya looked right at her and didn't bat an eyelash. "You have a vivid imagination, Mrs. Kidd. Now I need you to keep an eye out for something."

"What?" she asked, curious.

"There is a military base along this river near the coast with lots of power lines and generators. I need to fire up this thing one more time." He patted the box under his arm. "Look for the power lines. I need to get some sleep."

"Yes, sir!" she said with a mock salute and a smile. *Maybe we'll get out of this after all*, she thought. It was simply too peaceful right now to even imagine what could happen down the line, and she took advantage of the down time by relaxing in the rare morning sun.



Solo checked the Empress for the zillionth time from the dock. He needed that final reading to find his partner, and knew deep down that it was simply a

matter of time until it came. The rest of the world and their problems would simply have to wait, just as he did in this peaceful town. In another instance or other circumstances Napoleon Solo would feel at peace here. In this instance and circumstance, however, the passing days only made him more and more tense.

Stevie Inturi did all she could to keep the surroundings calm. She knew that he would be leaving in an instant the moment the information that he needed came through, and part of her was regretting that moment. He was a remarkable man, so proud and sure of himself, and so unlike any of the men her age around her. He was intriguing and exciting and she knew that after this time with him that she couldn't stay in this little fishing village anymore. He made her want to explore the world.

But for the meantime, she would help him succeed and bring this story to a successful close. Inside she knew her father would be saddened by her decision, but proud at the same time. Napoleon Solo was just the catalyst she needed to convince herself to pursue another life.

She watched him standing on the dock as the sun was on its final path to setting, staring to the west. She was sure he could hear his partner speaking to him. It was late in the day, and darkness wasn't far off. He stood there for quite awhile, unmoving, then turned abruptly on his heel. When he was close enough, he took her arm and directed her to the house.

"It's time," he said. "We're leaving. We need to cover about 200 miles of ocean."

Stevie didn't question him. She could see in his eyes that he had, in fact, heard something from somewhere, and simply nodded.

"Load up the radar equipment, and get the technician on board. We are leaving as soon as we're ready."

"It will be done, Solo-san."



Asikov landed at the base early that morning, ordering the pilot to follow the river the whole way. He could see his patrols beginning to close in. When Bratsk's body was found just west of the river he knew what Kuryakin's plan must be. He stationed a patrol at the end of the train's run just in case, but he knew the agent was on this river somewhere or would be soon. The river traffic was perfect cover.

He checked in with the base commander and told him the bare minimum he needed to know about his quarry. The commander put his soldiers at Asikov's disposal, but the General was reluctant to involve any more men. That would require too much explanation and loss of control over the device if it were found. He opted to check the area himself and then arranged to be ferried out to meet the

sub later in the day. No one could get by him then, and recovery of a traitor would give him favor in Moscow. He felt that this would be a good day.



Trudy couldn't believe that Illya could sleep in the middle of all the ruckus of the boat. The chatter was constant, as was the laughter and other thumping and banging of equipment, but the agent seemed oblivious. She shook her head. It had been hours before they began to see signs of civilization along the shore. The houses were coming more often, and now there were more docks apparent in the water. After a while, she even saw pedestrians and families on both shores, and what looked like the beginnings of a town of some sort. The sight of patrols on the shore alarmed her, and she shook her companion awake.

"I think something's going on. I see soldiers watching the river. Stay down."

"Asikov has become more efficient since we were last acquainted. All right, we need to get off. It's only a matter of time before the boat is searched." Illya found the boat's captain and they had a short chat. The man gave a hearty laugh, and clapped Illya on the shoulder, and then the agent returned to her. "He's going to take up to the first dock that looks clear. He's also going to notify his wife to look for us at their home. They live near the sea, on the other side of this town, and said they may be able to get a boat for us."

Trudy looked at him in amazement. "Why are these people doing all this? Did you save some of their relatives, too?"

"No," Illya explained as he gathered their things. "This is an 'us' and 'them' society. 'Them' being the government. The 'us' group tends to stick together."

"Ah," Trudy said. She couldn't imagine living in a country with that sort of ethic, and it made her a bit homesick.

They disembarked on a dock clear of soldiers, but very busy with fishermen. They blended into the crowd and were able to move through the village fairly easily as they headed west. In the distance, Illya finally spotted some power lines.

"Must be the base. I can hook up the device for the last time there, but I need to wait until later. Come on," he took Trudy's elbow and they moved a little faster.

"What? Where are we going?"

"I'm dropping you at the fisherman's house first, then coming back. I don't want you anywhere near me when I hook this up."

She tugged on her elbow. "Wait a minute.."

Illya threw her a glare that stopped her voice. "I mean it. I can work faster that way and it's far too dangerous for you to be near me. This way, if something happens, you can still get out."

She hurried along next to him. She didn't care to think about what he thought could happen; she already knew his way of looking at things, and preferred to keep ignorant about his thoughts at this point.

It was fairly easy to pass the patrols as they went through the village. There was a lot of hustle-bustle going on between arriving and departing fishermen, their families, and assorted children. They made it to the other side of the village in good time, and stopped to look at the ancient stone bridge that marked the end of the main village. On the other side were scattered houses, and further on, the sea. The old bridge was the only way out of the village and as of yet was unguarded. Illya had a fleeting thought about Solo's luck again, but didn't dwell on it.

They crossed the bridge and walked closer to the river's edge, away from the road. Illya told her the description of the fisherman's house, and that it was where the river and the sea met. They could see the ocean in the distance, and walked steadily. Trudy noticed him stumble occasionally, but he never fell completely, and she wondered what was going on with him. The constant fever he'd been battling seemed to have lessened, and it was all she could do to keep her hands off the wound dressing. The occasional glance she saw of the area didn't look infected, and she was heartened; perhaps it had cleared up. The slug, however, was still in there and at work. His gait proved that.

They found the humble house without a problem. It was a very weathered blue color, with its own small dock at the bottom of a long footpath. There was a small trawler tied up, bouncing gently in the dying wakes of passing boats. It looked old and well used, as did everything around here, and Illya made a mental note to check its readiness. It would be no match for a patrol boat, but it was small enough to be stealthy in the dark.

They were greeted by a smiling woman with a weathered face, and two girls hiding behind her skirt. She spoke rapidly as they approached.

"She says to come in because we're so easy to spot. I guess she has been well briefed!"

The woman chattered non-stop as she fixed some food and the girls, who looked to be around 10 or so, hovered curiously in the background when they weren't doing chores. Illya threw in a one-word reply now and again as he lightened his load for the return trip.

"I see why he goes off fishing now," he grumbled as he worked.

Trudy hit him on the arm. "Be nice!" she giggled.

They ate the hearty meal of dried fish and potatoes, welcome for the change from bread. Illya made plans to borrow the boat, and the woman shook her head, chatting rapidly as she cleared the dishes.

"What's she saying?" Trudy asked.



"Apparently, we are to be taken where we want to be in the boat. There's a young man that's supposed to be our chauffeur." He stood, and tucked the device inside his loose shirt. His eyes flicked from the woman to Trudy. "We'll see how that goes. All right, I'm going now. I plan to fire it up just before dusk so I'll have a little light to make it back here. You need to have that boat packed and ready; we won't have much of a window to get to sea. Napoleon will find us out there. I'm assuming it will be somewhere around the 12 nautical mile marker."

"Why there?" Trudy asked, her palms already starting to sweat with nerves.

"That's where international waters begin. Russian fishing rights extend a bit further, but if Solo is caught within 12 miles, he could create an international incident. I don't think our boss would be too happy about that." He tightened down the borrowed tunic and donned a hat. "This will have to do. Lay low."

He spoke briefly to the woman, thanking her. She bobbed her head in response, and patted his arm. He stepped out of the door with Trudy right behind.

"She's going to gather some provisions for us. Load up the boat and be ready for anything."

Meeting his eyes, he could see the fear she was trying to control. "And you are sure that your partner will find us? You have that much confidence in him?"

"Absolutely. "

With a reassuring grin, he patted her hand and she watched him walk back towards the village, one leg visibly dragging compared to the other.



Peretyciha base was on the opposite shore from the village. Those villagers that did not fish worked at the base, which made the economy of the small village unusually strong and the population busy. Illya studied what he could from his side of the river, and hopped one of the workers' ferries to the opposite shore.

He blended in easily, and worked his way around the outside of the fence to where a pair of power lines continued out of the base. He followed the lines to the first pole that was out of sight of the base and made ready to ascend. The now constant tingling in his fingers made him fumble as he readied the device and wrapped his climbing belt around the pole. The tingling in his feet made him hesitate a second, wondering if he could pull this off. He looked up to the lines; he had no choice. He began the climb.

He slipped several times, and had to concentrate on his grip, and when he did make it to the top he noticed he was breathing heavily and his limbs were trembling. Mentally he pushed the observations aside, and hooked up the device.

It didn't take long, and he was back on the ground in no time. Quickly, he tucked the device and other things away and headed to the river. On the shore he

found a young man fishing from the shore, a small, personal boat pulled up on the ground. Illya approached him and offered the last coin he had for a ride back across. The man immediately pulled in his line, and readied the boat. Illya gratefully collapsed inside and pulled the fisherman's hat down over his eyes for the ride.



Asikov sat quietly in his truck as the driver readied to leave. The milling crowd around the base gates was not unusual; soldiers were a source of income to these poor villagers. Those who did not fish supported the base in many ways. The General's eyes roamed over the crowd, not really seeing them as individuals, but as subservient workers.

His gaze drifted down to the river where he noted the variety of boats collected there. He recalled that his father had a boat quite similar to one docked there, and remembered smugly as it being the main reason he'd joined the army. He hated fishing.

Asikov's eyes jumped across the river, which at this point wasn't very wide, to a dock on the opposite shore. There was a little boat, barely big enough to fit two people, just arriving at the dock. He was thinking about his father and watching one of the two occupants step onto the dock when he noticed the wrappings on the man's arm. He sat up straighter. *No!* he thought, grabbing the field glasses from the floor.

When he focused on the figure, he saw the shaggy blond hair under the hat, and the profile of Illya Kuryakin as he spoke to the man still in the boat. As he spoke, he turned in Asikov's direction and scanned the horizon. Illya's attention was drawn to the flash of reflected light, and their eyes connected. There was a split second where they both froze, and then Illya took off running for the shore.

"THERE HE IS!" Asikov shouted, standing up in the convertible truck. His driver jumped in surprise, and looked where Asikov pointed. "He's across the river! Where's a patrol boat!" The General shouted orders at the gate guard, who was on the field phone within seconds. With the field glasses, Asikov followed the running man as best as he could as he attempted to mix with the crowd.

The gate guard handed Asikov the field phone, and he listened impatiently for a few seconds. "I don't need that information! I know where the spy is! The patrols across the river need to close the town! The suspect is wearing black pants, a dark red tunic and a hat, and is heading east on foot!" Asikov leaped from the truck and started to run to the dock. He tossed the phone to his driver and ordered the first fisherman he saw to take him across river. The driver followed, as did two guards from the gate.

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When they reached the other side of the river they were met by an army vehicle. Asikov shouted where to go, and they were off in a cloud of dust.



Illya ran until he thought his chest would explode, the healing ribs protesting the abuse. Then he walked rapidly, weaving in and out of the crowds on the busy road that paralleled the river. He flung off the hat, and reversed the tunic he wore so the black side was out. He made up an emergency story to a pedestrian in trade for his bicycle, assuring the man that the vehicle would be left at the edge of the town. He hopped on, hugged the device to his burning ribs with his still healing arm, and pedaled steadily. He recalled the sole bridge into the town, and knew he had to cross it before the patrols closed it.

The first patrol that came across didn't give him a second glance, and he was glad he'd reversed the shirt and got the bike. Illya pedaled steadily, each breath painfully making itself known. Another patrol passed him heading into town, and he knew time was running out. Finally, the narrow bridge came into view and he thought that he just might make it when an army truck barreled around a corner in the distance.

Illya knew his luck had run out. He slid the ancient bike to a stop and quickly leaned it against the closest building, and then walked to the river's edge close to the bridge. The device now was excess baggage; he already had the manual for it so he threw it into the swift moving current and watched it sink. Then he stumbled to the bridge base and quickly immersed himself in the frigid water.

Working hard to not make any wake, he could hear the patrol skid to a stop on the bridge followed by the sound of pounding feet as they set up and searched the area. Only half way across and directly under the bridge, Illya steeled himself and took a deep breath.

As he sank below the surface, he was thankful for the darkness of the water, the failing light and the current that pulled him away towards the sea.

## ACT XV: "Gee, Now I'm Telling You To Be Quiet!"

They had been afloat for many hours, running the Empress as wide open as they dared for that length of time. The thrumming of the engine made conversation difficult, but not impossible. Napoleon figured out that if you look directly at whom you were speaking to and spoke loud and slow that it was possible to carry out a conversation; just tiring. Although looking into Miss Inturi's eyes never became tiresome.

It was well into the night when the technician waved him over excitedly. Stevie cut the engine to idle. "I've got it! We have a plotted line now." They referred to the map rolled open on the floor and ended up with a straight line running east right through Peretyciha.

"You were correct, Solo-san." Stevie said with a brilliant smile. "You know how your partner thinks! Peretyciha; that is impressive."

Napoleon smiled briefly, but had a difficult time reveling his good guessing. "We need to turn a bit south, and cut back near the international waters border. I'm sure we'll get another sign when we're close."

"Ah, Mr. Solo?" the technician asked, waving him back to the radar screen.

"Yes?" Solo leaned over the man's shoulder. "What?"

"This blip appeared just a second ago. It's in the sea just north of Peretyciha and moving at a good clip."

Solo frowned. "It's not a boat?"

The man shook his head. "It's moving faster than a fishing boat, and the signature is much larger. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was a submarine."

"A submarine?" Stevie said, aghast. "I have heard stories of submarines in this area, but have never seen one. You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?"

Napoleon shook his head. "Where Illya's involved, I don't believe in coincidence. He can really stir a pot." He studied the blip for a few minutes as Stevie fired up the Empress once more. "OK, my Russian friend. Who have you pissed off now?" he mumbled to himself.



The water was very cold. Illya couldn't feel his hands or feet anymore, and tried to avoid any thought of this being a premonition of what his future may be like. He had been feeling an odd prickling feeling in his torso and limbs for several hours now, but it didn't appear to be getting any worse. But now, he couldn't tell because he was numb all over.

He allowed the current to pull him away from the bridge then tried to stay as close to the shore as possible. Every now and again he would work his way into some of the native water foliage and let his face surface just enough to see how dark it was and to catch his breath. He could hear the engines of boats passing by on their way to and from the sea, and noticed that it wasn't long before there were no boats going east to sea anymore; the patrol boats had created a blockade. Eventually, the only boats he saw were military patrol boats that would illuminate the shore now and again with their spotlights now that it was completely dark.

The agent found his thinking process was getting a bit scattered and knew that he was getting hypothermic; he needed to get out of the water, and soon. The lights from the houses on the shore were scattered and little detail could be gleaned, but he thought he was close to the fisherman's house and tried to make out the small dock. When he eventually bumped into what felt like a pillar, he wrapped his arms around it to hold steady. Shivering uncontrollably, it was nearly impossible to work his way to the shore. He pushed off to the next pillar, and the next, until he felt the river bottom under his feet.

Taking a fortifying breath, he launched himself towards the shore, grabbing plants and their roots to drag himself out of the water. He had to command his fingers to work properly, which took a lot of his concentration. When he finally felt dry earth under his knees, he collapsed in a quivering heap, spent. *I'll just stay here long enough to ... to... I wonder where Napoleon is? He should be here..*

Thoughts scattering to the wind, he closed his eyes and welcomed the blackness as a warm, dry blanket.



Trudy was pacing the inside of the house like a nervous cat, wringing her hands. The boat was all packed, and Stephan, the young man who was to drive them, was waiting patiently in the small house and watching her with questions in his eyes. For the umpteenth time she heard the wheels of patrol trucks race by on the road and she watched it go by from the window.

"Where is he?" she said again out loud. "The patrols are still out, so he probably isn't caught yet, but where is he?!" She chewed her fingernails, and the

fisherman's wife frowned at her. Trudy yanked her hand down. "I can't stand this. I'm checking the boat again." She grabbed the light jacket that had been loaned to her, and Stephan stood, picking up on the cue. He followed her out the door and down the path.

Trudy was looking everywhere as she walked to the dock, but it was Stephan to suddenly ran past her to the water's edge and knelt down. With her heart in her throat, she followed, and dropped to the ground on the other side of the shivering agent.

"Illya! Oh my God. Stephan, we have to get him inside and warm." She gathered up and arm, and Stephan mirrored her movements, managing to get him upright. Illya was speaking but his words were slurred and unintelligible. "Quiet now, it's OK. Gee, now I'm telling you to be quiet!" she huffed as they literally dragged him to the house. "You just have lousy timing, don't you?" Trudy was alarmed at how cold he felt. When they got near the house she could see the bluish tinge to his lips and limbs, and laid him down as close to the fire as she could.

The wife began boiling water as soon as she saw him, and with Stephan's help she stripped him down to his underwear and began rubbing him dry. It took a while, but eventually the blueness faded a bit and his skin didn't feel like ice anymore. They wrapped him in quilts and blankets and propped him in a sitting position by the fireplace. When his eyes blinked open, they looked a bit cloudy, and she helped him sip some sweet, hot tea the girls brought to them Eventually the shivers faded and his eyes cleared. And as soon as that happened, he was ready to move again.

"We need to keep moving," he whispered hoarsely, struggling to stand.

"You have got to be kidding!" Trudy scolded. "You nearly died from hypothermia!"

"If we stay, I'll die from bullets. I'll take my chances. Help me up." He finally made it to his feet and swayed dangerously. "Where are my clothes?" He spoke to Stephan in Russian, who departed to get some clothes.

"Mr. Kuryakin, I don't know how you're doing this, but you should be flat on your back unconscious." Trudy put her hands on her hips, ready to chew him out some more, but the sound of a vehicle out front and the sight of headlights shining in the kitchen windows made her forget everything. Eyes wide, she looked at Illya. "A patrol!" She whispered.

Illya grabbed her elbow and began to guide her to the single bedroom, but she ended up dragging him. "Get in the bed," he ordered and she did so after kicking off her shoes. Stephan entered the room with the clothes and Illya took them, chattering in Russian to him. The young man nodded and left, closing the door. Illya slithered under the bed and arranged the loose clothes along his body to



darken his profile and block the view of him from the room. "I told Stephan to pretend you were sick. That way you don't have to talk."

She didn't answer right away. "I'm scared, Illya." She whispered shakily.

"You'll do fine. Just remember that it is me they are looking for, not you. Now close your eyes and act sick. You're a nurse. You know what to do."

"Oh, funny," she snapped as she heard a pounding on the front door.

They heard the muted sound of conversation, and the wife making shushing sounds as they approached the bedroom door. When the door cracked open Illya saw a stream of light crawl along the floor towards his eyes. He held his breath as one of the soldiers stepped partway in and waved a flashlight around. He saw the shivering form of a woman on the bed, eyes closed, mouth open and breathing raggedly. He didn't make any effort to enter the room any further, and closed the door. Footsteps sounded through the house and outside the window, and then there was the sound of the truck driving away.

Trudy was up in a flash, and down to help Illya out from under the bed. He moved slowly, but was able to stand and begin dressing by himself.

"We are getting out of here now. Time is running out," he said softly. Trudy had to agree. When it was quiet outside for a reasonable length of time, they left for the dock.

Trudy hugged the woman and the girls, thanking them even though they didn't understand. Illya relayed her thoughts, and added some of his own, and Trudy was surprised when the two little girls hugged the agent simultaneously from two sides. Trudy was surprised at how his face softened with the affection as he patiently waited for them to let go. He patted them each on the head, and moved out the door and down the path with Trudy following.

"Well. They seemed to like you," Trudy noted lightly.

"They said I reminded them of their cousin."

"Really? Does he live near here?"

Illya hesitated. "No. Apparently he died at sea last year."

Trudy shook her head with a short laugh. "Only you could bring down a light moment, Mr. Pessimism."

"You shouldn't be surprised. It's in my nature. I am Russian, after all."

They managed to get the boat away from the dock, and kept the engine idle low and the lights off. Stealth was the only way they were going to get anywhere; this trawler couldn't outrun the patrol boats.

Illya hunkered down on the deck to inventory the supplies, and instructed Trudy to observe how the boat operated. In a quiet voice, he told her that there was no way he was going to risk Stephan's life and safety, and that he planned to get him off the boat as soon as possible.

"How?" She whispered back. "We're heading into the open ocean!"



"He's young and can swim back. I'll find a way to reimburse Strambokov for the boat."

Trudy looked thoughtful. "That was the fisherman's name?"

Illya nodded. "I would have introduced you, but that would have been improper."

"Improper?" She said, confused. "Are women second class citizens here or something?"

Illya eyes glanced up at her as his head stayed bent down, so she couldn't see his evil grin. "Well, generally, no. But handmaidens are another story."

"What?!" She sputtered. "Handmaiden?!? You told him I was a *handmaiden*??"

"It was the only way to explain why you couldn't speak to them," he said in a patient tone, enjoying his payback as he continued to inventory. "Most handmaidens are foreign."

Trudy punched him in the shoulder. "You rat!"

"Keep your voice down!" he said lightly, laughing. "Noise carries out here!"

"You...you..." speechless, Trudy turned in a huff to observe Stephan.



Asikov stepped from the patrol boat to the conning tower of the submarine just off the coast from Peretyciha and felt like he was coming home. He'd spent a lot of time on these vessels early in his career, and had enjoyed the power of them. And the stealth! They were a wondrous piece of machinery.

The hatch closed above him and the crew snapped to attention.

He reveled in the power of command for a few seconds. "At ease," he snapped. "Commander, I will meet with you now in the ready room."

The Officer nodded in the direction of the ready room. Once there, Asikov told him his mission: A traitor had returned to Russia to retrieve secret military documents to sell to the West. He was suspected as being in Russian waters, trying to meet his contact. The submarine was to be at Asikov's disposal to hunt the traitor down and retrieve the documents. When the Commander inquired about written orders, Asikov brushed him off.

"I will take full responsibility. There is no time for written orders. We are in hot pursuit. I outrank you, *Commander*, and you will obey my orders." The Commander bristled, but backed down.

"Now," Asikov said, standing. "I need to see your sonar officer. We have boats to hunt down."



The fisherman's dock was in the relatively peaceful currents of the river mouth, situated in a protected eddy. They pushed off and into the mainstream on an easterly heading. Their transition to the sea was seamless, thanks to the jetties jutting out into the open waters. They had just cleared the tips of the jetties when they saw lights bouncing in the distance.

Illya stayed on the floor, arranging items in a useable order: The manual was wrapped in oilcloth and tucked against the skin of his abdomen, under his clothing. The gun was tucked into his waistband, and the knife in his boot. The flares and grenade were laid out in easy reach next to a pile of oily rags and a small container of gasoline. Food and extra clothing were separated and put aside.

It didn't take long for Trudy to learn the basics on how to run the boat. She and her husband had a very small fishing boat of their own at one time; the driving mechanism was very similar. She squatted down next to the shaggy haired agent, resisting the temptation to brush back the bangs fluttering on his forehead. Illya hadn't tried to stand. She was sure his balance on the bumpy deck would be precarious, and he knew it. When she saw the lights in the distance closing in, she mentioned it to him and he peeked over the side.

"I was hoping we'd get further out," he said quietly, directing Stephan to drift a bit south and delay the inevitable confrontation. They edged up the throttle just a bit. "They must be using radar to locate us, because I'm sure we're too dark to spot."

Everyone felt the stress building as the light got closer. Eventually they heard the sound of the motor; the boat was moving at a good clip, and had passed the jetties. There was no doubt it was a patrol boat. All they could do was watch helplessly as the light grew in size. Illya said to turn east and try to feign engine trouble. Stephan threw him a wide-eyed look, and Illya spoke to him in Russian. Stephan looked a little relieved and did what he was told.

"What did you tell him?" She asked.

"I said I'd tell the patrol that I hijacked him with the gun if I had to," Illya explained patting the handgun at his waist. "But we may not need to do that."

Now it was Trudy's eyes that went big. She'd come to appreciate the survival skills of the small man, and knew he had a plan. She opened her mouth to ask what it was, and then decided she'd rather not know. She knew how he thought, and whatever it was, it would be a show. She just hoped they lived through it. "I hope you know what you're doing," she said softly.

"I've gotten us this far, haven't I? Have a little faith."

She couldn't respond to that. The boat was now very close and they were suddenly awash with light.

The announcement seemed to come directly from the bright, white spotlight. Only the sound of the motor gave away that the light was attached to a patrol boat.

The surrounding seas were so black compared to the white light that Trudy and Stephan were momentarily stunned into motionlessness. Only Illya, close to the floor and not visible in the spotlight, was in motion, pulling out the flares that had been stashed his tunic.

"Stephan!" he hissed "STEPAN!" The young man jumped, his attention finally captured by the agent. "Do you have matches? And don't look at me!"

"Da," he replied, eyes wide in fear.

"Idle the engine, and get the matches out slowly. Trudy!"

"Huh?" She aborted her glance at the agent, and blinked into the light.

Illya switched to English. "Be ready to take the boat. Move slowly toward the wheel, and keep your hands visible. And don't look at me."

She slid over slowly, hands up, as Stephan slipped next to Illya. They heard the patrol boat cut the engine back. Stephan dropped the matches in Illya's lap as the young man raised his hands for the patrol. The loudspeaker was spewing out orders and Illya talked over them as he worked with the flares. He jumped between English and Russian as he worked. Trudy was momentarily awed he could do that so easily under such pressure.

"Stephan, tell me if you see long, rectangular boxes mounted on the side of the boat. Keep verbal estimate as to the distance between us. When they don't see you as a direct threat, they will parallel us in an attempt to board. That's what I want."

"The lights are blinding me," Stephan said worriedly.

"I know. Look just above the water line, not directly into the light."

Stephan squinted and Trudy shifted nervously. She watched Illya out of the corner of her eye; he was wrapping the flares in the oily, gasoline soaked rags. *That'll burn like crazy*, she thought, licking her lips wordlessly.

The young man mumbled something to Illya, and the agent replied with a nod. Stephan then started what sounded like a countdown.

"What'd he say? What's going on?" Trudy asked, trying not to move her lips. She could feel the sweat trickling down from her hairline, but didn't dare move to wipe it away.

"I needed to know if there were missile launchers mounted on the hull of the boat, and how close the boat is." He was working rapidly as he spoke, hunched down next to the wall.

"Missile launchers?!" She hissed, horrified, locking her eyes on the dark form now being maneuvered alongside. She saw the long boxes he referred to, and took a little solace knowing that in a parallel position, the things were no longer directed at them. That was a good thing; the bad thing was that now that they were closer, she could see how heavily armed each person was. Her palms were itching to slam the trawler into drive and flee, but she managed to keep still.

Stephan continued to report the closing distance. Illya put a final tug on the rags, and pulled out the grenade. He held the grenade in his teeth by the ring, and readied a match. Trudy saw him fumble with the tiny sticks, dropping several, then finally get a grip on one with a shaky hand.

Trudy could see more and more details as the boat got closer. The man in charge was yelling something directly at Trudy, close enough to no longer need the loudspeaker any longer. He repeated his demand, more loudly. She replied by smiling, shrugging, and pointing to her ears. He grunted, and reached over the side just as the patrol boat bumped them lightly.

In that instant, perfectly timed because of Stephan's monitoring, Trudy heard the snap of the match as it was struck. Illya touched it to the rag wrapped around one flare, and all three ignited immediately. He stood and heaved them in succession, each landing on a different part of the deck of the patrol boat. She was amazed by his speed; the crew didn't have time to react until the burning packages hit the deck, then they exploded into motion, scrambling to either get away from the erupting flares or trying to stomp them out.

"HIT IT!" Illya yelled with gritted teeth, and Trudy grabbed the wheel and the throttle. The agent pulled the grenade free of the pin and leaned over the edge. As he stuffed the grenade between the parallel missile boxes, the trawler leaped away to the sound of gunfire. Illya grabbed the edge to keep from being thrown overboard as they raced away in the dark. When he gained his feet he took the opportunity to shove Stephan over the side before the young man could protest and started to make his way towards Trudy.

"HEY!" Trudy yelled, gripping the wheel.

"HE CAN SWIM HOME!" Illya yelled back. As he reached her, there were two huge, back-to-back explosions that made the trawler shimmy. Trudy ducked when debris rained down on them, and glanced back just in time to see Illya get nailed in the head with a sizeable chunk of something. He dropped like a rock and didn't move.

"Oh my God! ILLYA!" Her scream was lost in the roar and subsequent explosions of ordinance on the boat, and in an instant realized that he was safer where he was on the floor. Pegging the throttle full open, she held the bottom of the wheel and got as close to the floor as she could. *At least I won't hit anything*, ran crazily through her head as the trawler escaped into the darkness, peppered with burning shrapnel.

Her ears were still ringing when they finally cleared the shrapnel, and when the fiery mass was out of sight, Trudy checked the compass and confirmed their westerly direction. "Illya!" she called, not daring to stop or let go of the wheel. "Hey!" She heard a groan, and the agent rolled over. "Illya? Wake up, will you? I

know your head is harder than that! Are you with me? I wouldn't know this Solo guy if he bit me! Come on, I need your help!"

Illya struggled to a sitting position, flailing against the bumpy motion of the boat, and held his head in his hands, silent. The thrumming of the motor was broken only by the rhythmic jar of the boat hitting ocean wakes. After many minutes he attempted to stand without success, finally resorting to crawling to her feet and leaning back on the hull, eyes closed. They both ignored the dying embers that had settled on the deck from the sky and the smoky smell of destruction they brought.

"Can you hear me?" She yelled over the motor. "Are you all right?"

He winced in response, and she had to put her head close to him to hear. "I can hear just fine. Please don't yell. It upsets the marching band in my head."

She stood up, shaking her head as she looked forward into the darkness.

"You must be fine. Your sour demeanor is intact," she said.

"How far out are we?"

"I have no idea."

He struggled to his feet, holding firmly on the side rail and looking at the compass. "I guess we've been doing about 20 knots for less than one half hour, so we must be somewhere around 10 miles out. We're close."

"Now how do we find your partner? We can't telephone ahead or anything."

"Not in the sense you're thinking of, anyway. I still have that bit of gasoline to work with. You keep driving. I'll see what I can do."

"Aye, aye, Captain."



"It just disappeared, sir."

"How can it just have disappeared?! What about the second target? Is it still there?" Asikov wasn't believing what he was hearing. How could a fully armed patrol boat simply disappear? The other vessel was very small and slow moving before, but was now moving much faster. Its speed was still pitiful next to that of the disappearing patrol boat! Whatever had happened, Asikov was sure Kuryakin was the root of it. He touched the scar on his face, recalling the explosion that had caused it and how the annoying little man was involved in that debacle.

"The second target is still moving east. It will soon be in international waters, sir."

"I don't care if it will soon be on the moon. Intercept."

The sound of the Commander clearing his throat made the sonar man jump. Asikov turned an icy stare on him. "May I respectfully remind you, sir, that any

confrontation in international waters is against regulations?" He wasn't about to let this interloper risk his command.

"I outrank you, *Commander*. Do not question me. Pursue."

The Commander ground his teeth. "Aye, Sir."



The trio on the *Empress* heard what sounded like faint thunder. "But there were no clouds in the sky," Stevie commented, looking skyward. "And no storms were expected."

"Explosion." Napoleon said matter-of-factly. "And we can only get a general direction." He pointed southwest. "Turn that way."

Stevie did so without question. The radar technician confirmed a few minutes later that the submarine was headed in the same direction, and where there once had been two small blips in another area, there was now only one.



Illya finally felt that there was a good possibility of escape from all this. The horizon was clear in every direction and no sound carried when he turned off the engines to listen. He knew they were near the end of Russian waters, and now it came down to two things: either they'd run out of fuel and drift until they were picked up, or Napoleon would find them. He was sure that even Asikov, as driven as he could be, wouldn't risk an incident in open waters. Then again, witnesses out here were few and far between.

"OK, Mr. Kuryakin," Trudy started. "Tell me about this General Asikov and why he's pulling out all the stops to find you." She was curious, but she also suspected that Illya had a concussion and wanted to keep him talking. He seemed to be dragging, and she desperately wanted to check if his pupils were reacting evenly. She was playing it safe by keeping him talking and surprisingly, he seemed willing.

"I was a Lieutenant in the Russian Navy. Asikov was the Commander on the submarine I was assigned to. He tried to make a name for himself by putting the crew under him at unnecessary risk and I pointed it out to him. And when things went sour, there was an explosion and one crewman was lost. It would have been worse if I hadn't moved all the crewmen to a safe location beforehand." Illya's eyes were closed, and he had his head leaned back against the hull.

"So you defied his orders by moving the men?"

"Yes. The man that died was by Askiov's side. He saved the General's life by taking the brunt of the explosion."



"Did Asikov blame you for the explosion?"

"Yes, but only to my face. He said if the men had been where he put them, they would have seen the problem with the explosives before they blew. The formal investigation, however, didn't prove that and he decided to keep his mouth shut and save his career. The men never knew that I had defied orders; they thought Asikov was a hero by moving them. I kept my mouth shut and Asikov never got the blame he deserved. And I had this secret over his head; he didn't like that."

"Did he make life miserable for you after that?"

"Not really. He didn't have the chance. I moved to Naval Intelligence shortly thereafter."

"Because of your knack with explosives?" she teased.

"Partly," he confessed. "But when the opportunity came to leave the Navy, I did."

"And here you are today. Isn't life weird sometimes," Trudy commented. Illya shook his head slowly. "Madam, you have no idea."



**ACT XVI: "You Define 'Pessimism'!"**

General Asikov stared at the radar screen, transfixed. That little blip represented many things; his chance to move up in command and all the social benefits that brought, the chance to wipe the one blot on his career away, and the chance to finally seal a secret forever. Any one of those choices would make him happy.

When the second blip showed on the screen, he blinked in surprise. "What's that?" he barked, pointing at the moving form.

"Another boat, sir. About the same size as the one we're closing on."

"It's not a patrol boat?" he asked, throat tightening.

"By the size of the blip I can't say, but I do know that it's coming from the wrong direction, sir." Asikov felt his heart jump, but kept a cool exterior. The sailor continued. "And it looks like they'll get there before us. They're only about four kilometers off target."

Asikov brain was racing. The chance to clear his past in his mind was going to escape! He'd spent the past several years with the idea that Kuryakin's information would pop up someday and ruin his future; it had ruined every advancement he'd received since then. Here he had a chance to rid himself of that anxiety and get a device to help him out and he was about to lose both.

"Load torpedo tubes," he ordered darkly.

The Commander's face fell in surprise. "Sir! The limiting lines of approach are almost too narrow to insure a hit! And we only have sonar readings on the target! There is no confirmation of what we're firing at!"

"We don't have time to surface and check, Commander! Load the tubes!"

The Commander stood firm in front of the General. "Sir. I have to inform you that if you fire those torpedoes, I *will* remove you from command! I will not risk the careers of all on board on a guess!"

The General locked eyes with the Commander. The tension on deck was thick and the crew held their collective breath and tried to keep their heads down. There was electric silence for many seconds, then Asikov spoke.

"Fire one!" he barked.

"Sir! I'm warning you!" The Commander said firmly as the swishing sound of the torpedo leaping away was heard. Asikov didn't blink.

"One away," came the report from the weapons officer.

"Fire two!"

"Guards! I am relieving the General from Command!"

"Two away, sir!"

The guards flanked the General instantly, and Asikov sneered. "You have an efficient crew, Commander. My compliments."

"Remove him from the command deck," the Commander ordered. "Sir, you are free to roam the rest of the ship, but you will not be allowed on the command deck." He turned his back on Asikov.

"Surface! We need visual on what was hit."

As Asikov was escorted from the deck, he smiled. There was still one chance...



Illya had made it to his feet, and was surveying the dark for any sign of his partner when he saw the phosphorescent trail as it flew by the small boat.

"Torpedoes!" He yelled in surprise.

"What do you mean 'torpedoes'?" Trudy replied sharply, spinning around from the wheel. "I only see one!"

"They usually travel in pairs! There! Quick! That one won't miss! We have to go over!" Illya leaped for the wheel and turned the boat into the torpedo's direction, and moved to grab Trudy's arm, but was alarmed at how slowly his body seemed to be moving. The prickly sensation he'd been feeling for hours now in his upper torso was growing stronger, and he no longer felt his feet or hands. When he took a step towards her, he realized his legs were numb and they wobbled. "Hurry, Trudy, we have to jump!"

Trudy could see the second phosphorescent trail heading right for them. She also saw Illya sag heavily, and she encircled him with her arms, dragging him to the side.

"Go!" Illya grunted, realizing that he could no longer feel his limbs.

"Not by myself, I'm not!" Trudy yelled as they made it to the side rail. It took a moment to roll Illya over the side, and when she heard the splash in the dark water, she followed. Her feet had barely cleared the rail when the torpedo impacted

the old boat. Trudy felt herself fly into the air with the shock wave, and she took in a sharp breath as she hit the cold water. At the same time the gas tanks exploded in a flash of orange and yellow. All she could hear was rumbling and muted explosions underwater as she fought to find the surface. When she did, she realized that the flaming wreckage surrounding her was the remains of their only way out of Russian waters. She hoped Illya's confidence in his mysterious partner wasn't mistaken. *'Illya!'* she thought. *'I have to find him!'*

Orienting herself in relation to the wreckage, she swam back to where she thought he was. "Illya!" She sputtered, looking in a circle. "Illya! Where are you?!" Desperately treading water, she noticed a dark spot in the flame-reflecting sea, and stroked quickly to it.

It was a body, floating face down. Again treading water, she gently turned the body over, and checked his pulse at the neck. It was weak, but there. She felt for breathing, but there was none. Quickly, she pried open his mouth and puffed several breaths past his lax lips. Four puffs entered the limp body when she was rewarded with wet coughing and fluttering eyelids.

"Illya, do you hear me? Illya? Come on, soldier, wake up!" She held his face out of the water as she kicked her feet, trying to ignore the fatigue beginning overtake her. She also noticed the lack of motion in his body and was beginning to fear the worst.

"I'm here," Illya whispered hoarsely, coughing again, his voice barely audible.

"Illya," she huffed. "Can you swim? We have to grab onto something. Preferably, something that floats and isn't on fire!"

"Picky, picky," he said dreamily. He didn't continue right away, and when he did, his voice was flat. "I can't feel anything." There was a second of silence. "Next time we must insist on life jackets," he said dryly.

Trudy couldn't help but let out a quick laugh. "You seem so confident there will be a next time!" She repositioned her arm under his and across his chest, with his head against her chest. "All those swimming classes my dad made me take are coming to the test! Here we go!"

Swimming backwards, Illya in tow, Trudy used what she could find of her energy to get some distance from the flaming wreckage and locate some floating, non-burning debris. It didn't take long; she eventually came across a large section of wood that looked like it used to be part of the deck. She pushed and pulled enough of Illya's torso onto the board to make him secure, then she swam around to the other side and climbed on. She lay on her chest and he on his back. Her head was next to Illya's, and her legs still dangling in the water.

"Now," she puffed. "I hope there aren't any sharks around here."

"Finally, someone I can introduce to Napoleon that is more of a pessimist than I am." Illya said quietly in a droll tone.

"I just hope your friend is as good as you say," she answered.

"He is. But don't you ever tell him I said that," Illya replied slowly, in a whisper. "I just hope his new partner appreciates his abilities."

"Stop that." Trudy ordered. "I told you this would probably happen, and it's more than likely temporary."

"Might as well prepare for the worst." His voice was getting weaker.

"Sheesh." Trudy breathed. "You define 'pessimism.' I can't even come close!"

"My example will give you something to shoot for." Illya's eyes drifted closed, and he was quiet.

"Illya?" She whispered. "Hey!" She shook him with no response. His breathing and pulse were there, but very weak. After her exam, she scanned the horizon and said a mental prayer. "Come on, Mr. Solo," she mumbled. "Don't let him down."



The explosion was bright in the darkness and yielded a shower of falling stars. Stevie and Solo looked at each other, and without a word, Stevie pointed the Empress right at the conflagration.

"How far? Three, four miles?" He asked loudly over the rough engine.

"Yes. That is about right." She squinted into the wind and darkness, trying to get a bearing on where the explosion was in relation to the stars, her only landmarks. "I think it was at the edge of international waters. We may possibly enter Russian seas." She turned her dark eyes on her new friend, her flying hair framing her face.

The technician confirmed the disappearance of the boat's reading, and confirmed the sub's actions. They were all momentarily shocked.

Solo was stripping off his outer clothes, revealing a wetsuit underneath. As he spoke, he readied his tanks and other equipment. "I have no doubt it's in Russian waters. You can stop short, though. I can go in alone."

"You believe your friend to be alive? After that?" She waved a delicate hand in the direction of the flames.

"You don't know my partner," Napoleon said as he worked. "He just likes to raise a ruckus." With those light words he tried to squelch the feelings of doom he really had inside. "You just need to dump me as close as you can, then go back into legal waters, Stevie. There's no reason for you to jeopardize your life and property."

She tilted her head slightly in his direction as the Empress plowed through the waves. "But how will you get out? Does U.N.C.L.E. have a boat plane?"

He laughed shortly. "You mean a pontoon plane? Not around here. As soon as I find Illya, I'll let you know, and we will simply swim to you. With that sub out there, there is no way you should enter Russian waters."

She squinted slightly at the plan and then asked quietly, "What if someone else finds you first, Solo-san?"

Again, he gave her what he hoped was a mind easing smile. "They won't." He turned his back on her and finished gearing up. Using a small penlight, he pulled out the worn charts. "Almost time to dump me. You are about to cross the International waters line. See anything?"

She turned back to their goal. "No. Only flames on water and floating debris."

He allowed her to get a bit closer and then had her stop. Her eyes were unreadable as she watched him put himself over the side. She leaned over the edge and found him waving at her. "Thank you, Stevie. See you soon!" He fitted his mask and regulator, and ducked under the water.

"Sooner than you think, Solo-san," she said to no one as she flipped her hair over her delicate shoulders and reached for the radio. "Tell me, what is the range of your radar?" She asked the technician politely.



The only proof that Trudy had of time passing was the reduction of the size of the flames as they ate their fuel. She snuggled as close to Illya as she had dared, trying to combine body heat to keep warm. *I don't think I can do anything to prevent a chill, my friend. What was that word? Tovarich?* Her blond companion mumbled in Russian once in a while, and one time rolled his head violently. Trudy bit her lip and tried to keep his head still. *I don't know if your spinal cord is severed yet or not, Tovarich, but I'll be damned if I'll let you damage yourself further!*

Time seemed to stretch inconceivably. The flames were much lower now, and at one point, Trudy was sure she heard something just outside the debris field. *What does a surfacing sub sound like?* She thought, trying to see a conning tower in the darkness. Nothing came of it; maybe Illya was right about them being in International waters. Would they still try to find them?

She was fighting fatigue as a result of hypothermia. Her eyelids kept drifting shut, and she tried to keep up a conversation with her deceased husband or the unresponsive agent to stay awake. Soon, she couldn't think of anything else to say, so she started to sing. The sound of mechanical breathing startled her.

"Hello?" she said to the darkness.

"Are you alone?" A deep voice asked off to her right.

"Who are you?" She demanded, laying a protective hand across Illya's chest. She felt Bratsk's handgun tucked in his waistband and hauled it out, pointing it in the direction of the voice. "I won't let you take him!"

She heard the sound of swimming, and the voice was closer the second time.

"Believe me, I don't want him. He can be nothing but trouble."

She saw eyes, just a few inches above water level not three feet from her. Dawn was just touching the sea, driving off the endless blackness. She could see a diving mask was perched on his head. He kept his distance, but she saw the eyes flick to the blond man, then back to her.

"Our boss, however, seems to want him back. I could use the office space, but I'd miss his sour looks."

Trudy could tell he wanted to get closer, but was waiting her out. She could also tell his genuine concern for Illya.

"You're Napoleon Solo, aren't you?" She said hoarsely, her throat beginning to feel rather sore and raw. "Illya said you'd come."

She saw a flash of teeth as he smiled briefly then swam to them. "You must be Gertrude Kidd." He started to examine his friend as he spoke. "I've been swimming out here for almost an hour looking for him. I'm glad he wasn't alone."

She dropped the gun. "Trudy. Only my mother called me Gertrude. He's unconscious. I think he's paralyzed; it could be temporary, though," she added quickly at the look of dismay she saw in Solo's eyes. "He's got a bullet stuck in his neck which may be infected. He also has some broken bones and bruises, and a concussion, among other things. He needs to be in a hospital, Mr. Solo."

He smiled gently at her. "He'll like that about as much as he's enjoying this." He moved to be alongside Trudy. "Can you help me kick? I have a ride waiting somewhere over that a way." He indicated east with his chin.

"Are you kidding?" She said through chattering teeth. "Compared to what I've been through?" She began to kick in a steady rhythm.

They had only gone a few yards when they heard a voice speaking Russian. Solo glanced back over his shoulder and in the early light, saw two soldiers in a raft. One had a rifle pointed at them.

Solo didn't speak Russian, but he knew the intent of the words that came from the darkness and stopped kicking. The one with the rifle seemed to be in charge, and was telling Solo something. "I'm sorry," Napoleon said with his best smile. "I don't speak Russian, and my interpreter here seems to be unavailable." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Trudy's fingers moving towards the gun on Illya's chest. He kept talking to distract the man. "I assume there is something here you want. Isn't that just like my partner; he has no social graces. I don't see



anything here that qualifies as a gift. Except, perhaps, my partner himself? You want him?"

The sound of nearby motors made Asikov blink and look around. Through the smoke of the burning trawler a fishing boat appeared. Then another, and another. Within a minute or two Trudy and the agents were in the center of a semicircle of at least a dozen Japanese fishing trawlers loaded with smiling fishermen.

Solo could hardly keep the look of surprise off his face when he saw a hull emblazoned with the familiar name 'Empress' push its way into the forefront. The surprise was replaced with a huge smile.

"I don't think our friend over there has the stomach for an international incident, do you, Solo-san?" She kept smiling and waving at him.

Napoleon glanced over to the Russian boat. The rifle was now out of sight, and the boat wasn't moving any closer. The angry glow in the man's eyes was obvious. There was a lot of hatred there.

"By our calculations," and she waved her arm to indicate all the boats around her, "we are in International waters. Can fifteen fishing boat captains be wrong?" Stevie said with a smile, her companions looking completely innocent. They obviously didn't understand English, but knew the intent of this action.

Taking advantage of the stalemate, Solo kicked the floating platform alongside the Empress. Stevie and the technician helped the three of them in the Empress, and they were off, leaving the burning remains behind. The U.N.C.L.E. technician wrapped Trudy in a blanket, and tossed several more to Solo, who was bending over the very still form of Kuryakin.

Stevie's hair was glistening in the early morning light as she gunned the engine. Her dark tresses were blown back from her face as she steered the Empress to shore. She smiled briefly at Solo, and he nodded his thanks as he bent to help his partner and friend.

Fourteen boats lined up in a sloppy 'V' shape behind her as they left Russian waters for Japan.



## EPILOGUE : Going Home

They had taken the Empress directly to Sapporo. Solo and Trudy did as much for Illya as they could by keeping him warm and still, and the medical facility at the U.N.C.L.E. office there was well prepared for serious injury. It was late in the afternoon before he showed signs of consciousness and was stable enough for surgery. He was whisked off to the Operating Room just as Stevie brought Trudy back to join Napoleon in the waiting room. Trudy had been given a complete physical and been allowed to clean up, and Stevie bought some clothes for her. Except for lack of sleep, she insisted she felt fine, and slapped herself on her forehead when she heard herself utter those words.

"Damn, I've only been around him a couple of weeks and I've picked up his mannerisms!"

Solo had to smile, even though he was very worried. Illya had been lucky to meet up with this one, he'd decided as soon as he met her. Waverly had tasked Solo with debriefing the 'civilian involved', and figured now was as good a time as any. It certainly would help the time pass.

She gave her report like a professional. With each daring deed and sneaky tactic, she relayed to him, his respect for her grew. Stevie just sat and listened in open-mouthed astonishment.

"So this is the manual of the device that started all this, huh?" Solo held up the warped, wet book, and Trudy nodded, exhausted. "Well, U.N.C.L.E. can figure all this out, I'm sure. And may I say thank you again for helping Illya complete his mission? And I'm sure our boss Mr. Waverly will want to meet you when we return stateside."

"Yes, and I want to speak to him. Is he in charge of the hiring and firing of U.N.C.L.E. personnel?" Trudy asked directly, sitting back confidently like she was on a job interview.

"Ah, well, yes and no," Solo stammered. "You want to join U.N.C.L.E.?" What he didn't notice was how Stevie leaned forward to hear more herself.

"I loved Army nursing. Since I left the Army and my husband died I have found that nursing in a traditional hospital or private scenario has been unfulfilling. That's why I was traveling, to see where I wanted to be. I think your outfit and my experience would be a perfect fit: New environments and nursing a different kind of soldier. Where do I sign up?"

Solo grinned. "I would think after being with my partner for that length of time that he would have scared you away!"

Trudy snorted. "Him? His bark is worse than his . . . well, OK, that may not be true, but I do know that he has a pure heart. But Sir Galahad he ain't."

Solo laughed out loud. "I'm sure Mr. Waverly would *love* to talk to you!"

"Solo-san," Stevie said as she laid a gentle hand on his forearm. "I would like to speak to your organization also. I will start with the Sapporo office, if you will give me an introduction."

He smiled at her warmly. "You got it, Miss Inturi. I think you both would be fine additions."

They chatted lightly to keep busy, and were surprised when the surgeon interrupted them hours later. "He's in recovery. I've already reported to Mr. Waverly in New York, and he's instructed me to fill you in." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well?" Solo asked impatiently. Trudy took his elbow to steady both him and herself.

"He should be fine. The slug was wedged between two vertebrae and caused considerable irritation to the nerve bundle and cord. There was a small pocket of infection, and inflammation of the surrounding tissue. We got the slug out, and cleaned up the area, and haven't seen any permanent damage, but we have to wait until the swelling goes down to get a good picture of long term recovery. The concussion to his skull was considerable, and there's a little swelling there, but no bleeding."

"But you think he should be all right?" Stevie asked.

"That's my guess. I didn't see anything there to worry me. He is a very lucky young man."

Trudy snorted. "If you call getting shot in the back and clobbered on the head lucky. What room will he be taken to?"

He told them, they thanked him, and they made their way to the room. None of them would be truly content until they saw for themselves. They met the gurney in the hall outside the room. Illya's face was as white as the pillow and the bandages around his torso. His eyes, however, were cracked open and his annoyance of the whole situation clear.

Trudy grabbed the chart off his bed and flipped through the papers while Solo spoke with the nurses who were transferring his partner to the hospital bed. "Um, I think I would drop him once to let him know who's boss here, ladies."

Illya glared at him. "They aren't as clumsy as you, Napoleon." He said quietly but quite clearly.

"I see a clonk on the head hasn't improved your personality," Solo clucked.

"Boys!" Trudy scolded, replacing the chart. "If you don't behave I'll have to separate you into time out corners!"

Stevie giggled. Solo looked surprised. Illya rolled his eyes. "See what I've had to put up with?" The blond agent said.

Trudy and Napoleon looked at each other. "He must be referring to you," they both said simultaneously.

Illya sighed. "I think if you both research your genealogies you will both find you are related to the same mule somewhere. But before you do, watch this."

All eyes turned to him. Slowly, he raised a shaky arm.

"Hey! You can move!" Trudy said. "You're going to be all right."

Illya's hand made a waving motion.

"That's great, Illya! You'll be at those reports in no time!" Solo grinned.

Stevie frowned. "I believe he's telling us something."

They all looked at the hand shooing them out the door. "Go away, will you? How is a person supposed to rest around here?" Illya said to their surprised faces.

Solo gathered up the women after they said their goodbyes and herded them out the door. The last to leave, Solo gave his partner a parting word.

"I've did save all the unfinished reports for you, you know. Want me to bring them here for you?"

The signal Illya gave him with his fingers made clear his reply.

**FINIS**