

“Congratulations, Agent Kuryakin.” Jake Davenport, Section Chief of the Eastern United States Branch of UNCLE, stood to shake Illya’s hand. He was scheduled to move up to Chief of their European Division within the month, and Illya thought that he would be sorry to see him go. “Your record in Enforcement has been outstanding – both the earlier years, with Agent Solo, and these last four on your own. You have done this country – and the world – a great service. Well done.”

“Thank you, sir,” Illya answered. Had it really been four years since Napoleon had turned forty and been retired from the field? It felt like a lifetime ... and it felt like yesterday, that Napoleon had given his hand the same sort of brisk shake Davenport just had, and walked away. Walked away from their partnership, walked away from their friendship – walked out of Illya’s life. He blinked, and forced himself to refocus because Davenport was still talking.

“Now that you are forty it is, of course, time to change your classification. Have you given any thought to where you would like to be assigned for the future?”

It was a rhetorical question. Illya had already been approached, quietly, regarding his next position. They wouldn’t take the chance of him turning them down at this meeting of the full Board. They had offered and he had accepted, with real pleasure. So he only said, “I wish to continue serving UNCLE to the best of my abilities,” and waited.

“We have given serious consideration to the proposal you submitted last month,” Davenport went on, a faint tug at the corner of his mouth indicating his recognition of the dance they were engaged in, and the amusement it brought him. Charmed despite himself, Illya permitted his own mouth to quirk upward slightly. “A combined Physics, Chemistry and Research Sciences Department would – at least on paper – greatly facilitate the flow of communication among those sections. While we had wanted to wait until our new Section Chief is in position, for various reasons we are going ahead now and authorizing this change, and would like to offer you the position of Staff Operations and Program Manager.”

Staff? Illya’s eyebrows rose. That had not been broached before, so he thought about it. A staff position would move him out of the chain of direct command, although it would keep the reins and ultimate responsibility for the departments firmly in his hands. Davenport, who was watching him closely, leaned forward.

“This would enable us to pay you according to your abilities and the level of success you bring to this position, instead of tying you to regularly scheduled raises. It would also lift some of the paperwork burden from your shoulders, thus freeing you for research. That was one of the concerns you mentioned in your proposal.”

All true. Illya nodded. But it would leave future promotions ambiguous, to say the least. Not that he had his eyes fixed on that – it was the work that mattered, and this would give him a great deal more leeway to choose that work. Davenport’s eyes were still boring into his and Illya was suddenly aware that the man was a step ahead of him. He looked back blandly and waited for further information.

“We foresee a time when more departments would come under your aegis,” Davenport continued. “Library Research, Project Development ... those are two which come quickly to mind. As your areas of responsibility increase, so will your salary and benefits. Additional ...

ah, perks, would be added as well. For example, we are authorizing you to use the Executive Dining Room effective immediately. That sort of thing.”

Illya nodded again. It sounded good – more than good. It sounded challenging, and exciting, and fulfilling. He could do his research, write and publish articles and let the routine maintenance of the departments fall to those directly under him. He already had their names in mind. He could do a lot of good in this position, he knew it. It was an honor, that they were offering it to him. He acknowledged that with a small bow.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “I accept.”

They all shook his hand again, and he was dismissed.

Out in the hall he stopped. Excitement was rising in him, and his hands fairly tingled with his desire to get them on those far flung departments, where requests for information and test results could now take days or even weeks, and bring them together under his watchful eye. No more waste, no more duplication of effort, no more shunting responsibility from one to the other. He would ... his stomach growled and he realized that he was hungry. Very hungry. He looked at the time, and blinked to see that it was eight thirty-five. No wonder he was hungry. He hadn't eaten anything since a grabbed hot buttered roll at ten. And it was Friday night. Eight thirty-five on a Friday night was not the time to implement the changes he had in mind. Many people would have already gone home, and the ones who remained would be getting ready to do so. He would have to start thinking in those terms, if he was to manage his staff effectively. No more was he a field agent, working without regard to such things as weekends, holidays, overtime. He would be responsible now for keeping those costs down, for getting what needed doing done within the confines of the nine to five work week, whenever possible. Tasks left for the night shift would have to be clearly laid out, and the progress desired specified.

He suddenly saw many empty evenings ahead of him. He couldn't just work through the night the way he used to, because if he was at work others would have to be working too, and that would only breed resentment. And there would be no sudden calls, no swift jetting from one corner of the world to the other to deal with trouble as it arose. He was a pencil pusher now – a mouse and keyboard clicker really, he thought, and smiled a little. It would be a big adjustment. He might as well get used to it. His stomach growled again, and he thought of the Executive Dining Room, but not seriously. A formal sit down dinner, surrounded by other executives, was not his idea of a relaxing meal. He would pick something up on his way home – something he liked, and maybe a bottle of vodka or even champagne because this was a night to celebrate, wasn't it? Everything he had desired was in his reach. The people he had eyed with wonder and awe when he first arrived from the Soviet Union were his peers now. He was one of them. He was ... no longer a field agent.

That was such a big thought it was hard to get his mind around it, even though he had known this day was coming. Legal challenges to the age limit had been made, but none had been upheld. He thought that was probably because when most people actually reached this point, they were ready to leave. He was. Napoleon certainly had been.

Napoleon had reached out with both hands and grabbed the position they had offered him. Regional Advisor. It seemed innocuous, and that was part of the reason for the title. It sounded

non threatening. Oh, the Regional Advisor is coming for a few days. Nothing to alarm anyone. But then Napoleon Solo would arrive, with his eagle eye for inefficiency, his intolerance for slacking off. He would go through departments with a fine tooth comb and utter ruthlessness, weeding out anyone not pulling his or her own weight, tightening budgets wherever possible, putting his own stamp on everything. By the time he left staff would have been cut, funds reappropriated, and nerves shredded. Illya knew all this from personal experience, because Napoleon had been in New York just a few months ago, going through Communications. Even observing it second hand had been a harrowing experience. Secretaries had wept in the cafeteria, people had packed up and left between one day and the next, and behind closed doors voices had been raised and silenced, while Napoleon's own voice, hard and controlled, had gone on evenly.

Now why was he thinking about that? Napoleon had been in New York for five days, and had not contacted him once. Beyond a brief nod and a short "Illya", when they met in the elevator, Napoleon had not even acknowledged his existence. There was not the slightest indication that Illya was more to him than any other worker in UNCLE New York. Illya supposed he wasn't. Obviously he wasn't, because when Napoleon had left their team he had never looked back.

No phone calls. No emails. Not so much as a postcard. Nothing. When Napoleon had set the fieldwork aside he had set his partner aside too, and nothing in his life had ever hurt Illya so much. And that was saying something. Napoleon ... oh, Napoleon.

Illya stood in the hall, hunger forgotten, and thought about Napoleon Solo. They had been close – so very close. Napoleon had guarded him with a ferocity that had always seemed to go beyond that of one agent for another. And those brief touches; a hand to his cheek, or in his hair ... Illya closed his eyes, remembering.

He had fallen in love with Napoleon sometime during that first year together. He never had been able to put his finger on when it had happened, but by the time they were embarking on their seventh assignment he knew it was true. And rejoiced.

Rejoiced. Because hopeless as it was, foolish as it was, secret as it had to be, to find himself capable of love was a revelation. He had always thought himself impervious to the softer emotions. His childhood and adolescence had turned him in on himself, taught him that safety lay in utter self reliance, that other people were not ever to be trusted, that everyone would hurt you if they could, and the only protection from that pain was to make yourself a cipher. Mysterious, unreadable, impenetrable, because if no one knew when they were hurting you it was almost as good as not being hurt at all. Emotionally, that was. Physical pain was different. Under it he grunted, or cried out, or swore softly, or gasped. It took resources to keep silent, and why waste them on something that made no difference? Anyone who punched you in the gut knew he was hurting you, anyone who lashed you with a bullwhip knew he was hurting you. But emotionally ... the Ice Prince, they called him, and the first time he had heard it he had been glad. He had pretended otherwise, of course, had directed a glacial stare at the hapless clerk who had had the misfortune to be speaking of him as he rounded the corner, but it had pleased him nonetheless.

But Napoleon had pierced those defenses effortlessly. His kindness, his genuine concern for Illya's well being ... even to feeding him, or finding him a coat when it was cold ... had left Illya helplessly exposed. He loved Napoleon. And when he realized that, a fierce exultation swept

him. He loved. He could love. And the man he loved was worthy. Napoleon Solo would never betray him, never abandon him, never let him down. It hurt, on occasion, to be on the receiving end of Napoleon's caustic tongue, but he knew Napoleon well enough not to be seriously offended. And sure enough, within a day or two Napoleon would appear at his door with a pizza, or a bottle, or an odd gift ... a jazz record he knew Illya had long sought, or a book he thought Illya might enjoy.

He had never entertained any expectations of a return, of course – Napoleon's sexual pattern was obvious. But all those women meant nothing. Napoleon talked of them to him afterwards, and the dismissive tone in his voice was balm to Illya's heart. It was him Napoleon turned to when he needed more, him Napoleon bared his soul to, his shoulder Napoleon leaned on when the cares and burdens of his position became too much. Maybe it wasn't love in the same way Illya loved him, but it was far more than he had ever dreamed of having.

As Napoleon's fortieth birthday approached, Illya had wondered. What would happen now? Surely ... surely Napoleon wouldn't just accept another assignment as if they were nothing more to one another than any other working team. Surely ... but that was how it had happened. They had finished up their last mission, and flown back to New York. Napoleon had been called in to Alexander Waverly's office – this was just before the old man's retirement – and when he came out he had a plane ticket in his hand. He had stopped by their shared office to gather up his belongings, promise Illya that he could reign there in solitary splendor from now on, and give him an awkward one armed hug in farewell. Illya, awash with Napoleon's closeness, his scent, and the warm solid feel of him, had managed a 'good luck, Napoleon', and then Napoleon had been gone.

And he had stayed gone. Illya wasn't sure what he had expected, but it hadn't been this silence. Oh, he heard of Napoleon frequently; his shake-ups in California, the scandal he had uncovered in Bolivia, his brief foray into the field to retrieve secrets gone missing from a lab in Paris. When he knew Napoleon was coming to New York he had been vibrating with excitement. He had cleared his calendar, canceled a workshop he had planned to attend, and waited for the dinner invitation, the afternoon drop-in. But nothing had materialized. And after that brief encounter in the elevator, when Napoleon's eyes had rested on him, recognized him and given him the barest acknowledgment courtesy required, hope died. Napoleon didn't ... Napoleon hadn't even liked him particularly. Napoleon had ... had Napoleon really encouraged those feelings in him so he would be more devoted, more passionate about their partnership, and thus more valuable? Surely not. Napoleon was an honorable man. It was Illya's own fault that he had had such a false perception of their relationship. His own fault, that he had fallen in love. But he couldn't regret it. He had seen too much of what became of the human spirit without love to regret his own. It would be better, of course, to be loved in return. But failing that, it was still good to love.

"Good night, Illya." It was his secretary, Nicole. How long had he been standing here, daydreaming of the past? It embarrassed him, and he flushed, nodded jerkily.

"Goodnight, Nicole," he answered, and then he smiled at her because he liked Nicole. She was small, and shy, and very efficient. She smiled back.

“I hear big things are going to happen in our department,” she said. “I was going to put a down payment on a secondhand Toyota this weekend. Should I forget it and try to get more miles out of the Saturn instead?” She was still smiling, but her eyes were anxious.

Startled, he looked at her more closely. Was she really worried about her job? Was everyone? Well, maybe some people should be. But not this girl who never missed a deadline, was unfailingly courteous and pleasant; who was still here at nine o’clock on a Friday night. “Go ahead,” he said, and touched her shoulder lightly. He had learned well from Napoleon the effectiveness of infrequent, well considered physical contact. “Choose a new one if you want. You can afford it.”

She colored up with pleasure. “Oh, thank you. I won’t say a word to anyone, I promise.”

“I know that,” he told her. “Or I wouldn’t have said it.”

“But you know, Illya,” she looked at him very seriously now. “When you buy a new car you take a major depreciation. It’s better to get a two year old model.”

“So it is,” he said, and laughed a little. She laughed back at him. “So it is. Goodnight, Nicole. Have a good weekend.”

“You too. What are you doing to celebrate that which should not be mentioned until Monday morning, and who are you celebrating with?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” he answered although he had, of course. He would go home with take out. What else was there to do?

“Well, have fun.”

“Thank you. Have fun car shopping.”

“Oh, I will. My fiancé and I are going tomorrow morning. I had thought I’d have to settle on a much older model to get the Toyota – they’re very popular right now, you know. But now I don’t?”

“Now you don’t,” he agreed, and she positively glowed. He watched her go down the hall, and smiled again before turning his steps towards his office where he would pick up his coat and briefcase and head home, alone.

Alone. He thought of that while he put on his coat. There was no one to celebrate with. There was no one who cared one bit that he had gotten this promotion. The people under him cared, but only in so far as it affected their own careers, their own lives. There was no one to rejoice with him, no one to share a bottle of champagne with him, no one to be glad for him, proud of him. No one. He was utterly alone, and while he had always known that, tonight it bit deep. Solitude meant safety, because when you were alone that meant there was no one to harm you. But sometimes ... sometimes it was hard. Tonight it was harder than usual.

He straightened his shoulders. There was no point brooding over it. He would get Chinese, he decided, because he was in the mood for General Chicken. And he would get vodka because champagne all alone would just be sad. He would eat his dinner in his comfortable West

Greenwich Village studio apartment, and he would drink his vodka, and he would be safe. At one point in his life ample food and physical safety had been the summit of his ambitions, and it still wasn't a bad thing. Not a bad thing at all.

He stepped out of the front entrance and looked around for a cab. Ordinarily he would take the subway – unlike Nicole he had no car, not even a used one. It had never seemed necessary. He didn't mind the subway, but tonight he was celebrating. He would relax in the back of a taxi, have it stop and wait at the Chinese take out restaurant, and then bring him home. He was entitled, wasn't he? So he looked down the street, alert for the lit 'on duty' sign that would mean he had a ride home.

A limousine pulled up in front of headquarters and instinctively he stepped back, hand going to his weapon. But the interior light flashed once, twice, and at the familiar signal he came back out of the doorway, looking past the long black car for the elusive taxi. The back door of the limo opened, and a man stepped out. Illya registered his solitary state, his well cut suit, the seeming lack of threat he presented, and then he stiffened with shock.

Napoleon smiled at him. "Hello, Illya," he said, and held the door open. "Want a lift?"

"A ... a lift? From you? But what ... where ... how ..." he realized he was stammering, and colored hotly. But really, what was Napoleon doing here? He had heard nothing of an impending inspection and even if there was one, why would Napoleon offer him a ride? Last time ... "you didn't even give me the time of day!" he blurted, and flushed again. Not only did that reveal far too much, it didn't make any sense in the context of their conversation. "I mean ..."

"I know what you mean. I'm sorry, for that. I can explain, if you're interested." He gestured towards the open door. "Come on in. I have champagne, caviar, and those Ritz crackers you like so well. Let's celebrate."

"Celebrate?" Why was he repeating everything Napoleon said? Because he was struck witless by his sudden appearance, that was why.

"Not a good idea to be lingering here," Napoleon went on, his sharp gaze, moving everywhere, belying his casual tone.

No. No, it wasn't. So he crossed the sidewalk, cast another startled glance at Napoleon, and climbed into the car. Napoleon followed him and the car pulled out. "What were you going to do for dinner?" he asked. "General Tso's Chicken, am I right?"

"General ..." he realized he was doing it again, and blushed furiously. His face was so hot he put both hands to it to cool it down, realized how that looked, and dropped them into his lap. "Um, yes. Yes I ... I was going to stop at the East Buffet."

"And you can still do that if you want. But it so happens that an order of General Tso's Chicken is even now waiting for us at Ling's." Ling's was a very private, very expensive Asian restaurant. Illya had only eaten there once, with a group of other scientists, but he remembered well the tender plump pieces of chicken, the sauce that had made all his taste buds sit up and pay attention, the perfectly done broccoli and rice. By contrast East Buffet's chicken was sometimes

stringy, often tough, and was mixed with baby carrots which he didn't care for nearly as much. Napoleon was laughing at whatever his face was showing, and he flushed again.

"Yes please," he answered and this time he had to press his cheek to the window to cool its flush. How lame he sounded. Stuttering and parroting Napoleon's every utterance and finishing up with yes please, like a schoolboy. Napoleon always had had this effect on him, making him feel impossibly gauche and young. "But why?" he gestured towards the champagne glass Napoleon was even now holding out to him and knocked into it, spilling some onto Napoleon's faultless suit. This was even worse. In fact the whole thing was terrible. How he had longed for just this, over all those empty years and now here Napoleon was, and he was making a fool of himself. "I'm sorry," he said and began to dab at the spill with a napkin, realized that it was Napoleon's inner thigh he was touching, dropped the napkin and blushed some more.

"No, I am. I see I should have given you a heads up – a phone call at least. I was so set on surprising you I didn't ... Illya? Is it all right if I celebrate your promotion with you? I didn't even think, but you might have other plans."

Humiliation on top of humiliation. Now he had to confess his lack of plans, his lack of anyone in his life who would share such a celebration with him. "No. I mean, well, yes. I was going to go home and eat Chinese and drink vodka and think about what it means, that I am now" he coughed. "Staff Operations and Program Manager."

"You always were good company for yourself," Napoleon said and reached out, brushed a strand of loose hair out of Illya's eyes. The touch undid him. His stomach turned over – but not in a bad way, definitely not – and his legs felt so weak that if he had been standing he would have had to hold on to something for support. He lowered his eyes, and Napoleon went on. "I've envied you that."

"You ... you have?" It had sounded so pathetic to him. Why would Napoleon find it enviable?

"When I'm alone I go find someone – anyone – to pass a few hours with. When you're alone you settle into yourself and are complete. It's a rare talent. Here we are. No, don't get out ..." as Illya reached for the handle. "The driver will do it. Just sit and let me look at you." He did so, scrutinizing Illya from the top of his head to his feet, shod in practical loafers. "You haven't changed a bit," he said finally, shaking his head. "How do you do it?"

"Neither have ..." but the words stuck in his throat because they weren't true. Napoleon had changed. His face was harder, more assured. No trace now of the dandy about town. This was a formidable man, a man who felt no need to turn on the charm unnecessarily. He could still turn it on if he chose, of that Illya had no doubt. Evidently it wasn't deemed necessary for him. He looked away. "I mean ..."

"No, that's all right. I know I've changed."

"I'm sure the women still flock around you." Because Napoleon was even handsomer than before, if that was possible. Illya sent him a quick look slanted up through his eyelashes just to confirm that, and colored once again at the expression on his face. It was dark, and intent, and completely focused on him. Napoleon might not be trying to charm him, but he was paying attention, no question.

“They do. They flock, I pick and choose, and they leave. And then the next morning the one I selected leaves as well. Does that sound good to you, Illya?”

“It sounds lonely,” he said without thinking, and then bit his tongue, hard. Napoleon always had had the knack of eliciting the truth from him. He asked, and Illya answered. But that had been downright rude. Who was he to criticize Napoleon’s life? “I didn’t mean it that way. I mean, mine ... mine is lonely too.” It was a hard admission to make, but he made it because he had to offer Napoleon something to make up for his intrusive remarks.

“Goes with the territory, they tell me,” Napoleon returned and then the driver got back in and they pulled away from the curb. “Would you mind very much if we celebrated at my place instead? My fax machine is there, and I’m expecting some calls as well. I could forward them to you, of course, or take them on my cell, but it would be easier for me to be at my home base.”

“You kept the penthouse?” Illya was surprised. He had had no idea Napoleon ever planned to return to New York.

“Yes. What do you say?”

“All right.” He shrugged. What difference did it make? But when they rode the elevator up to Napoleon’s Upper East Side apartment – so familiar it took his breath just to be there, so he was thankful that Napoleon too was silent – and came in to find champagne in an ice bucket on the counter, and a tray of caviar and Ritz crackers in the refrigerator, he gave Napoleon an accusing look.

“You knew I’d say yes?”

“You always have before.”

And that was so true that he had no answer to it. He felt he should scowl, should be overtly irritated that Napoleon had been presumptuous, but he didn’t want to. It was so good to see Napoleon, he didn’t want to waste any of this time sulking or even pretending to sulk. So he accepted the glass of champagne Napoleon held out, managing not to spill it this time, and let him clink his own against it.

“To you,” Napoleon said. “The best field agent UNCLE ever had, the best lab scientist UNCLE ever had, and now the best science manager they ever will have. You survived the fieldwork, you’ve outlasted the Soviet Union and are hence free, and I ... I have missed you terribly, Illya. I know ...” holding up one hand to forestall Illya’s protest. “I haven’t given you the time of day. That was for your protection. Waverly warned me to cut all contact with you, to make it plain we were nothing more to one another than work partners, despite the rumors.”

“R ... rumors?”

“Don’t tell me you never heard them.”

“Um ...”

“ I love it when you say that. That little syllable ... like you know just what you want to say and don't choose to say it for whatever reason. The rumors that we were more than friends, more than field partners.”

“Um ...” he flushed hotly and Napoleon laughed.

“You keep doing that. Illya. Are you glad to see me?”

“Yes.” He lifted his eyes to Napoleon's and knew that they were showing too much. He wanted to veil them, but Napoleon deserved honesty from him at the very least. “Very glad.”

“And I am glad to see you.” He took a step closer, and set down his champagne glass. “The rumors that we were lovers,” he whispered and Illya put his glass down too.

“I wasn't sure you had heard them. I thought if you did, you might be offended with me, or too uncomfortable to work with me anymore.”

“I felt the same way. I thought you must have heard them, because not much gets by you, but you never said ... so neither did I. But the talk was there, and Waverly was concerned that they might try to use you to get at me, once I was promoted and you were out in the cold without me. I ... he had a point. A good one. So I let it go, all those years together, like it was nothing to me, just a part of the job now over. I let you go, as if you were nothing to me.”

“Oh.” Was he dreaming? That was how it felt, as Napoleon wrapped everything up in one neat little paragraph, explaining and justifying the long silence, the seeming indifference. “And now?”

“Now your job has changed and mine ... mine has changed too. I'm back in New York to stay. And I thought that maybe the time has come.”

“The time? What time?”

In answer Napoleon reached out, captured both Illya's hands in his. Illya jumped, started to pull free, then didn't. Napoleon moved closer. “To tell you that you are far from nothing to me. You are ... you are everything. Everything good and honest and true in my life, everything trustworthy and pure ...”

“Pure?” Illya's mouth twisted. “That's an odd word to use to describe me. You've read my file. Honey trap, lure ... bait and reward and leverage.”

“I'm not talking about that. Your heart is pure, Illya. I see it in your eyes when you look at me. I see it right now.” He used the hands he still held to draw Illya closer, and Illya went. What was Napoleon doing? He was gazing very intently into Illya's eyes now, and Illya gazed back, bemused. Because it looked as if ... it very much looked as if ... Napoleon were going to kiss him. He had seen the look second hand so often over the years that he almost rolled his eyes in automatic response, but he didn't because this time ... this time the look was for him. Napoleon was getting ready to kiss him. He was leaning in even closer, his eyes were moving appreciatively over Illya's face as if he were the best thing Napoleon had seen in a very long time ... it was all so familiar that when Napoleon smiled, that small smile that said here it comes,

Illya closed his eyes just as he had seen all those women do; closed his eyes and tipped his head back.

He was held fast in Napoleon's embrace, Napoleon's arms all the way around him, and he was suddenly alarmed by the collapse of his defenses. The distance he had been maintaining to protect himself had gone, and he had no defenses anymore, they were stripped from him whether he had wanted to give them up or no. It made him not want to, but it was too late, far too late.

Then Napoleon kissed him. Napoleon's mouth was hard, demanding response even as his tongue demanded entrance. That was good, and his lips parted, but the alarm deepened. He was giving it away, all of it, without being sure this was such a good idea. What would happen afterwards? To lose Napoleon again after having just found him, to lose him in such a way, as one more bed partner, enjoyed and discarded, would be intolerable. Everything was at risk – his hard won adjustment, his heart and his happiness were at risk and he had had no say in the choosing because – he swallowed as Napoleon drew back. He wished the kiss had never happened, wished it hadn't stopped. He felt Napoleon's eyes on his face even with his own closed, and turned away from that gaze that knew him too well, not wanting his surrender to be seen, written all over him as it surely was. It was only after he had put his face in Napoleon's shoulder to hide it that he recognized the gesture for the surrender that it was. And his body was so urgent, wanting more, needing to be even closer.

"You – you didn't like that?" Napoleon said and Illya frowned against his neck. He went over the words again, trying to make them make sense because obviously he had liked it, he was shaking all over with the intensity of that liking.

"What do you mean I didn't like it?" He moved against Napoleon, partly as a demonstration and partly because he had to, he had to move, and he had to be closer. Napoleon's hands slid down his back, pressing them together hard, and he moved too. Then he drew back.

"But something was wrong. I felt it. I know it. Illya, please tell me. Whatever it is, I'll do it differently, or – or not at all, if you'd prefer that. I –" his voice shook and he stopped, cleared his throat. Illya lifted his head to stare at him in amazement. Under that stare, Napoleon colored painfully. "You're not used to seeing me like this, are you. All stammering and unsure – but you have me at a complete disadvantage. I may as well admit it. I am ... defenseless in the face of what I feel for you."

"Is that how you feel?"

"Yes."

"That's how I feel."

"You? But you don't need – surely you know you don't need – Illya." Napoleon cupped his face between both hands. "You need no defense against me," Napoleon said then, and Illya nodded because it was true and he knew it. Napoleon wouldn't lie to him, not now, not over such a thing. He wanted to answer, to give Napoleon the same assurance but he didn't trust his voice, so he kissed Napoleon's fingers instead, kissed each one and then his palm.

Napoleon caressed his face, hands shaking, touched him like a blind man learning Illya anew by those touches. Then he leaned in and kissed Illya again and Illya yielded. He was no longer thinking of defenses, his or Napoleon's, no longer thinking at all. He was dimly aware of Napoleon moving them towards the bed, the experienced seducer again, every slight turn, every shuffling step bringing them closer, until Illya bumped against the bed with the backs of his knees

There was a lull while each undressed, because what more was there to say? Even as Illya thought that, Napoleon lifted his head.

"I love you," he said, and there had been more to say after all. Just three words, and Illya was soaring. Napoleon would never say them lightly, Napoleon had often vowed never to say them at all, so for Napoleon to say them to him now meant ... must mean ... everything. He wanted to say them back but Napoleon embraced him again, kissed him again. They kissed for a long time, soft now, and sweet, nuzzling, sucking, tongues entwined in a dance of their own. Finally Napoleon straightened.

"Illya," he whispered. "This is the culmination of everything. Everything. I waited ... it was so hard, but I waited because I wouldn't endanger you unnecessarily. But every night that I was away, I longed for this moment. When I came to New York and saw you in that elevator, it took everything I had not to hit the stop button and take you in my arms and do this ..." kissing Illya's throat ... "and this" bringing him down onto the bed ... "and this." He stretched out full length on top of Illya, and Illya arched up to him, helpless not to, helpless to do anything but press against Napoleon, kiss Napoleon's cheek, and his chin, and then his mouth again. Napoleon kissed him back and they moved together, moved against one another, desire building to frenzy. And after frenzy came glory.

Glory. Illya twisted under Napoleon, gasping, crying out, clinging to him, feeling the strength of Napoleon's arms, clinging too. They clung to each other and it was like having been lost and now being found. Found in one another's arms, found in one another's kisses. Found in one another's love.

They lay spent, breath coming in ragged wheezes, bodies slick with sweat. Napoleon was heavy but Illya didn't mind, he liked it. He ran his hands down Napoleon's back and Napoleon murmured something incoherent into Illya's hair.

"What?"

Napoleon lifted his head. "I said," he articulated, "how was that for a celebration?"

"It was fine. Just fine."

"Only fine?"

"Well ..." Illya could feel his lips curving upward in a smile and could see Napoleon's eyes laughing back in response. "We never ate the General Tso's chicken.

"I'll be damned." Napoleon rolled off him, propped himself up on one elbow and began stroking Illya's stomach. Illya shivered. "I must have been pretty good, to distract you from your food."

Illya yawned. “Pretty good,” he allowed and Napoleon wrapped both arms around his waist, nuzzled his belly.

“Pretty good, hmmm? And how about this?” He nuzzled lower.

“Yes, that’s all right too.”

“Pretty good, all right, fine. You’re a real sweet talker, Illya Kuryakin, do you know that?”

“Um,” Illya said and laughed out loud. “It was wonderful, Napoleon. And that ...” he caught his breath as Napoleon moved even lower, as Napoleon’s mouth surrounded him. “That ...” he trembled, and could say no more for several minutes. Finally Napoleon moved back up and kissed his cheek. There was such tenderness in the gesture, after the wild abandon of only a moment before, that Illya’s throat closed. He could find nothing to say so he only looked at Napoleon, knowing his heart was on his face, and Napoleon kissed the other cheek, then his nose.

“Stay right here,” he whispered, and got up. He was gone for some time and Illya lay there waiting, his body still throbbing with pleasure. Who would have thought Napoleon would have done that, and done it so well ... he reached down and touched himself, still damp from Napoleon’s attentions, and smiled. The smile widened when Napoleon came in carrying a tray. General Tso’s Chicken was on it, freshly heated and steaming slightly, along with caviar, Ritz crackers, and champagne in two crystal goblets .

Illya sat up and let Napoleon settle the tray on the bed. They sat cross legged and ate, feeding one another caviar, smiling at one another over the rims of their champagne glasses, eating the chicken and exchanging increasingly spicy kisses until finally Napoleon moved the tray onto the floor, turned to take Illya in his mouth again and Illya did the same to him.

It was slower this time, slow and sweet, a languorous climb to ecstasy that took them to the heights, spun them about until they were dizzy, clinging to one another’s hips, sucking and drinking and making smothered sounds against one another’s flesh until they collapsed, side by side. They fell asleep just that way, each curved into the other’s body, each inhaling the other’s scent, each defenseless within the fortress of the other’s love.

They spent the weekend wrapped up in one another, wrapped up in love. Saturday afternoon, after breakfast in bed, after a delicious session on the floor in front of Napoleon’s built in fireplace, Napoleon slid a ring onto Illya’s finger. It was yellow gold, with a thread of white diamonds tracing a delicate pattern around the band. It looked like the foam from an ocean wave, traveling about the ring. It was deceptively simple, exquisitely beautiful, and it had clearly been fabulously expensive. Napoleon kissed Illya when he had finished putting it on, and Illya kissed him back. “I love you,” he said, and realized it was the first time he had said it. Napoleon had said it first, and it had taken him nearly twenty-four hours to return the phrase. Had Napoleon been disappointed? Had he been waiting? Whatever he had been feeling before, the expression of dazed joy on his face now spoke volumes. It awed Illya, that Napoleon felt so strongly for and about him, and humbled him too. He kissed Napoleon again.

“You love me,” Napoleon’s voice was a whisper. “After all this time, after all that silence, you love me, Illya?”

“Yes.” He kissed Napoleon once more. “I love you. I have always loved you, Napoleon.”

“Did it hurt you very much, when I left and didn’t call you?”

He could never give this man anything but the truth. “Yes. And when I saw you in the elevator, when you were in New York, and all you said was ‘Illya’ – it broke my heart.” A melodramatic description perhaps, but honest. “I had canceled things ... I had cleared my schedule ... I was sure ...” he put his face into the crook of Napoleon’s shoulder and Napoleon held him close. Close, against that hard muscular body. Close, against Napoleon’s beating heart. It comforted him, and Napoleon’s words comforted him more.

“I’m sorry. I was sorry even as I did it because what I wanted ... well. I told you what I wanted to do.”

“Yes.” Hit the stop button and take you in my arms, Napoleon had said. How wonderful that would have been. But here and now, this was wonderful too. He shifted in the embrace and held out his hand, admiring his ring. “Are you going to wear one too?” He wondered suddenly if Napoleon planned to be faithful to him, if that was part of the arrangement. Surely it was. The symbolism of that ring, circling the third finger of his left hand, could mean nothing else. But Napoleon’s hand was bare. “Forsaking all others,” he said, and heard the warning in his voice. “Because otherwise ...”

“Forsaking all others, till death do us part.” Napoleon turned Illya’s hand over, kissed the palm. “And yes, I would very much like to wear a ring, Illya.” As evidence he produced one. Illya took it, studied it. It was identical to the one he wore, and when he put it on Napoleon’s finger the wash of emotion shook him so hard that all he could do was lean against Napoleon, trusting his words, trusting his commitment to this new thing between them.

Trust. The ultimate, forbidden luxury for an agent. But they had both indulged in it from the very beginning, wallowing in their faith in one another, never questioning the other’s loyalty, fearing nothing as long as the other was at his back. Illya smiled, thinking of it, and kissed Napoleon again. Napoleon gathered him in closer, and kissed him back, and there was no more talking for a long time.

Illya walked into the meeting Monday morning feeling as if his joy was visible to all. He had woken up in Napoleon’s arms, in Napoleon’s – their – bed. There had been no time for lovemaking, but just before Illya left Napoleon made him promise to come straight back home when the work day was done. “I know the new Section Chief will want to meet you and discuss the new arrangements for the Science sectors,” he said. “You’ll probably be tied up for a while with him and the rest of the board. And then I’m sure you will have plenty to do downstairs. But don’t be too late, Illya. I don’t start work for another week. I would like it very much if you could take some time off too. Is that possible at all? We could go away, give ourselves a few days just for ...” he ran his hand up Illya’s back and Illya dropped his briefcase. Napoleon chuckled, and did it again. “This,” he finished and Illya arched up towards him, into him, and they kissed.

“Yes,” he said when he could talk. “I can leave some orders with George – he’ll be taking over my old position. He’ll love bossing everyone around and making them move offices and change shifts. When I come back the groundwork will be laid, and we can really get our teeth into it.”

“You’re lucky to have George.”

“Yes. He’s deserved a promotion for a long time. Where do you want to go?”

“Someplace warm. It’s been chilly in Paris, foggy and damp in London and downright arctic in Dakota. Now here I am in New York and it’s barely hovering above freezing. But someplace close. I don’t want to waste our time together in travel. Florida all right with you? A private island in the Keys?”

“Buried in capitalistic bourgeois luxury?”

“For the rest of your life, comrade. Get used to it.”

“Well, it’s a rough job,” Illya began, then couldn’t keep it up any longer, and laughed out loud.

“Yes, Napoleon. A few days in Florida will be perfect. I can wrap it up today and be ready to leave tonight, if that’s what you want.”

“That’s exactly what I want. Take a cab to the airport. I’ll call you with the details. I’ll pack for you – or you can take one of the travel department’s little suitcases. Tell them tropical and they’ll have it ready when you leave.”

“All right. I thought those were only for assignments. We’re not supposed to use them for vacations.”

“I’ll make some business calls while I’m there, and you can email George a few times.”

“You’re assuming our new Section Chief will be pretty lenient. I’ve heard it’s going to be Bradshaw. He won’t let me get away with that. He’ll be demanding documentation and six hours a day in proven company work if I so much as use their sunscreen.”

“If it’s Bradshaw come home and pack. But I don’t think that it is.”

“No?” Illya drew back enough to look into Napoleon’s face. “The scuttlebutt says he’s in.”

“We’ll see. And I’ll see you at work.”

“You’ll come down and visit me?”

“Sure. We’ll have lunch. We’re going to be a scandal as it is, we might as well give them something to talk about. We can sit there and flaunt our rings –oh, very discretely, but those girls in food service don’t miss a thing.”

“No they don’t,” Illya said and laughed because he was happy, so very happy. “See you then.”

So now he straightened his tie, checked that his jacket was settled correctly on his shoulders, and entered the boardroom.

Napoleon was sitting at the head of the table, and as soon as Illya saw him he knew. Oh, you're close, he thought in admiration. All weekend long you knew, and didn't tell me. We even discussed who it might be, and you still didn't tell me. And why? Just out of the habit of keeping secrets? From me? Or for the sake of seeing my face now? Or because they told you not to say anything to anyone and that includes me – will always include me? He became aware that he had come to a stop right inside the door, and was staring at Napoleon. Napoleon smiled at him, and he smiled back.

He couldn't help it. He stood there and smiled at Napoleon, and Napoleon smiled at him, and the other people in the room might as well not have existed. They smiled at one another until Davenport tapped his nails on the table, apparently casually, but it broke the contact. Illya could feel his face heating up, but he took his seat calmly enough and then he smiled at Napoleon again.

“Agent Kuryakin, I believe you already know your new Section Chief, Napoleon Solo,” Davenport said, and Illya's smile widened.

“Yes sir,” he answered and they were beaming at one another now.

“Should I just say congratulations and end this meeting here?” Davenport asked drily and Napoleon shook his head.

“No sir, but thank you for the thought. I have several things I want to go over. Mr. Kuryakin ...” so Napoleon was going to use simple prefixes, as Waverly had. There was something exciting about being called Mr. Kuryakin by Napoleon, and Illya thought that he would like to hear it later, under more intimate circumstances. He would tell Napoleon so.

“Yes, Mr. Solo?” he asked, and had the distinct gratification of seeing Napoleon flush as well.

“I have looked through your recent proposals for the Science Sectors. I particularly like the idea of combining all their reports into one and delivering it into my inbox weekly. Will you be correlating them yourself?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Piper will be responsible for getting them to me, and I will write a summary for you on Thursday evenings. You will have it before start of the work day Friday.”

“Excellent.” Napoleon discussed a few more items from assorted memos Illya had turned in, and which he had thought no one had bothered to read. But someone had read them, and saved them ... he looked at Davenport. And now he would get to carry them through. It was very exciting. He answered some questions from other board members, and then was dismissed. He hurried downstairs and, before sending for George Piper, he called Travel and requested a standard issue suitcase for tropical climates. He didn't think his new Section Chief would mind. No, he didn't think Napoleon would mind at all.

They lay on the beach, stretched out side by side on their blanket. Both were in trunks and white cotton shirts, both wore sunglasses and sunscreen. Illya stared at the blue sky overhead, felt the sun bake any remaining tension out of his body and felt, too, Napoleon's hand clasping his.

Holding hands, he thought. We're lying here right out in the open, and he's holding my hand. Of course there was no one to see them, it was a private beach for club members only, and currently they were the only ones using it, but the fact remained that Napoleon was holding his hand in public. Illya tightened his fingers, and felt Napoleon squeeze back. He turned his head to look at Napoleon, and Napoleon was looking right at him.

"Happy?" Napoleon asked, and Illya nodded.

"Yes. Very happy."

"Me too." Napoleon smiled, and Illya smiled back. It made him think of that meeting, them smiling at one another across the conference table, and he laughed. Napoleon laughed too.

"What? What's funny?"

"We made rather a spectacle of ourselves in front of the board yesterday."

Napoleon laughed again. "Yes, I'm afraid that we did. In fact when I submitted my request for this leave Davenport could hardly sign it fast enough. 'By all means go get a room somewhere,' were his exact words."

"No he didn't."

"Yes, he certainly did."

"Are you sorry?" Illya asked, because Napoleon cared about his image at work, he cared about that a lot and Illya knew it. But Napoleon didn't look sorry. He was smiling at Illya again, and then he lifted their joined hands, turned them so the sunlight flashed fire off Illya's ring.

"Not in the least," he said, brought Illya's hand to his lips, and kissed it. His lips were hot, hotter than the sand around them, hotter than the sun beating down on them. Illya swallowed.

"Well, good. That's ... that's good." Napoleon kissed his wrist and he caught his breath. "Napoleon ..."

"A quick swim, to rinse the sand off, and then back up to our room?" Napoleon suggested, and Illya nodded.

"A very quick swim," he amended, and they rose, removed their sunglasses and their shirts, stepped out of their sandals and walked into the water. It was warm, and clear, and they didn't hurry after all because they didn't need to hurry, they had all the time in the world. Illya watched Napoleon, side stroking beside him, still smiling at him, and he smiled back, luxuriating in the silky feel of water caressing his body, and in Napoleon's face, so close, so plainly speaking his love. They swam side by side into the blue ocean, and it was quite a bit later that they returned to their room, but they still had all the time in the world. All the time in the world, together. And it was like swimming again, in the big bed, bodies moving as one, breath catching, holding, then releasing, side by side. Side by side, forever.

The End