

He's open...too open. Chyort, this venue is a disaster waiting to happen...if we can just get through the next two minutes. Where're the spotters?

Illya Kuryakin wished for the nth time that the powers that be would actually listen to the professionals when it came to their safety. He could plan and plot and perform to the best of his ability, but he knew at any moment it could all go to hell with dismaying dispatch.

Six months earlier

The slight Russian agent tried not to sigh as the briefing continued. He'd been tapped to lead the team responsible for the safety of the head of U.N.C.L.E., North America, while he attended a youth soccer exposition. The expo brought together teenagers from all over the world to celebrate their commonality and love of the sport and to minimize their differences, whether racial or political. It was just the sort of spirit the Network wished to cultivate, and the Continental Chief wished to participate to show his enthusiastic support.

One of the team, Albert MacClary, finished his outline on the physical parameters and possible loggerheads they might encounter on the foot route their boss would take. Illya nodded to him, and said, "All right, gentlemen. We've done all we can do for now. Go over your notes and give me a final report before the end of the day. That will be all." The rest of the agents filed out, talking about the assignment quietly.

Kuryakin rubbed at his forehead, trying to keep the building headache at bay. *Maybe I could still put in for vacation. Maybe I could put in my resignation. Dammit, Napoleon owes me for this one...*

Present Day

Illya Kuryakin spoke into his transmitter as he jogged along the perimeter of the soccer exhibition arena, shadowing his boss' every movement. "Two, watch the corner, this is a choke point. Five and Six, keep the barricade intact. Stay sharp, people."

His team had done brilliantly thus far, and the actual game was over, much to Illya's relief. The V.I.P. box assigned to U.N.C.L.E. was a logistical nightmare, and he was glad to be well quit of it. Truth be told, Kuryakin didn't like, "The Package," as his team'd tagged their Chief, seated and vulnerable for any length of time. However, being on the move brought with it its own variables, and having a scientific background only made Illya intimately aware of how infinite those variables could be. His team hastened their charge along as quickly as possible given that they had to allow for the dignity of the office and the respect the Old Man deserved. Illya thought it was rather like herding a cat.

The group was nearing their exit point when Number One, Section One stopped for a moment to talk to one of the players. The young Angolan man seemed thrilled to have such an important dignitary take

time for him. Illya backtracked, nervously scanning the perimeter and then the catwalks above. Their boss had been briefed and warned against deviating from the established plan, but he was known to go off script at times. Illya sighed. He hit the squelch button on his radio twice, signaling his agents to be on their respective toes, noting the change.

He watched his Chief shake the athlete's hand and then turn to head toward the wings and their departure point. Resuming his *pas de deux*, the Russian agent caught a glint of reflected light and squinted, shading his eyes with his free hand and sweeping the catwalk once again. He had his Special in his right hand before he even fully registered the threat.

"Sniper!" he yelled, streaking toward his boss. The men flanking the Chief pulled their own weapons and tried to pinpoint the source of the danger. They turned north and south, but did not see the rifleman to the west, the setting sun illuminating the windows behind the shooter and making him nearly invisible. Illya saw the weapon as a dark line in his dazzled vision and leaped in front of the target just as his ears registered the discharge. He hit his superior with one shoulder as the round slammed into his back, high and to the left below his shoulder blade. Both men went down in a heap, Illya on top, using his body as a shield. Through a haze of pain, Illya heard the report of answering firepower, his ears recognizing the rifles as U.N.C.L.E. issue. His spotters had done their job, he thought grimly.

Agents swarmed around the fallen men, fanning out and waiting. "All clear!" rang through the arena, and the phalanx parted, allowing the two closest bodyguards, MacClary and Tannen, to reach the wounded. They carefully rolled Kuryakin off their Chief, pulling the jacket of the older man open to check for injury, alarmed at the amount of blood soaking his previously pristine white shirt.

"Get The Package out, GET HIM OUT!" yelled a familiar voice from an unknown distance, and Illya relaxed, knowing he would take control of the situation.

"Sir! Sir, are you all right?" Ripping open the soaked shirt, MacClary ran his hands across the Old Man's chest, looking for a wound, face white with worry. His charge sat up, patted his chest, hands coming away red and sticky.

"It's...not...my blood." He glanced over at the wounded agent crumpled at his side. "*It's not my blood...*" his voice trailed away in shock. His bloody hand reached for the fallen agent lying next to him. He touched the blond hair of his man gently, leaving red fingerprints behind.

"Get him out of here! Now!" Mark Slate ran up to the scene, pushing the agents into action. "Get him to the secure position. Go, go, go!" The bodyguards hauled their man to his feet, propelling him out of the arena, toward the safety of an armored car.

"Wait, wait; let me see to Kuryakin. Is he alive?"

"No time, sir! Get in the car, get in the car!" His men bodily pushed him into the vehicle.

Illya sighed in relief as his boss and best friend, Napoleon Solo, was whisked away to safety.

Slate watched the car pull away and then turned his attention to the wounded agent at his feet. Kuryakin's torso was a bloody mess, and Slate used his handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood from the jagged exit wound under Illya's left collarbone. He felt something soft pressed into his free hand, and looked up into the tear-filled eyes of the young man Solo had greeted. He gave Slate a white towel with the Angolan flag emblazoned in bright colors in the center. The young man nodded somberly to the agent, no stranger to war and violence in his home country. Mark felt a twinge of sympathy for the teen, acknowledging that even here, in a sporting event celebrating unity, violence could rip itself a place. He tore the towel into two pieces and lifted Illya's upper body to press a bandage against both sides of the bullet wounds. Kuryakin gasped as the pressure sent new agony through his body. One of the delegates took charge of the boy and led him to safety.

Despite the pain, Illya remained on the job. "Shooter dead?" he gasped out.

"Very," the Brit replied.

"Khorosho."

April Dancer arrived and took in the scene, quickly assessing. "I've got him, Mark." She leaned the injured Russian against her chest, holding the bandages in place as Slate opened a pack one of the arriving guards handed him. He grabbed the med kit, and ripped the sleeve of Illya's shirt, jabbing an ampule of morphine into his tricep. Kuryakin relaxed into April, sighing as the potent painkiller did its job. He fought to remain lucid, and struggled weakly against the hands holding him.

"*Vse v poryadke, malenkii volk,*" Dancer soothed, speaking Russian to him. (It's okay, Little Wolf)

"No, no, Napoleon...is Napoleon safe?"

Knowing Illya's temperament and devotion to duty, Mark got on his radio, asking for a current situation report concerning their boss. He touched his ear mic, listened for a few minutes and then nodded. "The Package is secure, Illya. Rest easy," Mark reported. "He's on his way to H.Q. via the underground entrance."

Illya tried to follow the words and make sense of them. "No...he...he should be rendezvousing at the helipad...*what is he thinking?*" He panted hard, speech using up the rest of his sparse energy. He coughed, his lungs spasming as blood stained his lips. He slumped against April, spent. Mark removed his jacket and draped it across Illya's chest.

Dancer looked at her partner, worry darkening her eyes. Slate smiled at them both, winking at Illya, saying, "Buck up, old chum. The boss is sending the heli here to medivac you to H.Q. instead."

Illya tried to be indignant, sputtering curses in his native tongue. They barely registered as whispers. "I'll have his teeth for cufflinks..." he managed to threaten before both the fight and the air deserted him. He felt April snickering underneath him, and that made him even more indignant.

Mark brandished a finger at the Russian, saying, "Now, now, Illya, don't be petulant. RHIP, old sport." He grinned at Dancer as well. "It is his helicopter, after all."

Waves of dopplered sound registered on the agents' ears as Mark placed an I.V. line into his patient. He dialed the fluid flow to maximum, and turned to see the helicopter preparing to land on the soccer field. Tannen was guiding it down, and ensuring crowd safety. Once it was down, medics jumped out the side door, and wheeled a gurney across the grass, leaving small parallel tracks across the freshly mown turf.

"Your carriage is arriving, m'lord," Slate said as he doffed an imaginary cap in Illya's direction. Mark used a pen to write a large "M" on Illya's high forehead before the new medics took over. The attendants gathered Illya from April and set him gently on the stretcher. They transferred the fluid bag and noted the morphine dose before taking off across the field once more.

April sidled over to Mark and took hold of his hand as they watched the chopper lift off with its precious cargo. Mark placed his long arm around April's shoulder and said, "I wouldn't want to be in Napoleon's shoes when Illya recovers enough to read him the riot act."

April smiled, worry still evident in the set of her mouth. "Somehow, I don't think Napoleon will mind a bit."

Mark hugged her once, hard, and then bellowed orders to the group of agents still milling around. "All right, everyone. Excitement's over for now. Let's tag and bag everything pertinent and get the site secured. Come on; step lively, boys and girls."

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents moved off together to do their jobs.

U.N.C.L.E. H.Q.-N.Y. Medical Section

Illya swam into consciousness slowly, working through the waves pulling at him, trying to keep him in their undertow. He groaned, his mouth feeling like it was sandblasted. His one attempt to raise his head failed dismally.

"Easy, *tovarisch*; lie still." Napoleon Solo stood beside his bed, feeding ice chips to him from a spoon. They tasted heavenly and he stuck out his parched tongue for more. He touched his shoulder with his good hand, winced and asked, "How bad?" He was vexed at how weak his voice sounded.

Solo helped him sip water and settle back down before he answered. "Bad enough." The Chief sat back in his chair and sighed. "You've had three transfusions and two surgeries so far."

Illya digested the information and tried for flippancy. "I guess your marksmanship medal is safe for a while yet."

Solo huffed, "Don't get lazy. I expect a run for my money this year."

Illya's face smoothed a bit at that. Solo had recognized the uneasiness for what it was, and answered the question he'd been afraid to ask. In their line of work, career-ending injuries were a very real possibility.

Illya tried to get comfortable and only managed to pull at his sutures. He hissed at the bright bloom of pain, and Solo was up again in an instant. "Do you need some pain meds?"

Kuryakin shook his head, preferring to stay lucid. Solo straightened the sling on his left side and pulled the sheets straight, clearly fussing over his agent. Illya allowed it. He knew how he'd feel if their positions were reversed; they had been many times in their history.

"Was anyone else hurt?"

"No, you were the only one crazy enough pretending to be Superman."

"Pretending?"

Solo sighed. "Illya, obviously, you are *not* faster than a speeding bullet. You have got to stop putting yourself between me and the munitions." Solo's voice rose in volume as he pictured Illya's bloody form on the ground. He sat back in the chair, shot his cuffs and tried to get a rein on his temper. Berating his best agent and friend was not on the agenda today.

"My job." Kuryakin's voice was barely a whisper, the fear and anger in his boss' voice wearing on him.

Napoleon dropped his head and sighed again, letting his anger run out with the exhalation. "That's debatable," he countered gently.

"No!" Illya said, stronger. "Number One *is not* debatable." Blue eyes bored into brown for a moment, until Solo relented.

"*Da, tovarisch*. But you can learn to stand down once in a while. I'm a big boy, *Illyusha*. I can take care of myself. Stop catching bullets for me."

"You do seem to be the preferred target."

Solo smiled. "Easier to hit. I'm bigger."

Illya began to drift. "Not...everywhere, Napoleon..."

Solo belly laughed at that, patting Illya's cheek gently. He was down for the count. The Old Man let his hand drift over Illya's chest, feeling the strong and true heart of his best friend beat reassuringly beneath it. He settled back into the hard vinyl chair, keeping watch over his comrade, in for the long haul. The steady blip of the monitors lulled him to sleep. Both agents rested in the company of each other, reassured by the other's presence, like always.

Three Months Later U.N.C.L.E H.Q.-N.Y.

Napoleon Solo read the progress file in front of him, skimming the medicalese and focusing on the recommendations at the end. He'd had enough of these reports evaluating himself over the course of his enforcement career to know he should read between the lines as much as the printed page. This particular report seemed to be skirting the edge of actually coming up with a conclusion.

"Okay, Sam, I've read the eval. Tell me what you really think."

Dr. Samuel Levinson sat back into his uncomfortable chair and raised his eyebrows. He knew Solo, knew he wouldn't cotton to soft-selling or prevaricating. "Honestly, Napoleon? If it were any other agent, I'd pull him from the field permanently. The nervous tissue damage is healing slowly, but the long-range implications are speculative at best. You know I hate to put a permanent mar on an agent's record, but..."

"But..." Solo finished for Sam, "...it isn't any other agent, is it? It's Illya Kuryakin—arguably the best agent this office has ever seen."

"Don't let him know you said that. He'd be insufferable for days."

Solo smiled. "He already is." Number One, Section One leaned back in his plush leather chair, laid his head on the headrest, and looked at the ceiling, sighing. He swiveled back and forth slowly, mulling. "Would more time help?"

Sam shook his head. "It will only make the decision harder in the long run."

Napoleon knew he was right. It merely cemented his own judgment. "In my job, the only thing worse than this is a death notification."

The doctor agreed, saying, "Well, we both know Illya's work ethic and how much being Section Two chief means to him. He'll take it like a death notice."

"Hopefully, coming from me will help take the edge off. And he can still be Section Chief. He just won't have field status."

"Try making that sound like a good thing to our mad Russian."

"Yes, well, Rasputin can still have his choice of any section he wants, including the labs. He's damned lucky he's so versatile," Solo said.

"Right, as opposed to you. You only had one choice; Continental Chief." Sam smiled.

Solo waved the compliment away. "I never really wanted the job. I'd give it all back to have Alexander Waverly sitting in this chair again."

"But he isn't; you are. Rank has its privileges, but also its burdens."

“Uneasy lies the head'? Mine is aching right now.”

“You need an aspirin?”

“No, for this particular headache, I need an ice-cold bottle of Stoli and a Diner's Card.”

Later That Day

Speaking with Sam had gotten Napoleon thinking about the command structure at U.N.C.L.E. He normally didn't spend a lot of time musing about the power he could bring to bear, but now it was comforting to know it was available. No one would ever accuse Solo of abusing that power, as he had spent a career building a deserved sterling reputation. It was the reason he'd taken over the top spot in the organization after Alexander Waverly died. He'd always known Waverly wanted him to succeed him, but it was never spoken of in actual words. Solo'd been personally delighted and flattered to hear the letter Mr. Waverly had left for the Board of Directors to read at the time of his installment as the Continental Chief of North America, and Number One in Section One of the New York Headquarters.

His Chief's words of praise brought tears to Solo's eyes, though he didn't show the emotion until after the meeting in private quarters. What Waverly said to him after his death was what Solo'd yearned to hear from his mentor in life, but that hadn't been Waverly's way. The gruff Old Man had been stern, sometimes severe, and had rarely shown any sentiment to his agents. Even though he couldn't say so now, Napoleon wished he could thank his boss. He'd been the closest thing to a father Napoleon'd had. Now that he was in Waverly's shoes, he could understand how the job took its toll on the wearer. He would do anything, pull out any stops to back his agents fully. Sometimes more than not, Solo felt like a father with a thousand sons and daughters.

And now he had to break one of their hearts.

Solo's Apartment-Evening

He may be the most powerful man in North America, barring the POTUS, but he still had to do his own dishes. Napoleon pulled the glasses out of the drainer and dried them, holding them to the fading light from the kitchen window to check for spots. It may not be a state dinner, but he wanted everything just so. He was an elegant host.

The table was set, the Stoli in the freezer, and his favorite restaurant, Joe Allen's, was delivering their signature dish. Illya would be arriving within the hour. The men had been together as agents, partners, and friends for too many years not to know each other's likes and dislikes. Solo knew the way to Illya's heart, if not his soul, was through massive amounts of food. Liberal applications of liquor never hurt, either.

The intercom buzzed, and Solo pushed the button to speak. The doorman bade him good evening and announced the arrival of his take away. He cleared them and waited until his doorbell chimed, then opened the drawer of the small end-table next to the door, checking to see the shape of his Special tucked inside. Before opening the door, he eyed the peephole, then ushered the delivery boy inside, collected his order and tipped generously.

He reset the security system, and placed the various dishes in the warm oven. The wine was chilling, and Solo looked over the repast one more time. Most of Illya's co-workers thought of him as a garbage disposal when it came to food, but Solo knew his Russian enjoyed a fine meal as much as he. It's just that their occupation forbade them from having the time to indulge themselves as they liked. One of the perks of Napoleon's position was having a nearly unlimited expense account, and he availed himself of it and treated Illya as much as possible. It almost made up for all the meals they missed while in the field.

The doorknob rattled as Illya keyed in the entry code and let himself in. The doorman knew the Russian agent and didn't bother to announce him. He was on a short list of people Solo authorized to have access to his penthouse. April Dancer was the only other person on his list. Napoleon smiled as he thought of the more memorable visits from the gorgeous redhead.

Illya closed the door and reset the alarms. He greeted Solo and shrugged out of his jacket, loosening his tie. Solo caught the stiffness in his movement and turned away, pretending to be busy with the dinner. He pulled the vodka from the freezer and cracked the seal, poured two shots, handed one to Illya as he came near, and said, "*Na sdarov'ye.*"

"*Spasibo,*" Illya replied as he tossed the shot back, sighing in pleasure as the frigid liquor burned down his throat. He held out his glass for a refill. Napoleon topped him off, and set the bottle within Kuryakin's reach. He detested the taste of vodka, but drank it in Illya's honor as his guest. Illya turned his chair around and sat with his arms draped across the back, as relaxed as he allowed himself to get. "Something smells good."

Solo sat across from his friend. "Do you want to eat straight way?"

Illya quaffed the second shot and clinked his glass against the Stoli bottle. "I think I'll work on the appetizer first."

"Rough day today?" Solo asked gently.

Illya set the shot glass down on the table. His piercing blue eyes looked into Solo's and he replied, "Not as rough as the night, I think."

Napoleon cringed inwardly and looked at the floor.

Kuryakin's soft voice added, "It's all right, Napoleon. I know why you wanted me here tonight."

Solo looked up and sighed. "No, I don't think you do. I wanted you here because you're my friend, and my partner, Illya. No matter what our jobs, what section we report to, what agency we work for, you will *always* be my partner. Never forget that." Solo stood, nervous energy propelling him. He crouched in front of Illya's chair and placed his hands on the thin shoulders. "And, I won't ever forget that you took a bullet meant for me, and that bullet effectively ended your field career." Napoleon slid his hand from the shoulder and placed it gently over the ridge of scar tissue next to Illya's collar bone. After a heartbeat, Illya placed his hand over Napoleon's and looked away, suppressing the emotions welling within him.

Napoleon stood, took Illya's head in his hands and kissed him on both cheeks, Russian style. "Come on, *tovarisch*, let's eat. You must be starving."

The steaks were perfect, the lobster tails sweet and fresh, and both men ate in companionable silence. Solo'd learned early on that with Illya, eating was the thing, and conversation only got in the way of the food. So he curbed his natural inclination toward verbosity, and enjoyed watching Kuryakin pack it away. He remembered how rail-thin the Soviet agent had come to them, and his deliberate attempts to put some meat on him. Illya had allowed the indulgence, since it kept him in steady supply of *haute cuisine*.

The American agent got up and took an orange-and-white-striped box from the refrigerator. Illya's attention was riveted. "Is that what I think it is, Napoleon?" Solo turned his back to the man, and set the dessert on plates, and put the coffee on.

"Raspberry cheesecake from Juniors." He set the plate in front of Illya and tutted when he dove in. "If you'll wait a few minutes, there will be fresh coffee."

Illya waved him away. He filled his shot glass. "This will do. I can have coffee with my second helping."

Shaking his head, Solo muttered, "Philistine," as he returned to his chair.

Napoleon preferred his dessert at room temperature and was happy to digest his meal and wait for the coffee. He drained his glass of rose' and leaned back, crossing his ankles under the table.

He watched Illya consume the slab of cheesecake methodically, taking a raspberry from the top with each bite. He closed his eyes and sighed in pure bliss. Solo smiled. Apparently, cheesecake 'hath charms to soothe the savage breast ' as well as music--at least where his Russian was concerned.

After getting some dessert and the coffee service, Solo sat and asked quietly, "You feel like talking about it?"

Kuryakin scraped the last of the cake from the plate and licked the fork. He accepted a cup of coffee and pushed back from the table, sated. "What is there to say? I know all of this," he waved at the dishes piled around him, "was your way of apologizing for something that wasn't your fault. It is what it is. I was just doing my job, Napoleon."

Solo let his coffee cup bang down harder than he intended, rattling the saucer. "And if I'd done my job better, you wouldn't be in this position. You warned me about taking risks, going off script, but I didn't listen. And you paid the price for my behavior."

Illya snorted at that. "Napoleon! You take risks with every breath. Going off script is what got you where you are today. It's who you are. Don't apologize for that."

Solo smoldered in his seat, refusing to be let off his own hook. "Illya," he began, but the Russian cut him off, banging his fist on the table, making the cutlery dance and startling Solo.

"*Nyet!* Don't, Napoleon. You've saved my life a hundred times over. You've been the best friend I've ever had. The best partner. You took me on when no one else would even stay in the same room with the Crazy Ivan, the Dirty Commie, the Red Menace. You showed me the ropes, backed me up. You trusted me, Napoleon. . .trusted me with your friendship, your life. How could I not do the same for you?"

Napoleon stared at his partner--his quiet, unemotional, unflappable partner. Yeah, right. He swallowed twice before trying to speak around the lump in his throat. "All right, Illya. All right. But you have to let me return the favor."

Kuryakin furrowed his forehead, wondering just what Solo was up to.

"I am Continental Chief now."

Illya smiled. "I believe I got the memo."

Solo ignored the sarcasm. "And as such, I can give you any position you'd care to accept. Anywhere, Illya."

"Leave New York?"

"If that's what you want." Solo was surprised by the pang of sadness he felt thinking Illya might leave.

"But, Section Two...that can't be on the table. I'm not certified for the field now." His face betrayed him, showing the cost of that statement in his eyes.

"You can't be an enforcement *agent*, Illya, but you can still be the Section Chief."

Illya started. "Since when?"

Solo smiled. "Since now. I can make the policy change. And make it stick."

Illya shook his head, trying to get a grip on his new reality.

"The head of Section Two was never supposed to be a field agent. Waverly allowed it when I took the job. He knew he could never keep me at a desk. He was sorry once he saw how much I was gone and the risks I took. But to his credit, he still allowed it."

Solo watched the play of emotions across Illya's visage. He was enjoying Kuryakin's nonplussed state. It wasn't often he could flummox the cagey Russian spy. "Of course, you could head up the lab section instead. Indulge your pyrotechnic penchant."

Illya perked up at the suggestion of destruction. "Could I do both?"

Solo laughed. "You couldn't head both sections. But you could take leave from one to dabble in the other. And I'd back you all the way."

"They'll accuse you of favoritism."

"Let them." Solo's eyes blazed for a moment. "We're the best agents this organization has ever had, Illya. We've given our lives, our blood, our loyalty to this place. Now it's time for us to be paid back. If that means I pull some strings to get my partner the job he's earned and is best qualified for, so be it. It's not so much to ask, for either of us."

Illya was quiet. Solo sank back into his chair and sipped his cooling coffee, giving the man time.

"Very well, then."

"Very well, what?" Solo's eyebrows rose.

"Section Two it is."

Napoleon stood, and clapped Illya on the back. He stuck out his hand and Illya gripped his forearm like a Roman soldier.

"Chief," Illya said.

"Chief," Solo countered.

Illya grinned. "We have too many chiefs and not enough Indians."

Napoleon groaned. "Numbers eleven and two, together again."

"And may God help the U.N.C.L.E." Illya quipped. "Now, where's the rest of that cheesecake?"

Eleven and Two

Illya Kuryakin watched his dispersal board anxiously. A flat map of the world was hung on the largest wall in his office, each enforcement team's current position pinpointed with a colored light. Blue meant reported in-country, green meant in-route, yellow meant check-in interval approaching, and red meant unaccounted for, a blinking red light meant current operation in jeopardy. Three teams were blinking

red. The Section Two Chief had an open comm to the Communications Section, awaiting any news from his agents currently in trouble.

Team One, Grant and Imbaru, were in Pakistan, gathering intel on the latest in that country's weapons capability. They were the most stable of the three beleaguered teams. A helicopter from New Delhi was currently inbound to their last reported position for extraction. Illya just hoped they were actually at that location.

Team Two, Padamada and Luczon, were investigating the recently formed New People's Army in the Philippines, and the civil war fomenting there as a result. They had infiltrated the group, been compromised, and taken fire as a result. They had fled to cover. Luczon was injured and U.N.C.L.E. was coordinating with the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay to launch a Search and Rescue Team (SAR.)

Team Three, Slate and Dancer, were smack in the middle of a Sino-Soviet border conflict on Zhenbao Island. U.N.C.L.E.'s nemesis, Thrush, had thrown in with the Chinese and generally stirred up as much trouble as possible in the already turbulent region. The team's last transmission had been a frantic call for back-up from the only female enforcement agent in the Command. Mark had been captured by guerrilla forces and Dancer had just reached the compound where he was thought to be held. Dancer had enlisted local Russian help. Illya had schooled her in his native language, and knew she could hold her own. But one of her contacts had been a double agent, and now Dancer was injured and on her own. She'd still been able to break Mark out of his cell, and now the two of them were fighting for their lives.

Illya picked up the direct line to Number One of Section One, Napoleon Solo. "Anything yet?" he asked impatiently. Those were his agents out there bleeding and dying for the cause.

"Not yet, IK. We just got approval for the SAR team to infiltrate. Shouldn't take long for them to give us a sit rep."

Illya paced in his office, hating being behind the scenes instead of in the field. He was beginning to understand what Napoleon had gone through in this position. "What about my contact?" The Soviet agent had pulled some strings and gotten a message to a colonel in the GRU who might be able to get some boots on the ground for them.

"Kolochko? We're still going through channels. Your military is so compartmentalized, I can't get anywhere." Solo's frustration showed in his voice.

"It's the *khren* political officers, Napoleon. They don't piss without checking with three superiors. Get me a direct line to Kolochko. I'll speak to him. I'm coming up."

Number One of Section Two stalked down the hallway, scattering the agents there with the look on his face. Everyone he encountered was just grateful they hadn't been the cause of Kuryakin's state. He reached the bank of elevators and punched the button savagely. The car took too long and he swore, "*Chort vozmi.*" Sighing, Illya took a few deep breaths as the elevator arrived.

By the time he reached Solo's office he was calmer. He nodded to Mitzi and she buzzed him into Solo's domain. His boss was on the phone and waved him in. "They're patching me through to Kolochko. Apparently, the other Continental Chiefs have been leaning on the Kremlin as well. I got through the maze much easier this time." Solo punched the intercom on and handed the conversation off.

Kuryakin spoke to the aide, "*Comrade Colonel Kolochko, pazhalusta. Da. Govorite Illya Kuryakin.*"

Napoleon spoke passable Russian, thanks to tutoring from his old partner. He could swear like a Russian sailor, but the rapid-fire dialogue going on between the Soviets now was well past his ability to translate. He caught a few phrases here and there, enough to know that Illya wasn't going to take *nyet* for an answer. He was calling in a marker from his old GRU superior. That meant he had something on the man. Solo admired the size of Kuryakin's balls.

Once the negotiations wound down, the conversation became slower, more fluid. Illya laughed, a short bark of surprise at what Kolochko said. Solo got the words 'girlfriend' and 'pig,' but figured he'd translated incorrectly. Kuryakin mentioned Slate and Dancer by name and then thanked the colonel for his intervention. He wished him a good day and closed the channel.

"*Khorosho*, ah, good," Illya said, switching gears back to English. "Kolochko promised he would get a unit of men to the island immediately. I only hope Mark and April can hold out until help arrives."

Solo put his hand on Illya's shoulder. "We trained them well, Illya. They'll hold out." He sat and motioned his friend to join him. "It isn't easy, is it? Sitting here, feeling next to useless, waiting for that phone call. Still glad you took this job?"

Illya sighed, "Ask me at the end of the day, all right, Napoleon?"

Solo nodded, understanding all too well. He buzzed his secretary. "Mitzi, have the commissary send up some lunch for us, would you please, dear?" To Illya he said, "You might as well set up camp here for the duration. It'll save wear and tear on the agents in the hallways." He grinned at the younger man.

Illya smiled back, blushing. "I do believe I made Agent Watkins wet himself."

Napoleon laughed out loud at that, and remembered something Illya'd said on the phone.

"You might say the same for Kolochko."

"Pyotr? No, I just tugged on his leash a bit. The one he forgot he was wearing." Illya ran a hand through his blond hair, and rubbed the back of his neck. It was going to be a long day.

"So, what do you have on him to make him sit up and speak?" Solo asked.

"Now, Napoleon, the number one rule in the spy book is never to divulge secrets."

Solo agreed, "Touche', IK." Mitzi came through the sliding door just then, pushing a lunch cart into the office. He got up to help her and kissed her cheek in thanks. "So what was the pig doing with the girlfriend in the conversation?"

Mitzi turned her head at the remark and gave her boss a look. "Men," she said as she departed.

Solo looked at Kuryakin and they both laughed.

"'Sow,' Napoleon. It was 'sow,' not 'pig.'" Illya seemed embarrassed.

"Go on..."

He cleared his throat. "There was a certain, ah, lady that we were both interested in in the *Komsomol*. We made complete fools of ourselves vying for her."

Solo waggled his eyebrows. "So, who won?"

"Neither of us. She had higher aspirations. Pyotr recently saw her at an officer's ball at a general's *dacha*. She was fat as a hog and twice as bristly."

After they stopped laughing, Solo remarked, "Nothing brings old soldiers together so much as a memory." He smiled at Illya. "Even an ugly one."

"Well, this old soldier's hungry. Toss me a sandwich." The men ate quietly, used to having to eat quickly and with little distraction in their business. It was a hard habit to change. Solo cleared away the leavings just as the phone rang.

"Solo here." Illya leaned forward on his chair, wishing he could hear both ends of the conversation. Napoleon held up one hand, forestalling any questions. "Yes, yes, I understand. No, that won't be necessary. Tell Gambhir thank you from me personally. Solo out."

He grinned at Illya. "Grant and Imbaru are on the helicopter bound for New Delhi as we speak. No injuries, mission accomplished."

Illya let out a long sigh, mentally changing their status on the board to green. One down, two to go.

Solo clapped him on the back and handed him another sandwich. "Your appetite has probably picked up."

"When has it not?"

Napoleon grinned and went back to his desk, working on some time-sensitive reports. Illya finished his sandwich, and began pacing the length of the office. Solo watched him, eyebrows raised in amused tolerance. He *had* invited Illya to stay. It was going to be a long day.

Illya tired of pacing and dropped down on the black leather couch. He rolled his neck right and left, trying to work out the kinks. Napoleon kept his attention on his paperwork, but asked quietly, "Were you here all night again?"

The Russian shrugged. "Where else would I be?"

Napoleon didn't answer, merely went to a storage closet and pulled out a pillow and blanket. He dropped both onto Kuryakin's lap and said, "Get some sleep. I'll let you know if anything breaks."

Illya started to object, but Solo silenced him with a curt, "That's an order." He turned the lights down in the office and turned on his desk lamp. "Mitzi, hold everything unless it's important."

By the time he'd finished one file, Illya was asleep. Solo observed him critically, aware that the Russian's work ethic didn't allow illness or injury to get in the way of the job. His old partner wasn't back to his prime yet, after the latest injury. Solo had let go of the guilt, but would still keep an eye out for his friend's well-being. That would never change, no matter their job or their position.

Illya seemed to agree with the sentiment, as he turned in his sleep, letting one arm fall down the couch to touch the floor. Only with Solo did he let his guard down this completely. With all others, even the men in his own section, he was closeted; professional, yet cool in demeanor. He knew about the "Ice Prince" moniker he'd been given, and felt it was justly deserved. Napoleon, however, knew better; knew how Illya's impoverished and perilous youth had made him guarded, reserved, and suspicious in manner. But it had also made him crafty, persistent, and unfailingly loyal to a cause he believed in; traits that a master spy must have to be successful. And Illya believed in the U.N.C.L.E. without reservation, had believed in Alexander Waverly, and now gave that same trust and allegiance to Napoleon Solo.

Solo sighed, knowing intimately what his former job had done to his psyche and his soul and what it would do to Illya given time. Napoleon also knew the role he played now was a bigger one, and that it would take a bigger bite out of him, too. He wondered for the thousandth time how Waverly had done the job so long and so well. He missed the Old Man terribly, but he resolved not to let the job devour him whole, as it had Alexander. The man'd had no personal or family life to speak of; indeed, he seemed to live at headquarters, so much so that his wife would come to visit him there instead of waiting for him to come home. Waverly was old school, allowing the intrusion and never trying to negate the effects.

Napoleon was cut from a more modern cloth. He believed he could take on the job and still have something left for himself. His force of will would make it so. He didn't see himself as a family man with a wife and kids, a golden retriever. But he knew he needed a life away from the desk, the pressure, the wear and tear; knew Illya needed it as well, perhaps, more, since he'd never had a family to begin with.

His office doors slid open, admitting Mitzi with a fresh cup of coffee. She set the cup on Solo's desk, saw Illya on the couch, and whispered in Napoleon's ear, "Agents are so cute when they're asleep, aren't they?" She winked at her boss, and tiptoed out of the room.

A few minutes later, the phone rang, interrupting his short break. He grabbed the receiver before it could ring again, and heard Illya start awake, sitting up on the couch. He looked around, unsure of his surroundings for a moment, then came fully awake.

"Solo here." He waited for the connection to be established and then said, "Go ahead, Commander." His eyes met Illya's and recognized the look. He probably mirrored it. "How bad?" he inquired, holding his

breath. "I see." Silence again. "No, I understand. I know you did all you could. Thank your team from all of us here. I'll contact you later to go over the after-action reports. Solo out." The Chief slid the receiver onto the cradle carefully.

"Napoleon?"

Solo went and sat next to Illya on the couch. "The SAR team picked up Padamada and Luczon a few minutes ago. They just touched down in Subic Bay. Luczon was badly injured and they did the best they could. I'm sorry, Illya, but he died en route."

Illya stiffened. "Padamada?"

"He's fine, Illya. A bit bruised and bloody is all. Told the Commander of the team that Luczon saved his life. Padamada was able to smuggle out a list of the N.P.A. with him and is transmitting the intel to us through the Navy channels. The mission succeeded."

Illya stood and walked across the room to the liquor cabinet. He poured a drink for them both. "It doesn't feel like a success." He handed Solo the glass and lifted his. "To Luczon."

"To Luczon." The men toasted their fallen comrade. Illya calmly turned and threw his glass against the wall, shattering it satisfactorily.

Solo stepped up behind him, holding both shoulders for a moment. "Feel any better?"

The tense muscles underneath his hands relaxed a bit as Kuryakin said, "Not really."

Napoleon understood all too well. "Come on, Illya. Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace you can work off some aggression." Solo followed Illya out the door, and told Mitzi in passing, "We'll be at the firing range, Mitzi, if anything comes through."

Mitzi nodded, her eyes red from tears. She said nothing, knowing the men would rather deal with the loss in their own way. Knowing Illya as she did, that usually meant using extensive firepower.

Both section heads walked down the subdued hallways, most of the agents having heard the news from one source or another. The drawback to working with spies was that no one could keep anything secret for long. Somber expressions told the men that the news had spread, confirming the many offshoots of the office grapevine. Solo knew he needed to contact Luczon's family soon, but it could wait a few minutes. He knew from experience Illya's need for release was more immediate.

Once at the range, Solo called to the control room and had them ready the field. "Set up the Threat Scenario—setting ten." He saw eyebrows rise in the booth as the techs scrambled to equip the scene the Old Man desired. There was no higher setting for this test. It was a new training program Solo implemented when he became Continental Chief—modeled after some of the more progressive military

police training courses. A cityscape sprang up from floor tracks, and barriers snapped into place. Lighting was subdued, and the whole scene gave off a gloomy, derelict state.

“Ready, Chief,” came from the booth.

Solo removed his jacket, pulled his weapon, stood at the ready line and waited. Red strobe lights flashed and a warning klaxon sounded. A five second countdown began, and at the zero mark the bulletproof shield slid open, admitting Solo into the scene. A timer began as he stepped across the infrared barrier. He flowed smoothly from one point to the next, accessing the target as friend or foe in a split-second. The “bad guys” were either run-of-the-mill types, or wore Thrush coveralls. Innocents popped up as well. At the halfway point, Solo crouched behind a wall and reloaded another magazine. He sprinted toward the next objective, firing as he ran. He sent his last round downrange and then crossed the electronic barrier to stop the timer.

“All clear,” rang out from the technician, as he punched in codes on his control panel. The cityscape slid back into the floor, leaving only the bullet-ridden targets standing. Solo cleared his weapon, and returned to the firing line.

“Solo: Time—three minutes, five seconds. Score—sixteen kills,” recorded Saul Rubin, the rangemaster on duty today. “All center-mass shots.” He saluted Solo with a finger to his forehead. Napoleon nodded to the tech, and then stepped back to allow Illya access.

“IK?”

Kuryakin's face was set in grim lines as he readied his weapon. Solo took his jacket and draped it over one arm, leaning casually against the wall. Solo knew Illya's calm exterior belied the turmoil within. His first loss as Section Chief would dig deeply into him, as it had done to Solo. Waverly had sent Solo down to the gym after his first K.I.A. His boss had called down to the sparring instructor and given him a head's up as to Solo's situation and demeanor. After an hour in the ring, Solo'd bled off his aggression and anger, and sported a slew of bruises the next day. He'd been grateful to the Old Man for the insight.

So, now he was the Old Man and taking care of his agents was his purview. *The more things change...* he thought as Illya stood on the line.

The slight Russian relaxed, closed his eyes and took a deep calming breath. The strobe flashed across his pale features and highlighted his hair, making him look like a fallen angel in the red light. *A very deadly angel*, thought Solo.

The countdown eclipsed and the barrier opened. Illya slid into the test range and gracefully and smoothly negotiated the course, his Soviet ballet corps training showing in the fluid grace of his movement. Solo watched in admiration as the smaller agent hit target after target, without seeming to aim or even acknowledge the setting. He reloaded on the fly, not pausing at the wall. Illya executed the remainder of the test, dispatched the last target and crossed the line. He cleared his weapon and held a hand up to the booth.

“All clear. “ The scene disappeared for the second time and the two men waited for the results. Sometimes, Solo won, sometimes, Kuryakin. They were nearly perfectly matched in skill.

“Kuryakin: Time—three minutes flat. Score—sixteen kills, all by headshot.” Saul gave Illya a thumbs-up in recognition. Illya merely shrugged into his jacket and left the range.

Solo waved to the booth and thanked Saul by name. “Sure thing, Chief. Nice scores.”

Napoleon caught up to Illya waiting for the elevator. He placed his arm around the younger man's shoulders, gauging the tension in his muscles. He seemed calmer. “Nice shooting, partner. You win again.”

“No, Napoleon. I rushed through today. I let my emotions run my actions. That is not a win.”

“Illya, you were human. You had a horrible event happen and you still did the job. Perfect score. You beat me.”

“I'd say tied you. Americans train to shoot center-mass. Soviets train for head shots. Messier, but drops the target faster.”

“Well, I can't argue with that.” The elevator arrived. Solo shot his cuffs and straightened his tie. “Listen, I have a meeting in ten minutes. Why don't you meet me in my office for dinner?” I'll order Chinese. The usual?”

“Extra spicy for me.”

Solo nodded. “It's your stomach.” Illya's floor came up and he exited the car. “Illya?” The Russian turned and held the door open with a hand to the edge.

“Mark and April will be fine. You'll see.”

Illya looked his boss in the eyes, frowning. “So you are prescient now as well as Continental Chief?”

Solo smiled at that. “Of course. It's a job requirement. How do you think Mr. Waverly always knew what we were up to?”

“Hmm, that does answer a lot of questions.”

Illya let go of the door and Solo waved before it closed. “Later.”

Sighing, Kuryakin walked slowly to his office and waited for the door to close behind him. He crossed to his board and changed the status of two of the teams. The sole light blinking red glared back at him, seeming to mock him. He turned his back to it and called down to Communications. “Anything yet?” he asked.

“Sorry, sir. Nothing yet.”

He sat. "All right. I'll be in my office until six. Then I'll be upstairs." Illya knew Napoleon's "meeting" was with Luczon's family. He did not envy him that part of the job. One of his agent's mission reports was waiting for his approval. He picked it up and began reading, trying to occupy his mind with something other than death notifications.

His desk began to clear as he waded through the weekly reports. He never seemed to be able to clear it entirely, and that never sat well with his Soviet background. His training had been thorough, exhausting, and, at times, brutal, but it had instilled a sense of purpose and self-denial in his soul that welded perfectly with his vocation. When he would get too deeply mired in the job, however, he had a conscience on his shoulder called Mr. Solo. It would speak to him at the most inconvenient of times, reminding him not to get lost in the work.

It spoke to him now from his door. It meant something that he had not heard the door slide open. "What time have you got?" Solo leaned casually against the doorjamb, tie askew, five-o'clock shadow decrying his usual impeccable style.

Illya leaned back in his chair, muscles protesting. He glanced at his watch. "Six-forty-five."

Solo walked in, and held up the white bag he was holding. "You're lucky this stuff stays hot as long as it does."

"Sorry, Napoleon. I lost track of time. Our usual table all right?" He put all the files in a pile on the floor and swept the rest clear, pulling another chair to his desk.

"Best table in the house. At least we're not near the kitchen." Solo began doling out the dishes.

"Yes, well, I know the *maitre d'* here." He sniffed appreciatively. "That smells wonderful."

Solo smelled Illya's order carefully. His eyes watered so he knew he had the right carton. "Here's the hot stuff."

They ate quietly, trying each other's dishes and sharing the rice bowl, enjoying the respite from the day and the company. Solo pushed his plate back, watching his partner take a second helping of everything. He smiled, thinking that Illya ate like a man who didn't know where his next meal was coming from. His smile faded as he realized there was a history behind the behavior. So he watched with satisfaction as Illya packed it away.

Illya finally finished, and walked to the coffee service, making tea for them both. Solo tidied up and set the desk back to rights.

Illya handed him a cup of steaming tea. They savored the aroma and Solo sipped carefully. "New blend? This is nice."

"It's supposed to be a digestive aid. I'm not as young as I used to be." He patted his lean belly. "It has chicory and cardamom. No caffeine, either. Mark turned April on to it and she..." he stopped. He set his cup down carefully. "Dammit."

Kuryakin stood, pacing again. Solo said nothing, just drank his tea.

"How do you stand this, Napoleon? And for so long?" He ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

Solo stood and walked over to him. "I have good friends, IK." He placed his hands on Illya's shoulders. "And so do you." Illya dropped his head, nodding in acceptance.

"I know, Napoleon. Thank you."

Solo went back to the desk and parked a hip on one corner. "It doesn't make it easy. But if you want easy..."

"...you're in the wrong business," Illya finished for him. "I know that, too." He turned and retrieved the tea cups and placed them on the side table. "How did it go with Luczon's family?"

Napoleon crossed his ankles and his arms, letting out a puff of air that blew his forelock up and out of place. He finger-combed it back into submission. "As well as it could. His father was a decorated veteran, and so was his grandfather. He comes from a long line of heroes. They were very proud of his service."

Illya nodded. "Will the funeral be local?"

"No. They have a family plot in California. San Francisco H.Q. will take care of the details. You and I will attend, of course."

"I'd like to give the eulogy, if you don't mind."

Napoleon smiled gently. "I think that would be fitting. Luczon would approve."

Illya said, "I hope the family does."

"They're soldiers. Warrior class. They'll be honored. And so will I."

"Thank you, Napoleon. For everything you've done today to help me through this."

Napoleon waved the compliment away with his hand. The men were silent, each in his own thoughts. Their reverie was cut short by the jangling of the phone. Both men looked at the phone, then each other.

Illya straightened his spine, and then reached to answer. He closed his eyes for a moment and then said, "Kuryakin here." He switched the phone over to intercom.

Col. Kolochko's voice growled through the connection. The two Russian comrades spoke quickly and with little nicety. There was no need today. Solo listened and translated enough to know the news wasn't good. He heard his agents' names and then held his breath. Illya's staid manner gave nothing more away.

"Spacibo, Comrade Colonel. Dobre utra. Da, da, dasvedanya."

Illya hung up the phone and reported immediately to Solo, "They're alive. Kolochko's men got them out without a lot of collateral damage. Slate's banged up and has a broken arm and Dancer was shot in the back. She's stable and they're being transferred to Medical at Berlin H.Q."

"Thank God for that." Solo scrubbed his face with his hands, and ran them through his hair.

"Dr. Koehler is their medical Chief. He's very good," Illya added.

"Worked on you a time or two, if I recall correctly."

Illya smiled. "You do."

Kuryakin's intercom buzzed. He flipped it on. "Overseas relay for you both, sirs," Mitzi said. She connected them immediately.

Illya inclined his head at Solo, who nodded, and took the call. "Solo and Kuryakin, here."

"Good morning to you both, gentlemen." Mark Slate's voice was still cheerful, if a bit ragged around the edges.

"Mark!" Illya exclaimed. He jumped up from his chair, the motion rolling it back against the wall.

"Agent Slate, report." Solo waved Illya down.

"Yes, sir. We're a bit worse for the wear, but would be dead if it weren't for the Russians. *Spacibo, Comrade Kuryakin.*"

"What about Dancer?" Solo asked.

Mark sighed, his weariness evident. "She took a bullet to the back, but it's more painful than dangerous. Doctor here says she'll be fine." They heard a garbled female voice complaining in the background. Mark laughed. "April says she wants convalescent leave in Jamaica, boss."

Solo smiled, smacking Illya on the arm. "Tell her she's got it, Mark. And you, too, anything you want or need. Well, done, agents."

"Thank you, Mr. Solo. Illya?"

"Yes, Mark?"

"April says to tell you the double agent won't be causing any more trouble."

Illya replied, "I understand."

"Oh, and Kolochko said we were supposed to ask you about a hog?"

Illya looked at Solo, and wagged a finger in front of his face.

"Get some rest, Mark. We'll contact you tomorrow."

"Will do, sir. Good evening."

"*Guten morgen. Auf weidersehen.*" Solo gave Illya the kill signal. He cut off the line.

Illya's head was down and his shoulders were trembling. Solo was worried for a split-second, and then his partner looked at him. Both men burst into laughter, the stress of the day and the toll of the job lifting from them, for a while at least.

"So are you going to tell them about the hog?" Solo asked, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Of course not, Napoleon. We spies have to have our secrets, after all."

"Indubitably, IK. Indubitably."

Illya marched over to his board and changed the last blinking light to green. "The board is clear," he said, relieved.

"Until tomorrow, IK. Until tomorrow."

Illya locked eyes with his boss, a look passing between them that said clearly, for at least today, they had changed their world for the better. The Russian walked the few feet between them and took Solo's hand, shaking it. "Tomorrow is a long way off."

Solo smiled grimly. "But it does have an uncanny way of sneaking up on you." He retrieved his jacket and shouldered into it. "But, before that happens, I plan on having a few. After that meal, an ice-cold beer sounds terrific. Care to join me, old son?"

Illya grinned. "Don't mind if I do." He grabbed his coat and took one final look at the board. He let out a grateful sigh and then followed his partner out of the room.

Solo checked in with Mitzi before leaving. He kissed her on the cheek and said, "Great job today, Mitzi. Thank you for keeping the comm lines staffed here."

She blushed and averted her eyes. "Mark and April are my friends. You never even have to ask. You know that, Napoleon."

He took her hand and turned it over, kissing the back gently. "I do. And I never want to take it for granted, my dear." He winked at her. "Good night. Go home, Mitzi. That's an order."

She smiled at her handsome boss and his gorgeous friend. A shiver went through her as she wondered who would be a better lover. Then she shook herself mentally and gathered her things. "Good night, Napoleon. Good night, Illya."

The men took the elevator to the garage and Solo started his car. As they pulled out into the night cityscape, Illya asked, "Where to?"

"Shouldn't that be, 'To where?' my highly literate friend?"

Illya blushed slightly. “Yes, well, your Americanisms are brushing off on me, to ill effect.”

Solo laughed. “Touche’, IK. I know a little place. Privacy, good views of the city, cold beer in the fridge.”

“Sounds perfect. Drive, Jeeves.”

“Righty-o, gov’nor,” Solo replied, doffing an imaginary cap.

Illya grimaced. “Your accent is just terrible.” Then he leaned back in the plush leather seat and closed his eyes, relaxing fully for the first time in a long while.

Solo glanced at him as he dozed. He rarely saw Illya drop the barriers and it cheered him. Agents burned out quickly if they weren’t able to shake off a day like today and put it behind them. Illya’s tactics included sleep and food. Solo’s were of a more intimate persuasion.

After a half-hour of rush hour traffic, Solo pulled into the parking deck and then nudged Illya awake. “We’re here.”

Illya roused, looked around groggily and frowned. “Your apartment?”

“Hard to get more secured and away from it all.” He set the alarm on the car, and keyed in a code for the elevator. They rose silently, the car taking them to the penthouse. Solo’d decided to keep the apartment Aunt Amy’d left him, even after becoming Continental Chief. U.N.C.L.E. had simply solved the security problems by buying the building, installing their impressive state-of-the-art systems to allow Solo to live there and still be under their auspices.

Solo was the sole occupant of the top floor, and the floor below was kept vacant as well. Other units were filled with the higher echelon of Command agents and other personnel. It was essentially a fortress, albeit a very comfortable fortress. But no matter the luxury, sometimes Napoleon felt insulated by it all. A stylishly apportioned box was still a box after all. Hence, the invitation to his partner. Illya helped keep the isolation at bay. He truly felt at home with the Russian by his side.

The car opened into his private foyer. They entered the apartment proper, and Illya plopped down onto the plush leather couch. He kicked off his shoes and stretched his feet out on the coffee table.

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you?’ Solo joked, outwardly seeming peeved, but inwardly grateful that Illya felt comfortable here. Illya ignored the jibe, merely stuck his hand in the air and waited for Solo to put a bottle of beer in it. He took the proffered bottle, allowed Solo to pop off the cap, and drank deeply, without looking at the brand. He sighed with appreciation, and burped with gusto.

“Illya! Such manners,” Solo chided.

“I’ll have you know that in Asian circles, a good burp is a compliment to the house.”

“Well, since neither of us is Asian, I’d say that’s a flimsy excuse.”

“Not at all, my good fellow. We U.N.C.L.E. agents are citizens of the world. And, besides, we had Chinese for dinner. That's close enough.” He took another long pull.

Solo laughed and placed a bucket filled with ice and bottles of beer on the floor beside the couch. “I concede to the gentleman on the couch.”

“Damned right you do.” Illya motioned to the couch. Solo took off his jacket and shoes and followed suit. They sat in silence and allowed the beer to wash the day away. At the second bottle, Solo said, “To Section Two.”

“Section Two,” Illya agreed, clinking bottles.

“And to Section One,” Kuryakin said solemnly, “without whom I would not be sitting in luxury, drinking imported beer.”

“Well, I might have had a little bit to do with that,” Solo harrumphed.

“Don't overestimate your role in this, Napoleon. Just drink your beer. And don't 'harrumph.' You sound too much like Mr. Waverly. It creeps me out.”

Napoleon nearly choked on his beer. He laughed at Illya. “Where did you hear that particular Americanism?”

Illya waved his hand in a vague gesture that amused Solo. “Oh, one of the secretaries mentioned a man in her building had enormous eyebrows and that it 'creeped her out.’”

“The things one does hear at work.”

“Indeed.”

“Want me to find something on the television?” Solo asked.

Illya shrugged. “Not unless you do. I have everything I need right here.”

Solo eyed his partner, wondering if he'd given him an inroad on purpose. The quick mind was liable to come up with just the right thing at just the right time. Solo had seen it happen so often in their career that now he depended on it. It was a valuable facet of their partnership, and he was grateful beyond words for it. So, taking a deep breath of courage, Solo plunged forward, for better or worse.

“Ahem. Funny you should say that, Illya. Since taking Waverly's spot, I've been thinking a lot about what I need. I saw what the job did to the Old Man, the sacrifices he made and what he got in return. I know he loved the Command with all his being, and I know it took everything he gave it. I'm just not sure what it gave him in return was enough. An absent marriage, lonely nights, lonelier holidays, an aneurysm in the end.”

Napoleon got up and began walking toward the balcony. He watched the city lights glow back at him and sighed. He turned to face the couch.

Illya sat there, listening quietly, letting Solo vent. "And you want, what, Napoleon? More?"

The older man asked, "Is that asking too much? To want a life outside the steel cage? To want someone to share it with?"

Illya chuckled. "You have many women to share it with, Napoleon. Any number of them would jump at the chance to be Mrs. Napoleon Solo."

A look of dismay crossed Solo's face. "I know it looks that way, Illya. When I was in Section Two, I played it fast and loose. Hell, I never thought I'd live to forty, certainly not to Section One." This was harder than he thought. Solo turned to the glass balcony doors again, seeing his reflection, seeing Illya's looking back at him.

"I used women to get through it. The rush, the adrenaline, you can't just leave it behind at the end of the day. I used the women, the sex, to keep it coming, to feel alive."

"Then what has changed, my friend?" Illya sat on the edge of the cushion, watching his partner with concern.

"Circumstances have changed, Illya, not the need. You see, I never wanted the women as such. They were just a means to an end. I couldn't have what I wanted while I was in Enforcement. It would have been at least the end of my career, at worst a death sentence. But, now, *now*, Illya, *I'm* the boss. I can make or break policy. I can have a career and a choice. You know I loved Waverly like a father, but I don't want to be him." This last sentence was said so softly, Illya had to strain to hear it. He got up from the couch and stood next to Napoleon, gazing at the scenery but not seeing anything. He turned with his back to the cool glass and regarded his friend.

After a moment, Illya asked just as quietly, "Then what *do* you want to be, Napoleon?"

Solo brought his head up, the naked emotion on his face giving him away. He looked into the brilliant blue eyes of his partner and said, "Yours. I want to be yours, Illya. And I want you to be mine." He took the last step between them, saw Illya take a faltering pace back, hitting the security glass with a thud. Carefully, now, Solo stopped, watching Illya's eyes dilate and his breathing quicken, the pulse point in his neck bounding faster.

This was the moment; the time he wished for distilled into one minute that would fashion the rest of the minutes of his life. He was sure of Illya's response; he'd had years to telegraph the way he felt about him, through little touches and gestures and possessive behaviors. Hell, rumors abounded at work about them anyway, so it was apparent how others saw their relationship. He just had to be sure to give Illya the time he needed to adjust, to make the decision for himself. Solo would not rush him into anything. He'd waited years already; a few more moments wouldn't matter. So he kept his hands down at his sides, kept the small distance between them, allowing Illya to deal with the divide between them. He felt the sweat gather at his temples, at his nape, and he could smell Illya's response chemically. Solo couldn't help taking a quick whiff of Illya essence. It smelled like a summer storm, just before the lightning struck.

Solo saw the moment Illya decided. Felt it in his gut. He closed his eyes.

“Yours,” was all the Russian said.

Solo snapped open his eyes, watching Illya digest the revelation like a hawk digests a rabbit. The smaller man smiled, the tiniest of Illya smiles, the one he only used for Napoleon. Solo's insides did a small roll, and he felt light-headed.

“I have been 'yours,' Napoleon, for years. I've been in love with you for years. And it seems I have been waiting years for you to make your move. You've been Chief for over a year and a half now.”

“Twenty months,” Solo corrected, then wanted to slap himself.

“Twenty months,” Illya parroted. “And in all those months you made me wait wondering if you'd changed your mind; if you had found some woman to make you happy; if you didn't need me anymore.”

A sound of anguish came from Napoleon, and he instinctively leaned into his Russian.

Illya held up a hand, warning him off. Solo rocked back on his heels, giving Illya the floor again.

“What I want to know, Napoleon, is if you can truly be *mine*? Mine *alone*? I am a jealous lover, and won't allow any straying.”

At the word 'lover,' Solo's knees nearly buckled, so he solved the problem by resting his hands on the cool glass of the French doors, on either side of Illya's head. The cold sensation grounded him, pulled his senses into line again.

“Yours, Illya. I am yours. Only. Always.” He leaned into his hands, inching closer to his soulmate. Illya held his ground, allowing the intrusion. Napoleon rested his head against Illya's thin shoulder, turning his lips to brush across the skin under his ear lobe. He licked the sweat drops there, sucking them into his mouth and tasting Illya along the line of his strong jaw. He kissed the jugular, feeling the rabbit-quick pulse, almost doubling in tempo as he explored the white warm skin. His own pulse echoed the need, and he smiled against the hot hollow of Illya's jugular notch, itching to explore the taste there as well. His partner let his head drop back to the smoked glass, allowing Solo better access.

Napoleon tried to slow down, wanting this first time to last, to provide a wealth of memories for them both. But years of foreplay and his own libidinous nature warred against him. He meant to undo Illya's buttons and slide the tie apart, but he merely ripped the shirt open, sacrificing it for expediency's sake. Illya growled, and Solo smiled, licking his way across the clavicles and swirling his tongue into the notch. It was an easy slide down the taut chest, a few moments' pleasure rooting his nose in the patch of hair dead-center in Illya's sternum. Napoleon had a moment to consider other parts of Illya that were furry, but the sudden ache in his groin told him to find a safer subject. He latched his busy mouth onto a flat nipple, sucking it to attention and making Illya gasp and twitch against him.

Napoleon slid his hands down the glass picking up moisture and coolness and then took both of Illya's wrists in his hands, holding them against the small of the Russian's back, causing him to arch his body

closer to Solo's talented lips. Napoleon breathed against the other nipple, biting lightly and grazing the hardening nub. Illya's chest was heaving, his breath hitching in his chest with each of Solo's discoveries. His eyes were tightly closed, as if he were afraid of opening them and having Napoleon pop out of existence.

Keeping pressure on Illya's wrists, Solo dropped to one knee, raking his tongue and lips along the Happy Trail of blond hair leading south. Almost to his prize, Napoleon's attention was diverted by Illya's sharp, "Stop!"

He looked up at his partner, wondering what was wrong. The blue eyes were open, the frantic look on Illya's face worrisome. His brown eyes softened and he asked softly, "What is it, Illya?"

Illya broke the hold easily and used his freed hands to grasp Solo by the shoulders, hauling him upwards. Flush against his sweating body, Illya took Solo's face in his hands and said, "I...I need..."

Napoleon stilled and asked, "What? What do you need, love?"

Illya took a long shuddering breath and answered, "This." At that, he pulled Solo to him and kissed him hungrily, their mouths meeting for the first time. Solo smiled against the soft lips, opening his when Illya's tongue slipped inside. They slid against each other, Solo tasting the sharp residue of tea and beer on Illya's tongue. He sucked it eagerly, then followed its retreat with his own advance. He felt Illya's large hands pulling at his clothes, removing each layer impatiently. Once down to skin, the younger man explored Solo's strong back muscles, pulling him against his own aroused body, feeling the tautness and the strength he'd relied on all these years. His over-heated body arched against Solo's, feeling the hardness trapped there that echoed his own swelling need.

Napoleon growled once, and then separated their nether regions, apologizing with a quick kiss to Illya's bee-stung lips. "No, Illya." Kiss. "I can't." Kiss. "Not yet, don't want it to end too soon."

After another prolonged snogging session, Illya broke away, nodding. "There be dragons?" he guessed.

Napoleon looked surprised, and then burst out laughing, holding Illya in a tight hug. "Exactly."

They stayed in a loose embrace, nearly dancing, swaying to their own inner tempo. Illya laid his head on Napoleon's bare shoulder, taking in the smell of him, the feel of him. After a time, Napoleon pulled back, gauging Illya's mood. "Should we take this to the couch, or the bedroom?"

Illya blinked at him and replied, "How about the shower?"

Solo's world tilted then, his agile mind picturing a naked, wet, and soapy Illya in his arms. He gulped audibly and Illya grinned. "The shower it is, then," he affirmed, and walked down the hallway. Solo closed his mouth with a snap and followed a beat later.

One of the first things Napoleon had done after moving into the penthouse was to modernize the bath. He'd kept the claw foot bathtub, the old-fashioned lines appealing to his romantic side, but he had to have a shower. A double-sized glass-enclosed cubicle resided in all its glory now, and Solo was never so

glad he'd made the change as he was at this moment, watching a naked Illya enter and start the shower, the rippled glass obscuring his form but giving Solo a tantalizing glimpse of a promising future.

He stripped off the rest of his suit, pulled soft cotton towels off the rack and set them on the closed commode lid. The bath was rapidly filling with steam, Illya using all the jets available. Solo took a deep breath and opened the door. Illya had his back to him, his face under the soft spray and warm water cascading off his pale skin, dripping down his torso and following the line of his legs to the drain.

Napoleon gasped softly, the sight he'd dreamed of for years now a reality before him. He slipped in behind his lover, and began a slow assault of the expanse of wet slippery skin. He ran his hands along Illya's sides, snaking down his flanks to caress the strong thigh muscles. He felt Illya tense, then relax, leaning back into the embrace. Solo picked up the soap, running it along Illya's chest, working up a lather in more ways than one. He pulled Illya flush along his body, his erection grinding against the smooth skin of Illya's backside. His hand made contact with Illya's cock at the same time, causing both men to moan aloud. He slid his soapy hand around the girth, rubbing the uncircumcised tip with the edge of his thumb. Illya froze, and then surrendered, pushing into the hand holding him. A low growl came from the smaller man.

Solo smiled and then slid wet lips against the smooth skin of Illya's neck where it joined the shoulder. He started gently, then bit down on the ivory skin, marking Illya as his. He released Illya's erection, turning him around before the sound of his disapproval left Illya's throat. Looking down into Kuryakin's eyes, Napoleon stopped, and took in a breath, the open emotion radiating from his lover enough to give him pause.

No 'Ice Prince' was evidenced here, tonight, in his arms. Illya wrapped one arm around Solo's waist, then cupped the older man's cheek, his thumb now playing with the cleft chin. His mouth followed his thumb, tongue lapping around the point and then delving inside. Solo's erection twitched, and he laughed, realizing that Illya'd found a new Solo erogenous zone. Illya felt the hard flesh jump against his own, and reached between them, cupping them both in his hand.

After only a minute, Solo grasped the busy fingers, stilling them. "No, Illya. Not yet; I'm too close. I want this to last. We'll never have another first time."

Illya nodded, leaning in to take Solo in a long and breath-stealing kiss, understanding. Not the first time they had held each other, these circumstances were far better than any other they'd shared. "I know, Polya. For once, neither of us is drugged, injured or bleeding. We can hold each other and explore as much as we like."

Solo grinned. "Brother, I got a lot of like."

It was Illya's turn to grin. "Yes, I seem to be able to feel your interest." Illya grasped Solo's cock firmly. "And I believe it's compounding."

Napoleon snorted at the joke. "Well, you know what they say. 'In for a penny...'"

"...in for a ruble," Kuryakin finished.

Solo squinted at his lover. "Well, maybe in Russia."

"You want to quibble? Now?" Illya punctuated his question with a squeeze.

Solo gasped, closed his eyes and counted to ten. In Latin. "No, no, my dear *Illyusha*. Right now, I want to do this." He dropped to his knees, sliding his hands down Illya's arms along the way, then holding both hands in his own. He kissed Illya's navel, then rimmed it with his tongue on his way to the goal. He felt Illya's hands clench, fingers tightening on his, and spared a look above him. Illya's head was thrown back, the shower spray dancing off his gold hair, and the rivulets streamed down his throat, dripping onto the head of his rigid cock. Napoleon moaned at what the picture did to his self-control. Leaning in, he took Illya's crown in his mouth, sucking the edge of the foreskin back and forth, causing Illya to cry out.

"*Bohze moi, Poly*." Illya looked down at his shaft disappearing into Solo's worshipping mouth, and whimpered at the rush of ecstasy. He thought he must be crushing Napoleon's fingers, so he let go of his hands and placed them on the sides of his lover's head, working the fingers into the thick hair. It took all he had not to push into the eager mouth.

With his hands free now, Solo swallowed Illya deeply, and placed both hands on his trim ass, fingers splayed across the soft skin, and thumbs working the crease. At the first touch of the invading digits, Illya sighed deeply and tried to stop his hips from thrusting. Solo responded by backing off, pulling free until he held the mere tip, and closed his lips around the weeping slit, tongue working inside the tiny opening. With the talented tongue at his front, and the searching fingers at his back, Illya nearly came on the spot. He telegraphed his predicament to his lover by sliding out of Solo's mouth entirely, the loss of suction bringing him back from the brink. He panted in relief, and hauled Solo up by his armpits.

"Not like that," he said, kissing Solo again, letting the water flow over their shoulders. "Like this," he said and placed Solo's hand over his erection at the root. Illya took Napoleon's cock and touched them together, tip to tip, then pulled his loose foreskin over them both, encasing Solo in his own flesh. With one hand Illya jacked their flesh together, and took Solo by the base with the other. They worked back and forth, masturbating each other until they matched rhythms. "It's called, 'docking,' Poly. We used to do this in the navy."

"Well, anchors away, my boys..." He concentrated on the exquisite feel of the satiny skin inside Illya's foreskin, the slippery slide of the frictionless surface skimming across his glans with each pull. He groaned, leaning forward to capture Illya's lips, feasting on them, tasting the desire there as well. "Illya, *ahhh*...I can't last like this..." The glide became faster, tighter, and he sucked Illya's saliva into his mouth, needing all of him now.

"Then don't fight it, *mio Napoleone*. Give it to me. Give me yourself. Now." Their hands worked harder, their kisses became slurred moans of passion and then Solo felt his cockhead being bathed in hot liquid, the spurts pulsing out to cover his glans in Illya's strong fist, the semen pouring out between them to leak around the tight skin. Illya shouted his name and then Solo was lost as well, his emission joining his lovers, hot jets covering Illya's flesh, making the Russian cry out again. Wave after wave seemed to crash over them both, finally cresting and subsiding. They still clung together, heads resting on each other's shoulders, weak in the knees from the powerful orgasms. They held each other up, relied on each other's strength in this as in all things.

When they could function again, the men reluctantly drew apart, their erections subsiding and their nervous systems calming. Illya grabbed the soap, and lathered his hands, playing over the Solo-scape now, cleaning away the residue of their lovemaking, stroking across the broad chest, working down the six pack, claiming his mouth again and again because he could. Napoleon encouraged him, pressing their slippery bodies together and stealing the soap back, running the bar around the softly fuzzed sac of his lover, cleaning him as well. He felt Illya's soapy hands claiming his ass, felt stubby fingernails scratching the skin of his strong back as he tried to touch him everywhere at the same time.

Illya's lips kissed his ear and he whispered into it, "Turn around, Polya."

Napoleon gave the soap to Illya, kissed him deeply once more and turned, placing his hands on the shower tile and leaning forward slightly. This gave Illya the chance to plaster himself along Solo's back, snugging his hips against his ass and running his hands across the hard pectorals. Illya glided across the nipples, just starting to peak at his hands and he tickled them, tweaking them both at the same time. Solo gasped, turned his head and Illya took his mouth again, sucking on the eager tongue. While he entered Solo's mouth, his hand snaked south, picking up the soft cock and running the soap around the base, lathering the thick nest of hair and massaging the large balls in the sac. Solo groaned into his mouth and Illya returned his attention to his hardening cock, pulling and tugging on the large organ.

"Illya, what you're doing to me..." Solo panted, pushing his cock into Illya's hand.

Illya grinned behind Solo's back. "Yes, Polya, but what I want to be doing..." He thrust his own hard cock against Solo's ass, repositioning until he was underneath the furred pouch, gliding back and forth against the sensitive skin there. He hissed, the feeling unbelievably erotic.

Napoleon agreed with the sentiment, feeling the hard cock stroking against his perineum with the in-stroke, and rubbing faintly against his opening with the out-stroke. He bent lower, giving the shorter Russian a better angle and ground out, "Yes, Illya. Yes!"

Kuryakin didn't waste any time, then, hearing the plea that matched his own desire. He worked Solo's cock and then pushed his finger against his entrance, the lather making it easy to penetrate the tight ring. He stopped, gauging Solo's response, not wanting to hurt him.

Solo growled, deep in his chest, and Illya felt it throughout his body. "Don't stop now, don't you dare stop."

"Are you sure, Polya?" He got his answer as Solo surged back against him, driving the finger in to the hilt. Illya chuckled softly, saying, "I suppose I needn't have worried overmuch. Neither of us could be called virgins in any way. The job made sure of that." He punctuated his statement by adding a second finger and Solo cried out in pleasure, breathing in gasps as the digits opened him up.

"So good, Illya...so good...yes..." Napoleon dropped his head and watched, mesmerized, as Illya's slick hand worked his heavy cock, sliding to the tip and then holding, waiting, teasing until Solo nearly finished the job for him, grabbing Illya's hand and tugging it back roughly.

Illya smiled at his eager lover's impatience, kissing down the knobby backbone. "Not yet, Napoleon. I know what you want. What we both need." He replaced Solo's hands on the tile wall, slicked himself up and took a deep breath. He snugged Solo close with one arm around his waist, and positioned himself at his entrance. Illya leaned in and kissed Solo's neck, then tucked his chin over his shoulder possessing him, surrounding him. With one sharp thrust, he buried his cock in Solo's body, driving forward until his thighs slapped against Napoleon's.

Napoleon gasped, freezing, every muscle tightening at the abrupt penetration, his nerves firing in overload. Illya kept perfectly still, allowing his lover time to adjust, time to accede to the possession. Solo was an alpha male to be sure, but Illya was the only one who could take Napoleon's body as well as his soul, and have the man willfully participate in his own subjugation.

Kuryakin kept an arm around Solo, looking down on the lovely sight of the fully engorged phallus straining upwards, neglected and weeping. "Are you ready, *Napoleone*?" he whispered in the ear under his lips.

His partner's body relaxed a mite, but he could feel the fine tremors beginning in the bunched muscles. "*Fuck, Illya...*" he whispered.

The Russian laughed, then asked, "Is that a declarative, or a command?"

Solo groaned. "Either, both, I don't care, just move!" The American pushed his hips back, letting Illya know what he wanted.

"So impatient, my lover." Illya grasped Solo by the hips and then pulled back, feeling the slide in every nerve he owned. Now it was his turn to swear. Solo's Russian was good, but the guttural slurs coming from his lover's throat defied translation. Illya began a hard and fast rhythm, driving into Solo again and again. He pushed on the small of Napoleon's back, bending him forward more and pushing to the hilt.

Solo cried out as Illya hit his prostate for the first time, and had it not been for the strong arms encircling his waist, he would have slumped to the floor in a boneless sprawl. Napoleon's cries spurred Illya on, the smaller man driving up on his toes, rutting the last bit further into Solo's body. The water beat against Illya's back as he slammed into his lover over and over, trying to hold out a bit longer, but knowing it was fruitless. He reached in front of Napoleon, collected the straining cock and ran his thumb back and forth over the overly-stimulated glans, spreading the leaking juices across the smooth skin. Solo gasped once more, pushed into his hand and looked down at the thick fingers milking him. Illya drove deeply into him and that was all it took to send him over the edge, shooting semen through Illya's fingers to spray against the shower wall. He whimpered as the second orgasm so close after the first emptied his balls, draining the last drop and causing spasms so strong they felt just short of pain.

The rush of Solo's orgasm resonated through their joining, and Illya groaned loudly, feeling his cock massaged by the clench of Solo's passage. He managed one last plunge, and hung on the cusp, the fire spooling through his balls and racing out of him into his lover. He shuddered against Solo's back, still plastered against him, and heard Napoleon's cries mingle with his own as the strong pulses filled him.

Illya felt like a wrung-out dishrag, drained physically and emotionally by the raw power their joining had unleashed. He slumped against Solo's sturdy back, the American's hands still splayed against the tile, his strength holding them both. Slowly, Napoleon slid his hands upward, straightening his taxed back, muscles complaining. Illya was still hard inside him, and he relished the connection. He felt his lover's heart hammering wildly, matching his own, and smiled. *Together in this as well*, he thought. He longed to turn and gather Illya into his arms, but didn't want to separate just yet.

The Russian's mindset seemed to mesh with his, as he tiredly raised his head and began licking the water spray from Solo's flushed skin. Illya released the clinch he'd been employing and hugged Solo to him, standing erect and circling the older man with his arms. He felt himself softening and finally slipped from Solo's body with a groan of regret. Napoleon hissed at the withdrawal, and Illya asked softly, "Are you all right, Polya?"

Solo laughed and replied, "I'll feel it tomorrow, but I'm about as all right as I've ever been in my life." He turned into Illya and returned the embrace. They stayed locked together as the warm water sluiced over them, cleaning the last remnants of their lovemaking away. Illya yawned into Solo's shoulder, the long day and the seminal events therein ganging up on him now, his weariness evident. Napoleon kissed him on the top of his head, and said, "Let's dry off and turn in."

They stepped onto the mat and Solo grabbed the towels, handed one to Illya and then used his to ruffle the sleek blond hair, drying it with brisk motions. He finger-combed it and then started on the lean frame, rubbing the droplets away and warding off the gooseflesh pebbling Kuryakin's skin.

"You know, I've always wanted to do that," he confessed.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Illya grinned.

"No, not *that*." Solo actually colored. "Well, yes, **that**, but I've always wanted to play with your hair. I've been itching to get ahold of it and run my hands through it for years."

Illya laughed. "Trading secrets, now?" He slowly rubbed Solo dry refamiliarizing himself with the larger, stockier frame. "Well, truth be told, I've always been fixated on your cleft chin. Longed to kiss it, actually." He did just that, which led to a barrage of more kisses. "And a certain rumor, propagated by the steno pool, has been properly authenticated tonight."

Solo leered at Illya and asked, "What rumor is that, *Illyusha*?"

Kuryakin snorted. "Suffice it to say that your large extremities, including your chin, are proportionally matched to your other large appendage..."

Solo interrupted. "Illya..." he growled dangerously.

"...your ego," he finished and snapped the wet towel at Solo, hitting him in the ass. He ducked under Solo's roundhouse and fled to the bedroom, still trailing droplets of water on the rug.

Solo gave chase, tackled him by the knees and flopped Illya onto the bed, bouncing them together into a satisfying naked pile. Solo took Illya's mouth, feeding from it, plundering the moisture there, stealing the smaller man's breath. Illya carded his blunt fingers through Solo's wet hair, loving the thicker, denser feel of it. He felt Solo sucking his hair into the lush mouth, feeling the silkiness of it on his tongue. He sighed happily.

"Whatever shall I do, Mr. Solo? I haven't any pajamas." He batted his pale eyelashes at his lover.

Napoleon swatted him on the ass and said, "Good. One less thing I have to tear off of you in the morning." He waggled his eyebrows at Illya and turned back the covers. The men climbed in, relishing the closeness of skin on skin anew.

"The morning, you say? That long?" Illya did something very wicked with his hand and his head followed, causing Solo to groan out loud.

"I've created a monster..." he groused, until his breath was no more and speaking was impossible.

Illya said, between mouthfuls, "Actually, I believe I'm creating one now." Wet, obscene sounds eked through the muffling covers as Illya proclaimed in his best Dr. Frankenstein voice, "**It's alive!**"

Napoleon Solo's eyes rolled back in his head as he managed to whimper, "But I may not be by morning..."

