Pity No More (The Closed Doors Remix)

by pyrrhical (anoyo)

Summary

It hadn’t been an easy thing, growing up with a man’s name tattooed inside his wrist, even if it was in English. Too many people knew English, were learning English -- it wasn’t safe.

He faked an accident. Deliberately threw himself off-balance and burned his wrist, alongside a good portion of his arm, in the fire from the stovetop. The words weren’t just unreadable, after that. They were gone.

Notes

This is a remix of Pity No More by chantefable. Please read the original: I can't recommend it highly enough.

This story was written for the Remix Redux challenge, and I have to say: getting an author I've read, and really enjoy, was a delight.

See the end of the work for more notes

It hadn’t been an easy thing, growing up with a man’s name tattooed inside his wrist, even if it was in English. Too many people knew English, were learning English -- it wasn’t safe.

He burned it.
The moment his mother had read him the words, whimsically told him of Napoleon, the French conqueror, Illya had known it couldn’t stay. Many people wore wrist-watches, or bands, to keep their names private and hidden, but that wasn’t enough. When the military kept such a close watch on his family, it was nowhere near enough.

He faked an accident. Deliberately threw himself off-balance and burned his wrist, alongside a good portion of his arm, in the fire from the stovetop. The words weren’t just unreadable, after that. They were gone.

Illya did his very best to burn them from his mind, as well. No good could ever come of it. Never.

It was fifteen years before Illya’s forced ignorance stumbled. He was sitting across from a man that he had tried to kill - who had tried to kill him - and who was being introduced to him as Napoleon Solo, CIA. He was being told they were going to have to work together. He would need to place at least a modicum of trust in this man if they were to complete their mission.

From the look on Solo’s face, he was feeling much the same.

Through some unspoken understanding, they did their best not to use the other’s name. Somehow, it helped.

The life-saving didn’t.

Illya could allow that they made a good team, for all that they were enemies. Solo was competent in ways Illya himself was not, and the same was true in reverse. They fit, in that inexplicable way soulmates always seemed to in the stories. That didn’t help, either.

Illya didn’t panic when Waverly told them that he, Solo, and Gaby would be working together for the foreseeable future. Some part of him, primal on a level with the soul bond, had known it would happen. Soulmates rarely met, with billions of people swarming the planet; the logical part of him said that if they did, serendipity would work to keep them that way.

It was comfortable, and he knew it was right. When he let himself consider it seriously, he could see all the ways Solo was his “other half,” as the romantics said.

That didn’t make it any less dangerous.

Solo’s country was more accepting of homosexuality than his, but only in the barest of degrees, and mostly in name alone.

He and Solo continued as they were: partners, and good ones, no matter how rarely they used one another’s given names.

As perceptive as she was, Gaby never seemed to notice the little ways they slipped into overcomfortable conversation or physicality. Illya’s mark was gone, it was true, but Solo’s was simply covered by the band of his watch. Illya had seen his name there a few times, when the band had slipped or simply been gone.

Or, perhaps, she did notice. Gaby was a good spy - an excellent spy. She wasn’t buried in romantic ideals any more than he or Solo were. Perhaps, she did notice, but agreed that keeping it hidden, unsaid, was safer for them all.

Illya didn’t expect it to change, and like a self-fulfilling prophecy, it didn’t. Years passed as they all worked for U.N.C.L.E., Gaby getting married in 1970 to a flower-seller in Venice, but continuing on as active as ever. Illya was fifty-five before he took a desk promotion, Solo following the next year
with his own promotion to diplomatic liaison.

It was strange, no longer seeing or speaking to one another every day. Solo didn’t expend any extra energy making sure that Illya stayed up-to-date on his activities, and Illya didn’t expect it.

When Solo finally completed his sentence - pushed and extended as many times as the CIA had been able - Illya received a memo on his administrative daily.

There had been many times, over the years, when Illya had forgotten that Solo wasn’t an operative by choice, but rather by necessity. The reminders always seemed to come out of the shadows, like snake bites: fast, deadly, and without warning. Always, always when Solo was nearing the end of his “sentence,” something would happen in the field, a mistake or failure, that the CIA cited as some form of minor treason in order to extend their hold a few more years.

Solo had joked a few times, in that dark manner he had when he was twisting a hard truth into something more bearable for those around him, that he would never leave the CIA. That, rather than ever finish his time, he would simply serve until he died in his sleep, an old man. They never spoke on which part of the joke was truly less likely.

That memo, after all the jokes and shared hangovers after the fact, had come as a shock.

Illya and Solo were no longer in the same division of U.N.C.L.E., as Illya handled field agents and Solo handled angry diplomats, so Illya had no real reason to feel ambushed. They only spoke when Solo was at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, or when they had been tasked to a joint purpose.

Feeling ambushed was irrational, but as Gaby had once said, feelings often were. Illya had no way of asking how Solo had finally completed his sentence, or what he would be doing with his life in the wake of it. No way of asking, unless he broke the assumed neutrality.

It was still a bad idea.

Civil rights activists, of both the bombing and lobbying variety, had become louder in the past decade, but open homosexuality was still the rare exception, not a general allowance. Generously into his sixties, Illya held no belief that he would live to see that change. He could, perhaps, wave away a phone call to congratulate his old partner. It wouldn’t be expected, or particularly true to his character, but it was believable in a more general sense.

That wasn’t why it was a bad idea.

Illya knew, had always known, that if he allowed himself to become close to Solo outside of U.N.C.L.E. and Gaby, he wouldn’t be able to stop. There was a door between the two of them, in his mind, and if he opened it, he’d never manage to close it again.

He didn’t call. It was only in a letter from Gaby, two months later, that he learned Solo had moved to California to retire. Part of Illya was glad, both for Solo and the quiet that he had earned, and for the distance. He thought that, someday, maybe, he could do the same.

He never did.

End Notes
I tried to take the tone of the original story and lighten it, while at the same time taking the story itself and darkening it. If I succeeded, huzzah! If not, I hope you still enjoyed this remix.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!