Unfit For Vision
by Elise_Madrid

Summary

A misunderstanding one night taints their friendship. Then a Thrust plot intervenes, and their lives may never be the same.

Notes


Napoleon watched his partner through the mirror, his attention only peripherally on combing his hair. Illya had one elbow propped up on his desk and his chin rested in the palm of his hand. Eyes downcast, he scribbled furiously on the paper in front of him.

“You feel like going out for lunch?” Napoleon asked as he flipped his hair back with a well-practiced twist of the comb.

The scribbling faltered for a second, then continued on as if Napoleon hadn’t spoken.

Napoleon waited only long enough to gather the frayed edges of his temper. Then he turned and walked over to stand in front of the desk. “Illya, are you listening to me?” He almost sounded normal.

Illya finally stopped writing and looked up. “You asked about lunch.”

“So you were ignoring me, is that it?”
The other agent played with the pen in his hand and his gaze slid away from Napoleon. “Don’t you have to meet with Mr. Waverly about the upcoming conference?”

“That’s not until tomorrow. I think he’s still not sure where to have it.”

“I don’t understand why they don’t use an UNCLE headquarters. It would certainly save money, something Mr. Waverly’s always complaining about. Not to mention doing away with the security problems.”

“Beats me. I suppose the section heads like to try to outdo each other, see who can come up with the most exotic location. But ours is not to question why....”

“Yes, yes, ‘ours is just to do or die.’”

“Anyway, what about it? Do you want to have lunch together?” Napoleon asked, trying not to sound too eager.

Illya hesitated a moment. “I’m not really hungry right now, Napoleon. Perhaps you should ask someone else.”

“You’re never going to let it go, are you, Kuryakin?”

With a sigh, Napoleon sat on the edge of the desk and pulled one leg up to lean against. He stared at his partner, unsure of what to say.

“Oh, hell, in for a penny... “I don’t want to go with someone else. I want to go with you,” he finally announced.

Conflicting emotions played across Illya’s face, though quickly suppressed. But Napoleon had long ago learned to read his partner and while he noticed the initial irritation, he gained hope from the longing that had slipped his partner’s control.

“Come on, Illya, I’ll buy.”

Illya stared up at him. It seemed as if he was going to refuse again but something on Napoleon’s face must have swayed him because he gave a quick nod instead and rose from his chair. “I am due in the labs within the hour so we can’t go far. Perhaps the commissary....”

“No.” Napoleon stood, the well of good humor he felt bringing a grin to his face. “There’s a new vendor a couple of blocks away. It’s supposed to have the best hot dogs in all of Midtown.”

“Hot dogs, Napoleon? That doesn’t sound like your usual fare.” Illya looked at him askance.

“Not usually, no, but one every now and then isn’t going to kill me. Besides, no self-respecting American would pass up the chance to try out one that’s come so highly recommended. Now, come on,” Napoleon walked over and grabbed Illya’s jacket from where it hung on the coat rack, “we’re wasting time.”

Illya allowed him to help him on with his jacket, even smiling slightly when Napoleon bowed and waved him through the doorway. Napoleon took it as a good sign. It had been too long since Illya had looked at him with anything but distrust.

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Illya’s silence as they traversed the wide hallways of UNCLE headquarters almost made Napoleon think he had misjudged his success in bringing his friend around. Perhaps Illya figured it would get Napoleon off his back. That Napoleon would give up. If Illya thought that, he didn’t know him as well as he thought he did. But by the time they exited Del Floria’s Napoleon had come to see that
this silence was more like what they had once shared. It lifted Napoleon’s spirits. It felt good to walk
the streets with Illya at his side, the sun warming their faces, the brisk winds of winters beginning to
give over to the balmier breezes of spring.

He sneaked a quick glance at his friend as they walked down the street and saw that he was almost
smiling. Illya seemed content at his side, the distance that had grown between them over the last
month narrowed, even if only slightly. It was a start.

“Where is this place, exactly?” Illya asked.

Napoleon waved vaguely ahead. “It’s across from the library. I’m surprised you haven’t noticed it by
now. Weren’t you there during lunch a couple of times last week? You told me you were.”

Illya shrugged. “One vendor looks very much like the next.”

An answer that wasn’t an answer. Perhaps he hadn’t made as much headway as he’d thought.
“Maybe,” Napoleon glanced both ways before grabbing Illya’s arm to direct him across the street,
“but this particular vendor is supposed to be quite memorable.”

Illya kept his eyes ahead of him as he stepped up onto the curb, his response sounding as if it was
made more out of politeness than interest. “Memorable?”

“Myers says she’s a real beauty.”

“Myers shoots in the bottom ten percentile. I don’t know if I’d take his word for anything requiring
visual proof.”

“Well, it wasn’t just Myers. Roger Collins and Mark Slade have both mentioned her to me.”
“The fact that they mentioned her to you makes me think neither got very far.”

Napoleon grinned. “Got it in one, partner.”

“And of course that would prove a challenge you could hardly refuse.” The look Illya gave
Napoleon then was inscrutable. “I’m surprised you didn’t take this little foray on your own.”

“We haven’t had lunch together for awhile. You couldn’t go far and I’d been meaning to check her
out. What’s wrong with killing two birds with one stone?”

“Ah, a matter of convenience.”

Napoleon scowled, stung by the remark. “That’s not it at all. We’re friends, Illya. Or at least we used
to be.”

Illya ran his hand through his hair and sighed in exasperation. “We are still friends, Napoleon.”
“It doesn’t seem like it to me. Ever since that night—”

“We’ve already been over that. Everything will get back to normal. It’s just that... it’s going to take
time, that’s all.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And I accepted your apology. Let it go, Napoleon.”

But he couldn’t. He wanted the closeness they’d shared back and he wasn’t one to wait for
something he wanted. It was all he could do not to grab Illya and demand that his friend forget what
had happened, push it into the past where it belonged. The distance between them was killing him
and he wanted it gone now. That his impatience had gotten him into this mess to begin with wasn’t lost on him.

He had been so sure Illya wanted what he wanted. How could he have misjudged the situation so badly?

They turned the corner and stopped at the curb. Across the street the city gave way to a small park. Picnic benches, crowded with people, were spaced haphazardly through the green area, while venders of every type lined the sidewalk and vied for customers.

“Is that the one?” Illya nodded to the left as they crossed over to the square. A blue and white striped umbrella cast a cooling shade over a vendor’s cart. Standing beside it, a young woman was busily serving a line of customers.

“I suppose so.” Napoleon glanced around. “She seems to be the only hot dog vender in the area.”

He studied her as they approached. She wasn’t exactly beautiful, but Napoleon could see why so many of the agents had been taken by her. Though of average height, the apron she wore tightly wrapped around her torso accented her trim figure and her auburn hair blazed in the afternoon sun. And she seemed to have a way with her customers, easily balancing between friendliness and a certain air that created distance. A mystery in tan cords and tennis shoes.

They got in line. Napoleon contemplated the sign taped to the side of the cart listing the menu. He never imagined one could do so much with a hot dog. “What’re you going to have?” he turned to his partner and asked.

“A hot dog.”

“Ha ha, very funny. I meant what kind of hot dog are you going to have.”

Illya frowned as Napoleon showed him the sign. “I didn’t realize there were so many. There was only the one at the ball game.”

Napoleon remembered. Illya’s first baseball game and Napoleon had been the lucky one with him. They’d got more than their share of odd looks as Illya’s dry remarks about the players and their activities had kept him laughing more often than actually watching the game. It had been a great day.

“Those are called ballparks. See?” he pointed it out on the menu. As his gaze slid by her, the woman send her smile his way. He returned the smile and, second nature, found himself responding to her interest.

“The line is too long. I think I’ll head back and pick something up at the commissary.”

That brought Napoleon’s attention sharply back to his partner. “What are you talking about? There’s only a couple of people ahead of us.”

“I really should be going,” Illya glanced behind him, as if planning his escape. “Perhaps another time...”

“Illya, wait...”

But Illya was already backing up, slipping away. “I’ll see you at the office.”

“Don’t—” He started to argue but found he was talking to himself. Illya was gone. Napoleon swore under his breath. What the hell had caused that?
It occurred to him to follow his partner back but then thought twice about it. What would be the point? He’d obviously lost whatever ground he’d made. Besides, he was hungry, he was here and Illya would expect him to stay and make a play for the woman.

Hadn’t that been the whole point? To show Illya that he was still interested in women, so that Illya would know he had nothing to fear from him? That he deeply regretted what had transpired that night and would give anything to take it back?

Yet here he stood, alone, waiting for a chance to make a play for a woman he really wasn’t interested in, while the person the whole charade was for hightailed it back to the office. Napoleon moved forward as the next person in line was served. How was he supposed to make Illya more comfortable around him if he wouldn’t stay around him?

Napoleon eyed the woman. She really was quite attractive now that he took a second look at her. Nice features. Maybe he could still salvage something from all this. Illya didn’t necessarily have to see him make the date. All he had to know was that Napoleon had actually made one.

As the man in front of him walked away, Napoleon stepped up to the counter. “Uh...” The mind, still half on his partner, went blank.

The woman’s eyebrows went up in question but a smile teased around her mouth.

He grinned. “Sorry about that. My mind was somewhere else.”

“Somewhere nice, I hope.”

He answered with a shrug then turned his attention to her sign. “What’s good?”

She took the hint, though her manner still showed interest. “Everything.”

“Oh, really?” he responded, falling easily into the repartee. “But what’s best?”

“A man who demands only the best. I like that.” She thought a moment, then opened up the warmer. Removing a bun, she placed it on a paper napkin then proceeded to layer on condiments, half her attention on her work, half on Napoleon. “I don’t usually offer this since it takes a discerning palate to appreciate but I’ll make an exception for you.”

“Oh? And why is that?” He watched, fascinated, as she opened one container after the other, sometimes deciding for, sometimes against. Most of her choices were familiar to him, but a few weren’t.

“Don’t they always say a way to a man’s heart is through his stomach?”

His response was a lift of his eyebrows. His heart wasn’t available but, even if it was, most women weren’t quite so obvious.

She laughed at the look on his face. “It’s just an expression, though I won’t deny I wouldn’t mind getting to know you better.”

“Nor I you, Miss, Miss—?”

“Lucy. Lucy Owens.” She lifted her chin and pushed her right shoulder forward. “See?”

Partly obscured by her apron, an oval patch edged in red was sewn onto her white blouse and proudly displayed her name. “Ah, yes, I see. And how did you come to be in this business, Miss
Lucy Owens?”

“Pure luck. The previous owner decided to retire.” She gave him an ill-concealed once over. “And you are?”

“Napoleon. Napoleon Solo,” he responded with a slight bow.

She smiled then picked up a pair of tongs, carefully choosing a frank to plop unceremoniously into the overflowing bun. With a flourish, she handed it over to him. “Here you go, Mr. Napoleon Solo. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to pay for it. How’s that? Can’t have the course of friendship, even a new one, not running true.”

He eyed it with apprehension. It was huge. “You may have to take a detour. I don’t know if I’m up to this.”

“Oh, go on, take a bite at least.”

Straightening his shoulders, he gave her a “here goes” look and carefully took a bite. He chewed slowly, while he tried to sort out the flavors. Try as he might, he couldn’t quite place them all. Finally, he nodded to her in appreciation. “It’s very good. What’s in it?”

“Now, you don’t expect me to tell you that, do you? Old family secret, or something to that effect.”

Just then another customer walked up behind him. Napoleon moved to the side.

“Why don’t you sit down over there and eat?” Lucy nodded toward a nearby bench. “I’ll be done here in a few minutes. Then maybe you can walk me back to my car.”

He hadn’t thought to stay. They normally only took about half an hour for lunch and he’d already been gone almost that long. But maybe if he stayed away for awhile Illya would be more inclined to accept that Napoleon had returned to his womanizing ways. It was exactly what he would have done not so long ago. He supposed it was worth a try. With that in mind, he took a seat on the nearest bench.

He gave the hot dog a wry look. There was no way he was going to eat all this. Glancing at the woman, he made sure her attention was firmly on her customer before tearing the dog in two and throwing the smaller half into the trash can placed at the end of the table.

There, much better. He picked up what was left and continued to eat while he waited for the woman. By the time he was finished, the lunch crowd had died down and Lucy had started to close up her business. Napoleon stood and wiped his mouth and hands with his now empty napkin. He threw it into the waste basket and walked back to her stand.

“All set?”

“Just about.” She finished locking up the stand, then undid the umbrella and pulled it down to strap onto the side of the cart.

Napoleon moved over and grabbed the cart’s handle. “Which way?”

“Over there.” Lucy pointed down the street. “See the alley two blocks down? I’m parked about a hundred feet in.”

He tucked her arm into his and, undoing the brake, started the stand forward. It was a relatively cool day, but the sun felt good and her body next to his was a welcome warmth.
“Aren’t you afraid to walk around with that much money?” he asked with a nod toward the side of the cart. He’d noticed her stashing away her earnings in one of the doors there.

“Not really. There’s still plenty of people around. Besides,” she threw her hair back with a dramatic flourish, “I can take care of myself.”

He laughed. “I’ll take your word for it. So, how long have you been doing this?”

“Not long. Less than two months.”

“Why, may I ask? You don’t look like someone who’d make their living this way.”

“Why not? It’s enjoyable, I get to work outside and I meet a lot of interesting people.” She glanced up at him. “I met you, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but still...” He groped for words, not wanting to insult her but unable to associate this cool beauty with what she did.

She shrugged. “I got tired of being just one among dozens who spent their days typing, filing, and running errands for a bunch of men who look at us as little more than gofers. Being a secretary isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

He could understand that. He and Illya sometimes spend days in the office but it didn’t happen that often. Most of the time they were out in the field. He didn’t know if he could stand it if, for whatever reason, he was tied to to a desk. “Was that here in New York?”

“Oh, no, I’m from Wisconsin, born and bred....”

Napoleon listened, asking questions but rarely giving answers of his own. He’d got very good at that over the years. They had just crossed the second street, the alley entrance no more than thirty feet in front of them, when he felt the first twinge of nausea. He tried to ignore it, keeping his attention firmly on pushing the cart forward while the woman at his side gave him a compressed version of her life.

“I’d saved up for two years before I felt I had enough to take the plunge....”

His grip tightened on the cart handle as a stronger surge of nausea rolled through him. He felt hot and he could feel beads of perspiration dot his forehead. As they took the turn into the alley, he had to fight off the feeling to vomit. After he got her to her car, he’d find somewhere to get sick, but not before. It would be embarrassing enough under normal circumstances. But to lose his lunch in front of the woman who’d made that lunch—he absolutely refused to do that. He could hold out.

“You look awful.”

He felt her hand on his arm, trying to hold him up. But she was too weak and he found himself suddenly on his knees. He grabbed his stomach and groaned as pain ripped through him again.

“I’ll go get help.” She was starting to turn away. He flailed out and grabbed her by the arm.
“No,” he gasped. “Help me into the car. There’s a place—” He clenched his teeth together as yet another surge of pain threatened to overwhelm him. It was getting worse.

“No, Napoleon, you need to get to a doctor.”

She tried loosening his fingers from the tight grasp he had on her arm but he held on. He couldn’t be left alone like this, not without backup. He’d be a sitting duck.

“Just—just get me into your car,” he finally managed. “I’ll show you where to go.” He looked up, seeing mostly concern but also confusion on her face. “Please, Lucy, just do what I say.”

She finally nodded, reluctantly stooping down to wrap an arm around his waist. He stood, using her strength and the car as a prop to get to his feet. But he didn’t know if he was going to last long enough to get to safety. His vision was tunneling down and he knew he had only seconds left before he passed out.

He heard more than saw her open the passenger side door. Then he was inside, the seat rising up to catch him. He slid back against the closing door, unable to hold himself up, and his head impacted on the window. Another pain hit and he heard himself cry out. He felt like he was dying.

“Napoleon,” she was shaking him by the shoulders, trying to pull him up at the same time. “Napoleon, where should I take you?”

To Illya, take me to Illya. He’d thought he’d said the words but she only stared at him expectantly. Maybe she hadn’t heard. He tried again but now the words wouldn’t form. His body spasmed and he fought back a whine as hot pain filled him. Then the world went black.

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Napoleon came to with a start, his hands automatically clutching the surface beneath him. He knew he was alive. He felt too bad to be dead. At least, he always figured it would be that way; he’d die and that would be the end of it. But right now his head was pounding and his stomach was still in revolt. So he was alive; he only felt like dying. But where was he? Only one way to find out.

He opened his eyes. A cell of some sort: gray walls, cement floor, a commode and sink in the corner. And the bed he was lying on. Whoever had him, they weren’t worried about his comfort.

He came up on one elbow and tried to get his bearings. There were no windows. Even the door was a solid barrier, gray like everything else in the room. He could be anywhere. He lifted the blanket covering him and made a face. Of course they’d taken his clothes. He sat up, wrapping the blanket around himself as best he could. He wasn’t ashamed of his body but being naked did tend to put you at a disadvantage. He wished he knew how long he’d been here. It would be nice to know that Illya was already on his way here. Wherever here was.

He could just hear his partner, griping about having to rescue Napoleon from yet another of his romantic entanglements because, of course, Lucy would have to have been in on it. Napoleon grimaced. He’d fallen for that like a green novice. He wondered how long she’d had to work that stand, waiting for him to make an appearance so she could slip something into his food, then getting him by himself, away from prying eyes. He couldn’t have made that part any easier for her. They’d counted on him seeing her to her car and he hadn’t disappointed them.

With a disgusted sigh, he tried getting to his feet and realized his mistake almost immediately. With a wild lurch he threw himself across the room to the commode. He barely made it. His stomach spasmed and emptied as Napoleon gripped the cold porcelain, the cement hard and cold against his
knees.

When he was done, he gathered the blanket more tightly around and pushed himself to his feet. Better. At least now the room had stopped spinning. Even his head was starting to feel better. He flushed the toilet, then turned to the small sink to wash his hands and rinse out his mouth. There was no towel, so he dried his hands on the blanket and returned to the bed.

It was mounted to the floor, the steel frame hardly wider than a cot. Even the mattress was secured with ties at the head and foot. With nothing else to do, he sat back down on the bed. He rested his back against the wall and pulled the blanket around to cover himself. Then he waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. Though his eyes were shut, Napoleon was vividly aware of his surroundings. He couldn’t have been sitting there more than ten minutes before he heard muffled footsteps outside the room. There was the sound of a key turning and then the door swung open. He opened his eyes but otherwise remained as he was.

Lucy walked in, followed by three very large guards. With guns. No longer in a working girl’s getup, instead she wore the coveralls and beret favored by THRUSH agents everywhere. Bringing up the rear, yet another guard pushed forward a steel table that he maneuvered into the room not far from the bed.

“I hope you’re feeling better, Mr. Solo.” She came over to stand in front of him. The expression on her face was pure satisfaction.

“Please, ‘Napoleon.’ After all, we’re practically dating.” Napoleon had to look up at her, she was so close. He tried to ignore the gurney behind her.

“I really couldn’t do that. After all, a doctor isn’t supposed to date her patients. In a way, ours is the same relationship.”

“Oh? Are you going to be tending me?”

“In a manner of speaking. You’ve already had—how shall I put this?” She thought a moment then beamed. “A prescription filled. I certainly hope the side effects weren’t too painful.”

“No, not at all.” He smiled. “I feel as good as new.”

“You had me worried there for awhile, it took so long for the serum to take effect. I was afraid I was going to have to shoot you.”

“So glad I could oblige. But if I could have my clothes now I’ll be on my way. I’m sure you have plenty of—patients who would be more than happy to have you treat them.”

“But it wouldn’t be quite the same, would it? No, I’m afraid you’re it for now. There’s so much floating around in that mind of yours, it would be remiss of me not to try to retract it, especially after all the trouble we went to to get you here in the first place. As a matter of fact,” she stepped back and motioned him to stand, “now would be a perfect time to start.”

He looked at her and then at the table behind her. The top was innocuous enough, except for the straps at its sides, of course. But underneath a shelf held an assembly of medical instruments: needles, tubes, bandages and several small containers of what, he didn’t want to imagine.

“I’d really rather not.” Napoleon instinctively pulled back.

Lucy waved to one of the guards who brought his weapon around and aimed it directly at Napoleon.
“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist. Come now, Mr. Solo. I’ve been so looking forward to using this. I’d really hate to have to have Edward here shoot you. That surely will hurt much more than any of my drugs.”

Napoleon wasn’t so sure about that but knew he really didn’t have a choice. Pulling his blanket more snugly about him, he stood up and walked over to the gurney.

“Uh, you won’t be needing this.” Lucy tugged at the blanket.

He gave it up without a fight. He would only end up making himself look foolish. Instead, he handed it over, pulled himself up onto the table and laid flat.

He kept his eyes focused straight ahead as his arms and legs were strapped down, his forearm swabbed and a needle jabbed into his vein. He felt nothing at first, only the cold of the room against his bare skin and the chafing of the leather on his ankles and wrists. After about a minute a buzzing started in his ears and the room took on a funny tilt. This was something new. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed he wouldn’t break.

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Illya readjusted the focus on the microscope. The image shifted, then re-converged, only to fade out again when he inadvertently moved the knob an indeterminate degree. He swore and sat up, his back and neck protesting the hours bent over the instrument. A glance at the clock told him it was approaching nine. He’d been sequestered in the lab since returning from lunch. Perhaps it was time to call it a day.

He stood up, his back popping as he stretched the kinks out. He removed his lab coat and replaced it with his suit jacket. A stop by his and Napoleon’s office to pick up his overcoat and he’d be on his way. This late in the evening he’d need it. He’d had to drive in with his partner but Napoleon had probably left hours ago. At least, Illya hoped he had. His problem with his friend was uppermost in his mind as he traversed the mostly empty halls of UNCLE back to the office they shared.

There had never been many secrets between them. Perhaps because, from the very beginning, they had found a comfort with each other not shared with any other. Illya had found himself telling Napoleon things he had never spoken of with anyone else. Yet, during all the time of their partnership, there was one topic Illya had not dared bring up.

Illya had long ago come to terms with his desire for men. It was what he was. It was who he was. But it was also something that could get him thrown out of UNCLE. Out of the country. Even worse would be his fate once back in the USSR. So he had kept his mouth shut and hoped against hope his secret would remain his own.

It had at first. There was no one close enough to him to notice the lack of female interests, to wonder at his, granted, infrequent visits to certain clubs known only to his own kind. Then he had been partnered with Napoleon and everything had changed.

Now, there was someone who wondered what he did on his off hours, who, in fact, wished to share some of those hours with him. There had been movies and baseball games and even days spent with each other just because they wanted to. Days when he would go to Napoleon’s apartment, or Napoleon to his, and they would do nothing more than share a few drinks and speak of whatever happened to be on their minds. But then Napoleon began to speak of women, of dating. What kind of women did Illya like? Was he seeing someone special?

So Illya had pretended to enjoy the company of women, to even date a few. But as the months had
gone by he had noticed more and more speculative looks directed his way from his friend. Napoleon was an intelligent man and something obviously wasn’t adding up to him. What better time to test his hypothesis then when the two of them would be sharing living arrangements far from home?

So, alone together in the house at Shady Haven Estates, the mission complete, the innocents safely away, Napoleon must have decided there was only one way to find out if what he apparently suspected was true. On their final night there before returning to New York, he had waited until Illya had fallen asleep before entering his room. Illya still wondered what Napoleon had expected but his reaction had been instinctual and his partner had found himself across the room, nursing a rapidly swelling jaw.

What Illya had found was that the man he had considered his truest friend, wasn’t. Napoleon had been curious and had used whatever means available to assuage that curiosity, no matter what it might do to their friendship, no matter that Illya did not want it to be known. And if, at that moment Illya had discovered something else about himself, that, too, was something Napoleon would never know.

Such knowledge. One bitter, the other bittersweet. He didn’t know which hurt worse.

The door to their office opened automatically as Illya reached his destination. He walked over to the coat rack situated in the far corner and grabbed his jacket. Only as he was starting out did he notice that Napoleon’s desk was still covered with the report he’d been working on before they had gone to lunch.

He slowed and stared at the papers scattered about in the haphazard way Napoleon tended to have when dealing with large amounts of paperwork. It shouldn’t have bothered him; it certainly wouldn’t have been the first time his partner had left work without clearing his desk. But there was something about the way—they hadn’t been touched. They were exactly the way they had been this afternoon.

Illya went over to his own desk. Throwing down his coat, he took a seat and picked up the phone. He pushed the button for the front desk and impatiently waited for someone to pick it up. When someone did, he didn’t bother with formality.

“Has Napoleon left for the day?”

“His badge is here, so I assume so,” the woman on the other end replied after a short hesitation.

“But you don’t know for sure.” He suddenly recalled the person who had handed his own badge to him when he had returned from lunch. “Where is Carla?”

“Her tour was up at five, sir. She left a couple of hours ago.”

“Is there anyway to get in touch with her?”

“I could call her at home but perhaps if you told me what it is you needed, I could help.”

Illya took a breath. It probably wasn’t anything, yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. “Yes, you’re correct. I’m sorry but this is very important. This is Kuryakin. I don’t seem to be able to find my partner. Is there any way for you to know what time someone left the building?”

“Of course there is. We keep a daily tally of when people come in and when they leave.”

“Then, could you tell me when Napoleon left? The exact time?”
He heard the rustling of paper. “It was at twelve forty-five this afternoon.” There was a brief pause. “According to our records, he left at the same time you did.” More paper rustling. “It doesn’t look like he ever came back.”

“And there has been no call?”

“No, sir. Could you hold on a moment?”

An obviously rhetorical question since Illya found himself on hold. Moments later, the woman was back.

“He isn’t responding to my call. Do you want me to try his home?”

Illya didn’t see any point. If Napoleon was home, he’d have answered his communicator. “No, that’s all right, thank you. Oh, one more thing. Is Mr. Waverly still in?”

“Yes, sir, he is.”

Illya hung up the phone. He might be overreacting but he didn’t think so. No matter how things stood between them, Napoleon would have let him know if he’d been called away on a mission, sent on his own for whatever reason. Since he hadn’t, the only thing Illya could think was that the only reason Napoleon hadn’t returned to UNCLE headquarters or answered his communicator was because he couldn’t. But only one person could tell him for sure.

He grabbed his coat and headed out the door to Mr. Waverly’s office.

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Lights out.

Napoleon sat at the head of the bed and let his head fall back against the wall behind him in relief. It was like clockwork, lights on to waken him for yet another session; lights off when they’d done with him for the day.

Four days. At least, he thought it had been four days. For all he knew, they were following their own time table as a way of disorienting him. If that was the case, they were doing a pretty good job of it. They were doing a pretty good job of working him over, too.

The first day hadn’t been too bad. Lucy and her cohorts had been too busy pumping him full of their nauseous concoctions to spare much time for physical persuasion. He’d been slapped around a bit, a few blows to his abdomen but he could tell they weren’t serious about it. The second day had got nasty. The third, nastier still. Today, well, today things had definitely hit rock bottom.

He cradled his right arm against his chest. He didn’t know if the muscle was torn or only strained in their latest endeavor at trying to make him talk. Tired of getting nowhere with the drugs, Lucy had ordered him unstrapped from the gurney. They had tied his hands then manhandled him off the floor to be hung from a hook imbedded in the ceiling, his feet dangling about a foot off the ground.

He had been left facing away from the door, so the first slice of the whip against his back had taken him by surprise. He’d caught the yelp in his throat but it was forced from him when the whip came down again, this time across his chest. That’s when he had started trying to twist away from it, protecting himself as best he could. The lashes had kept coming until his torso was a crisscross of bloody stripes. Through it all he could hear Lucy in the background, demanding information.

He didn’t know how long it had gone on. All he knew was that he’d finally over stretched himself,
the shoulder muscle unable to take both the weight of his body and his wild gyrations and he’d felt the shock of pain run from his shoulder all the way to his fingertips. Then he’d passed out.

He’d come to on the floor, alone. He eventually managed to gain his feet and staggered over to the bed. He’d covered himself up, using the blanket as some sort of pathetic shield, girding himself for their return.

But, once the lights turned off, he knew they wouldn’t return. Not tonight at least. Small comfort. How the hell was he going to manage tomorrow? And the next day and the day after that? Illya better hurry up and get here, that’s all he had to say. His arm left like it was ready to fall off, his back and chest were on fire and the rope burns on his wrists were only adding to his discomfort. He looked over at the hook fastened in the ceiling and shivered. He was a mess.

To make matter worse, he needed to take a piss and the distance from the bed to the toilet in the corner seemed to stretch out before him, no matter that it couldn’t be more than fifteen feet. He could just make out the glow of porcelain from the little amount of light which filtered in from under the door. With a sigh of resignation, he unfolded his legs and carefully levered himself up off the bed. He left the blanket where it was and started across the room.

Once there, he gratefully leaned against wall and aimed for the bowl as best he could. The welcome sound of his urine hitting the water was loud in his sparsely furnished cell. Afterwards, he washed his hands, then drank several handfuls of water. They were still feeding him but the smorgasbord of drugs they were giving him made keeping anything down difficult. Water was about the only thing he could handle without regretting it later.

He made his way back to the bed and settled into his previous position. For all his discomfort, he wasn’t sleepy. Exhausted, yes, his arms and legs like lead weights, but his mind wouldn’t turn off.

Illya. Napoleon grimaced. Of course his mind would turn to thoughts of his partner. It had been a long time since he had found anything else as interesting. Or anyone. Damn the man. Why did the prickly, humorless Russian he’d been partnered with have to turn out to be one of the sweetest, kindest men Napoleon had ever known? Why did he turn out to be so easy to love? It wouldn’t be so bad if the feelings had been reciprocated. Or if Napoleon hadn’t managed to make such a total fool of himself.

He shook his head and chuckled derisively. Boy, had he misread that particular situation, badly.

Illya. Napoleon touched his jaw, remembering his shock at finding himself on the floor, his partner, dressed only in his pajama bottoms, standing over him, ready to do battle. Illya had been seething.

He supposed he couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t every day your best friend tried to kiss you. But that was not the reaction he’d been hoping for...or expecting.

Trying to salvage what he could of the situation, he had passed it off as a joke. It hadn’t mattered. Since then, his friend had been barely civil, the chill only barely thawing the last couple of days. So, of course, with the chance of things finally getting back to normal between them, he had to go and get himself captured. And all because he wanted Illya to know he had nothing to worry about.

He shivered again. Damn, why did they have to keep the room so cold? Giving in to the inevitable, Napoleon gingerly moved away from the wall, stretching out his legs on the bed to lay on his side. He arranged the blanket over his body, then carefully lowered himself the rest of the way down. If he didn’t move around too much he should be okay. His back and chest had got most of the damage. His sides were relatively untouched.
As he lay in the dark, he wondered how long it would be before he was rescued. He wondered if things would ever be the same between him and Illya. He wished he could go back and do it all over again so that what he felt could stay forever buried. He wished it had played out so very differently.

It was a long time before he fell asleep.

*****

"Ah, there you are. Come in, come in."

Illya moved away from the entrance and let the door close behind him. He walked over to the large, round table that dominated the room and stood waiting. His boss sat on the other side, his attention fixed on one of the files in front of him.

Waverly didn’t look up, merely made a cursory motion in Illya’s direction. “Do be seated, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Illya took a seat, very aware of the vacant chair next to his. “You asked to see me, sir?”

“Yes, I did. We have finally had some luck tracking down our Mr. Solo.” Waverly finally closed the file, then spun the table around until the document sat in front of Illya. “Go ahead, read it.”

He opened it and quickly scanned the few pages inside. “Apparently, THRUSH is more afraid of the New York City bureaucracy than they are of UNCLE.”

“Doesn’t sound like them, does it?”

“No, sir, it doesn’t.”

“Which is why when you mentioned the vendor you and Mr. Solo visited for lunch that day, I couldn’t believe there would be any way to track her down. Nevertheless, I felt we should give it a try. This is what we found. It could very well be that this particular THRUSH agent is working on her own and feared being harassed if the city became aware of her unlawful enterprise. The rules are quite strict when it comes to such things.”

“It says here that she had a license for the cart, registered under the name ‘Lucille Borden.’” He flipped back to the front page, then looked up at his boss in surprise. “Is this address real?”

“That’s what I’d like you to find out. If it is, perhaps you can find something there that will lead you to your partner.”

Illya fervently hoped so. It was a week since Napoleon’s disappearance. A week he’d spent in a futile effort to find his partner. He hastily closed the file and began to stand. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Kuryakin. There is something else I wish to discuss with you.”

Illya reluctantly took his seat. “Yes, sir?”

Waverly seem to hesitate, or perhaps stall would have been a better description. He picked up his pipe from the ashtray nearby, grabbing the humidor next to it at the same time, then slowly filled his pipe. Only when that was done did he begin to speak. “Mr. Solo is an experienced and valuable agent. That experience is greatly missed and UNCLE will do all in its power to retrieve him.”

“I’m sure he will greatly appreciate that, sir, once he is found.”

“I certainly hope so. But that could take days, weeks, perhaps even months. We can’t afford to have
two experienced agents out of the field for such a long length of time.”

“I don’t understand,” Illya responded cautiously, though he had the terrible feeling that perhaps he understand too well.

“If the address turns out to be false, or if you find nothing there which leads you to Mr. Solo, I’m afraid I’m going to have to remove you from the case. There are many agents of lesser caliber who can, nevertheless, do just as efficient a job of tracking down leads as to his whereabouts as you can. I need you back in the field, doing the work only agents such as you and Mr. Solo can do.”

“But, sir—”

Waverly shook his head. “The matter is not open for discussion, Mr. Kuryakin. I have already allowed you more time than I should. If this turns out to be yet another dead end, you will hand off the assignment to Mr. Carmichael.”

“Carmichael has less than a year with UNCLE.”

“More than enough time to have learned the rudiments of investigation, I’m sure. If anything of significance is found, you will, of course, be apprised of the situation.” Waverly picked up the next file, opened it and began to read. After a moment he looked up. “That will be all, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Illya knew arguing further would do him no good. Could, in fact, make matters worse. So he rose to his feet, grabbing the file as he did, and walked out of the room.

He didn’t bother going back to his office. Since Napoleon’s disappearance he had spent little if any time there. Instead, when not out in the field looking for his partner, he had cloistered himself in his lab. No one bothered him there with sympathetic looks and words of encouragement. “We’re sure you’ll find him, Illya. Don’t give up.” As if he would. And of course Napoleon was alive. Illya could imagine no other outcome.

So he was thankful when he managed to retrieved his overcoat from the lab and slip out of the building without running into anyone who might try to engage him in conversation. As he exited Del Floria’s, he turned his collar up against the wind; spring was bringing more showers than sunshine. His car was parked a couple of blocks away but he was able to get to it before the skies opened up.

A slight drizzle followed him to the address he’d been given, an apartment building on the Upper West Side facing Central Park. Either the information was false or the woman was higher up THRUSH’s chain of command than they’d thought. No lowly underling could possibly afford accommodations anywhere near here.

After circling the building a few times he gave up and turned into its underground parking. He’d never liked using them, their dark confined, spaces perfect for an ambush. Nothing untoward happened, however, and he was able to take the elevator up to the fourth floor without mishap.

He double checked the slip of paper with the address on it as he followed the numbers down the hallway to the apartment at its end. His knock on the door went unanswered. He waited, then knocked again. Finally satisfied that no one was home, he glanced down the corridor both ways before removing a pick from his coat pocket. He quietly worked the lock open, then slipped into the apartment and shut the door behind him.

He gazed around the well appointed-room. Definitely the home of a woman, he decided. Too much pink and two many floral prints for a man to live here. Not one who wished to keep his way of life in the shadows, anyway. Only a fool would so openly proclaim his predilection.
Whoever lived here, the place had a feeling of not having been occupied recently. The air was slightly stale and a thin layer of dust covered the furniture. The small bouquet of flowers on the coffee table was in its last stage of decay.

A delicately built desk in the corner drew his attention. He carefully searched through the stacks of papers on top, making sure to keep everything in order. He found a bill with her name on it among a handful of appeals from different organizations. An architectural magazine. A stub from a recent Broadway play. He swore under his breath. There had to be something. He’d almost given up hope when he came across her calendar. Written under “March” was a destination on the very day Napoleon had gone missing. He rejoiced that his search finally had a direction as he pulled his communicator out of his pocket.

“Open channel D.”

“Channel D, Lisa here.”

“This is Kuryakin. I need to know which airline had a plane bound for Phoenix,” he glanced back to the calendar, “six days ago. It would have most likely been sometime in the late afternoon.”

“Hold on, sir.”

The line was quiet for several minutes. Finally, the girl returned. “No airline, not that day. But there was a private plane which took off about that time.”

“Who did it belong to?”

“Snowbird Enterprises, a well-known cover for THRUSH, actually. I think I have—yes, here it is. I pulled up as much information as I could from the people in Phoenix. There wasn’t a passenger manifest, but a rental car was requested. The clerk there remembered the woman who rented it walked over from where small planes are directed, then drove back to pick up her luggage herself. He thought it was odd because they have a shuttle service.”

“That is odd. Do they know where the woman was going?”

“No, that’s not information they usually ask for, though she did say she’d need the car for several days.”

Illya pondered the implications. The area was not a major metropolitan area but it was large enough. And Lucille Borden could have traveled in any direction from there. “Do you have the clerk’s name?”

“Yes, it’s Steven Mills. I checked his records. He seems to be exactly what he claims, just an ordinary airport employee.”

“Very well. Book me on the next flight to Phoenix. I’ll pick up my ticket at the airport.”

He closed his communicator. It wasn’t much but it was a start. Perhaps he could garner more information from the clerk. People tended to remember more when confronted in person. If not, he didn’t know how he’d go about finding Napoleon. But find him he would. His major problem would be convincing Waverly to give him the time to do so.

*****

Napoleon struggled to his hands and knees. Around him, his tormentors patiently waited for him to get up. Maybe he shouldn’t, he thought. Maybe he should just lie back down and wait for whatever
was next. Why make it easier for them?

The floor was cold, though, which only made his body ache even more. Besides, he’d never been one to just give up. But when he tried to stand, he found he could get no further. Stuck in this position, his right arm began to spasm as the pain from his injury crested. He shifted his weight onto the left one. It helped a little.

“Come now, Napoleon. Don’t tell me you’re getting too tired to play along.”

He wearily turned his head toward the voice. Lucy stood against the wall, wavering in and out as his vision blurred. “I hate to be a spoiled sport but I think I’ll sit this round out,” he croaked.

She stepped forward, smacking the electric prod she was using on him against her palm. The three bruisers, there to make sure he didn’t try anything, as if he could, moved aside as she advanced. “Oh, I think not. I’m having too much fun to stop now. Why, it’s hardly noon. We’ve got hours to go.”

He flinched as the prod hovered in his sight. It wouldn’t be so bad if he could prepare for it but he was never sure if she would administer a slight shock or a jolt that rattled his teeth. It was never enough to knock him out but, more than once, enough to knock him down. “I suppose I’ll have to do better then.”

“You know, all you have to do to end this is give me the location of the next Section one meeting and you could be on your way.”

“What? And leave this vacation hideaway?” More a way to end up dead, Napoleon thought as he finally managed to straighten, then carefully bring one leg up to plant a foot on the floor. The good one, the one he hadn’t badly sprained the day before. The drop hadn’t been far but he’d landed off kilter. He was lucky not to have broken it. Keeping as much weight off of it as he could, he gathered his strength and managed to gain his feet. “No, I think I’ll stick around for awhile.”

“If you insist.” She eyed him critically. “Though I think you’ve probably seen better days. Really, I’m rather disappointed.” She punctuated her words by running the tip of the prod up his bare leg to his groin, stopping only inches away from his flaccid penis.

He was growing used to that, too. Why she thought humiliation would work, when drugs and torture hadn’t, was beyond him, yet she had continued to question his manhood at every opportunity even though it wasn’t getting her any further than anything else she’d attempted. Of course, if she used that thing there it would probably kill him. Not exactly the way he’d planned to go out.

Instead, she suddenly swung the prod up and positioned it against his face. When the shock came, he realized that she hadn’t been using the full force of the thing on him. She did now. This time, he didn’t get up.

****

The flight was uneventful. Illya tried to nap on the plane, knowing he’d be adding time to his day flying west, but sleep had not come easily. He was too keyed up. With any luck, today would be the day he would find Napoleon. And if not today, surely tomorrow. It was a mantra that followed him across the country. And by the time he’d disembarked and found his way to the car rental office, he almost believed it.

Illya stepped up to the first position at the counter. Behind it was a young woman, probably still in her teens, but professionally dressed in some sort of uniform and immaculately groomed. “Excuse me
—” he glanced at the badge on her jacket, “—Susan, could you tell me if Steven Mills is in today?”

The girl looked up from her work. “I think he’s in the back. Hold on.” She got up and walked over to a doorway set in the wall behind her. “Steve,” she called out. “Someone’s here to see you.” She remained at the door until joined by a young man. She pointed Illya out to him.

“Is there something I can do for you?” Mills asked as he motioned Illya over to the next position. He looked to be in his middle twenties and dressed in a male rendering of the uniform Susan wore.

“Yes, My name is Illya Kuryakin. I am with the U.N.C.L.E..” He pulled out his badge and let Mills look it over before returning it to his pocket. “Yesterday you spoke with someone in my organization about a customer of yours.”

“Right, the woman from the private plane. I told your people everything I knew about her.”

“I was hoping perhaps you had remembered something more, anything that might help me to find her.”

Mills pursed his lips in thought, then slowly shook his head. “No, I can’t think of anything. She wasn’t here very long. The paperwork had been done ahead of time, so all I did was get her signature and hand over the keys to the car.”

“What kind of car was it?”

“A Land Rover. I remember because we don’t have but the one. Not a lot of call for it, either. Did seem out of character, you know? Classy looking lady, dressed really nice, then wanting something you’re more likely to see on the back roads.”

“Is there somewhere close by where she would need something like that?”

Mills laughed. “Well, sure. Any direction you want to go, you’re going to run into desert eventually.”

Illya could feel the small hope he’d harbored that morning slowly slipping away. It didn’t seem that Mills was going to be any help. But he couldn’t give up. Not yet. “Did she happen to mention if she was traveling with anyone?”

“She didn’t talk a whole lot. I got the impression she’d prefer I didn’t either, so I didn’t. I gave her the keys then went back to work.”

“Were there any other customers here at the time? Someone who might remember her?” He was grasping at straws and he knew it.

“No-o-o. It was a slow day, that much I do remember.” Mills gave a resigned shrug. “I’m sorry I can’t be any more help, Mr. Kuryakin. If I’d known it was important....”

“That’s all right. I’m sorry to have taken up your time.” Illya nodded and turned to leave.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kuryakin?” Susan had walked over from her position. “I couldn’t help but overhear. Are you asking about the woman who came in last week?” She looked at Mills. “The one with the gorgeous hair?”

“Yeah, that’s the one!” Miller exclaimed happily. Then he frowned. “How come you remember her?”
Susan gave him a look. “Maybe you didn’t notice anyone else looking at her because you were too busy looking at her yourself. Carl and Larry were both practically drooling over her, even from where they stood.” She tilted her head toward the doorway leading to the back.

“What do you think I could speak with them?” Illya asked.

“Fraid not. They’re both off today. Besides, they didn’t talk to her. But I think I can help you,” she added.


“Because she came back about ten minutes later. She asked for one of these.” Susan leaned around Mills and grabbed a brochure from one of the stands on the counter. “This one.” She handed it over to Illya.

Illya eagerly took the brochure. “A map of the... Payson area.” He looked back at Susan. “Where is this place?”

“About a couple of hours drive north of here. The directions from here to there are included in the brochure.”

His hand tightened on the map. It wasn’t much but so much more than he’d had. Now, at least, he had a destination. He rented a car, then thanked Susan and Mills for all their help. On his way out, he turned back once more. “Did you by any chance see the car she was driving?”

“The Rover? Sure, she had it parked right outside the door,” Susan responded.

“Was...was there someone with her?”

“Now that you mention it, yes, there was. I didn’t get a good look at him because he was sort of slumped over, like he was asleep.”

Illya swallowed. “Was there anything else you might have noticed about him? Anything at all?”

“Just that he had dark hair.”

It was enough.

*****

Illya settled on the bed, dressed in his pajamas. The map he’d picked up in Phoenix two days before lay open before him. Several more brochures he’d collected from the front desk of the hotel he’d checked into were also scattered about. Somewhere, in all these hundred of acres of land, his partner was being held.

He leaned over and grabbed his glass off the night stand. He took only a sip of the vodka before settling it within his crossed legs. Just enough to blunt the edge of tension. He was alone, no Napoleon to watch his back. He had to be doubly careful.

Taking his pen, he marked off a section of the map. Right next to the section he’d marked off the day before. He’d spent the last forty eight hours combing the area looking for anything out of the ordinary. He’d discovered nothing. Nor had the locals he’d talked to been able to provide him with any information.

He took another sip of vodka, the alcohol creating a comforting heat in his belly. He continued to
nurse the drink as he studied the map, trying to decide where to look next. There was so much land, so little of it developed that most of the names on the map signified natural landmarks, not towns. The brochures had been even less help.

Then there had been the call from Waverly the day before. His boss had not been pleased with the lack of progress. He wanted results, not wishful thinking. He’d given Illya twenty-four more hours to either find a substantial lead or return to New York. His time was almost up.

All he could do was try another section and hope he’d found something. It had worked before; he and Napoleon seemed to have developed a knack for stumbling across THRUSH’s various hideouts. Maybe that was the problem. This time, he was alone. He looked at the map again. He’d take the road north out of town and see where it took him.

With that decided, he pushed everything off the bed and stretched his legs out. He finished off his drink and put the glass on the night stand. He lay back, his hands linked behind his head. From out of the corner of his eye, he could just see the other bed, the empty bed, sitting there like a thorn in the side of his conscience.

Illya should have been with Napoleon that day. He knew how Napoleon had the habit of letting his guard down, even if only a little, when it came to women. He should have been there to guard his back. Instead, he’d run from his friend like a coward, not wanting to see him with a woman, yet at the same time afraid to let him close again.

He missed that closeness. The business they were in, one had few chances to make good friends and Illya had lost touch with most of those from his youth. His taciturn nature had kept most people at arm’s length. He hadn’t been lonely before Napoleon, just alone. It wasn’t people he missed, it was Napoleon.

But Napoleon had tried to shine a light on something Illya wished to remain in the shadows. He didn’t know if that was something that could ever be resolved between them.

When his communicator went off, he quickly sat up and grabbed it from where it had ended up near the foot of the bed.

“Kuryakin.”

“Ah, Mr. Kuryakin, we didn’t interrupt your sleep, I hope,” Waverly remarked.

“No, sir. It’s two hours earlier here.”

“Yes, quite right. We seemed to have stumbled on another bit of luck regarding Mr. Solo’s whereabouts.”

“Sir?”

“It seems last month one of our agents reported a possible THRUSH outpost in your general area. If Mr. Solo is in the vicinity, I would imagine that’s where they would be holding him.”

Illya leaned over the side of the bed and scrambled to pick up the discarded map. “Where is it?” he asked as he frantically tried to spread the slightly crumpled paper onto the bed.

“We don’t have an exact location. There’s a small village, really not more than a collection of cabins, approximately twenty-two miles east of your position. The outpost is situated north of there. Perhaps five miles or so. Check it out, Mr. Kuryakin, and let us know what you find.”
“Yes, sir.” Illya closed his communicator. He tried not to get too excited about the information but he couldn’t stop himself from thinking that Napoleon had to be there. Nothing else made any sense. How many outposts would THRUSH have, out here in the middle of nowhere?

He rose and started picking up the scattered brochures and threw them, along with his dirty clothes, into his suitcase. All he left out was what he’d don the next morning. Then he went into the bathroom and collected his toiletries, stuffing everything into a bag except for his toothbrush and toothpaste. Returning to the front room, he pulled down the covers, turned off the light and climbed into bed.

He closed his eyes and, one by one, willed his muscles to relax, his mind to shut down. Tomorrow he would find Napoleon.

*****

It was the sound of muted gunfire which woke Napoleon, a sound too familiar to go unnoticed. He didn’t know what time it was. Not that it mattered. He was either with his jailers or he wasn’t. But it was still dark in the room, which meant he was blessedly alone. He closed his eyes and tried to sink back into sleep.

He was not quite there when another shot, this one closer, brought him fully awake. He painstakingly pulled himself erect, then sat, his head down, huddled within his meager blanket, and tried to garner what strength he had left. Lack of sleep, lack of food, not to mention the workout his body was getting, was slowly leaching it away.

There was another shot, then someone was at the door.

“Napoleon? Napoleon, are you in there?”

Napoleon raised his head and looked toward the door. The light that always streamed through at its bottom was broken. Someone stood on the other side.

“Napoleon, it’s Illya. Answer me if you’re in there!”

“Illya?” It came out little more than a whisper. He knew his friend couldn’t have heard him, but he was unable to speak any louder. Panic hit him, as he imagined Illya moving away, leaving without him. He tried getting to his feet and only managed to end up falling to the floor. “Illya, wait.” he gasped.

“Napoleon, if you’re in there, I’m going to blow the door so get as far away from it as you can. Napoleon? Napoleon!”

He didn’t try to answer. The door wasn’t more than ten feet away and he had nowhere to hide. Taking the only course of action open to him, he pulled himself to the wall and turned his back on the door. He brought his arms up to protect his head and waited for the explosion.

The blast almost threw the door from its hinges. It held but pieces of its lock and parts of the wall shot out in all directions. Napoleon felt a rain of debris then, seconds later, a hand on his shoulder.

“Napoleon?” Illya stood over him, worry turning to relief as Napoleon looked his way.

He let himself be pulled to his feet by his friend’s gentle strength. “It’s about time you got here,” he croaked.

“I can’t help it if your women insist on taking you to the most out of the way places. Now come on,
we have to get out of here.”

Illya tried to hurry them along but they made slow progress. Napoleon’s ankle was still sore so even with Illya’s arm firmly wrapped around his waist he could manage little more than a shuffle. But Illya seemed to know where he was going and eventually they reached a door that led to a stairwell.

“Do you think you can manage them?” Illya asked as he helped Napoleon over to the steps.

Napoleon looked up with dismay. He didn’t know if he could or not. It didn’t make much difference since they certainly couldn’t stay here. “I’m game if you are,” he managed to force out through his strained vocal cords.

With a quick nod, Illya tightened his grip on him and, taking one painful step at a time, helped him up the stairs.

“How many of them did you kill?” Napoleon asked, as much because he needed to know as to try to keep his mind off the effort this was taking.

“Three. Two men and a woman. The one from the vending cart, Lucille Borden.”

“Huh.” Napoleon chuckled weakly, then cleared his throat. That made it slightly easier to talk. “She told me it was ‘Lucy Owens.’” He thought a moment. “You said two men? Then there’s at least one more floating around here somewhere.”

“We’ll worry about that if and when we have to. Right now, I’m more concerned with having to carry you the rest of the way up these stairs.”

Somehow they managed. Napoleon gave a sigh of relief when he finally planted his foot on the upper landing. The stairs continued up but there was also a door leading out. “Where to now?”

Illya motioned to the door. “There’s a short corridor on the other side that opens up to the rest of the house. Once we’re through there, I’ve got a car parked about fifty yards away.” He gave Napoleon a studied look. “Maybe I better leave you here while I go for it. You don’t look so good.”

Napoleon had had to lean against the wall to keep from falling but there was no way he was going to allow Illya to leave him here. He’d manage. Somehow. “I’ve definitely had better days. But I don’t have a gun and there’s at least one more of them out there. We stick together.”

Illya scowled but didn’t argue. He opened the door and after making sure no one was around, returned to his position at Napoleon’s side and helped him navigate the empty hallway and into the building’s living area.

Napoleon looked around as they hurried through. “It looks like a cabin.”

“Probably because it is. Ingenious of THRUSH, don’t you think? Putting one of their hideouts in the forest and camouflaging it within a cabin?”

“If you say so,” he responded breathlessly. Whatever help the adrenaline rush had given him was fast running out.

Near the exit lay one of the men Illya had killed.

“I wonder if his clothes would fit me,” Napoleon wistfully asked as they passed by the body.

“Possibly, except we don’t have time. I know how much you hate not being at your sartorial best,
Napoleon, but you’re going to have to put up with you’re wearing. Now, come on.”

“Hold on.” Napoleon pulled from Illya’s grasp and bent over the body. “I can certainly use this,” he quipped as he picked up the dead man’s gun. “But I’m still not staying so let’s go.”

They exited the building, using the same caution they’d used inside. Napoleon blinked rapidly when confronted with the bright sunlight of mid afternoon. He would have sworn it was night time.

Their luck seemed to hold as they moved away and across the open space in front of the cabin but Napoleon was having a harder time staying on his feet.

Illya must have noticed. “It’s not much further. Just around that stand of trees.”

They spotted the car at the same time. They looked at each other and grinned, then unconsciously picked up their pace. Ten feet from the car, two things happened at once. Napoleon’s ankle decided it could take no more; he stumbled and brought them both down—just as a bullet went flying past them.

“Take cover!” Illya pushed Napoleon aside and rolled away in the other direction. He gained his feet in a crouch and drew his gun but whoever had shot at them was not to be seen.

“I think he’s just outside the building.” Napoleon had managed to hold onto his own gun but was having a hard time keeping it aimed. His shoulder throbbed with each and every movement.

Illya straightened. “I’m going to go around to his right, try to flush him out. Do you think you can shoot that thing?” he motioned to the gun in Napoleon’s hand.

“I’m fine. Just be careful. We don’t know if it’s only one man.”

Illya nodded then moved off. Napoleon watched him until he disappeared from sight. He blinked his eyes. He was starting to have trouble focusing. And the quiet of the forest only made him more nervous. *Hurry up, Illya.* It seemed far too long since his partner had left.

He wiped his forehead with the blanket. Sweat was pouring off of him, even though he was having to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering. Lost in his misery, it was a wonder he heard the soft rustling in the underbrush behind him. Instincts kicked in, and he swung around and fired in one smooth movement. The third THRUSH agent fell to the ground.

“Napoleon!” Illya came running out of the forest. When he saw the body he slowed and approached Napoleon. He squatted down in front of him. “Do you recognize him?”

Napoleon nodded wearily. “Yeah, he’s the one who took particular pleasure out of tap-dancing on my ribs.”

“That’s probably it, then. No one else came out of the cabin.” He stood, pulling Napoleon to his feet at the same time. “Come on. Just because there’s no one else here right now doesn’t mean reinforcements aren’t on their way.”

“I don’t care.” Napoleon shrugged out of Illya grasp and bent down to start undoing the man’s belt buckle. “I’m not going to traipse all over the countryside in my birthday suit.”

“Get out of the way.” Illya nudged him aside and proceeded to undress the man.

The shirt had too much blood on it to be of any use so he left it but handed the rest to Napoleon, holding the blanket while Napoleon donned the pants and socks though the shoes turned out to be
When Napoleon was finished, Illya draped the blanket over his shoulders and helped him over to the car. He opened the passenger car door and got Napoleon settled, then sprinted around to the other side and got in. As he started the car, he turned to Napoleon. “Our communicators won’t work this far out but there’s a small town about seven miles from here. We can put in a call then.”

“Wake me when we get there.” Napoleon slumped into his seat and closed his eyes. He was with Illya. And for now, he was safe.

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The cessation of motion woke him. Napoleon sat up and peered blearily about. Movement at the front of the car drew his attention. It was Illya, dusting off his hands and looking decidedly unhappy. Napoleon rolled the window down and leaned his head out. “What’s the matter?”

Illya came around to the side of the car. “It appears our friend back there was luckier than we thought. There’s a bullet hole in the radiator.”

“How far did we get?”

“A couple of miles. Maybe a bit more.” He gazed down the road. “I don’t think we were followed.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

“I don’t think we will be. I took the first two by surprise then destroyed their radio equipment. I doubt the third man had any way to call out after that.” He seemed to ponder that. “I suppose there’s always the possibility they’re supposed to check in periodically.”

“Let’s not even think about that, okay? So, now what?”

“Well,” Illya looked back into the forest behind him, “there are some cabins off in that direction. Not more than a quarter of a mile.”

Napoleon took a deep breath then pushed open the car door. “Let’s go, then.”

“Napoleon, you don’t even have any shoes.” He eyed him dubiously. “Even if you did, I doubt you’d make it a quarter of a block, much less a quarter of a mile.”

“We don’t have much choice, do we? Even if they didn’t manage to get a message out, this time of year I think it gets pretty cold at night around here.”

“Unfortunately, you’re probably right. Very well.” Illya came around the door and helped Napoleon to his feet then led him over to lean against a tree. “You rest here. I’m going to push the car off the road and try to conceal it as best I can...just in case.”

Napoleon didn’t argue. He needed Illya’s help just to stand up straight. So he watched as his partner put the car into gear and started pushing the car forward as he manipulated the steering wheel. Luckily, it wasn’t a very big car and the road was slightly higher than the surrounding forest. It easily careened into the brush, stopping only when it hit the tree line. It took only a few more minutes for Illya to cover it with branches he found scattered nearby.

He returned to Napoleon’s side. “See? You can’t even tell it’s there,” he beamed.

“Lucky us.” Napoleon levered himself away from the tree and threw his arm over Illya’s shoulder.
“Now comes the hard part.”

Illya only nodded as he took on Napoleon’s weight. They turned away from the road and made their way into the forest.

*****

“Hold on, hold on.” Napoleon pulled away from Illya and lowered himself onto a nearby log. “I’ve got to rest.”

Illya looked worryingly at the sky. They were fast losing daylight. But looking back at his partner brought even more worry. Napoleon wasn’t going to last much longer, not without a great deal of rest. But they couldn’t rest. Not out here. “You sit there. I’m going to take a look around. Maybe I can see something from up on that crest.” He motioned his head in the direction of the slowly setting sun.

Napoleon looked at him for several seconds, then gave a tight nod.

“I won’t be long. But here,” Illya removed his jacket and draped it over Napoleon’s shoulders. “You need this more than I do—do not argue,” he added when his partner started to respond.

“I was just going to say thanks.”

Illya didn’t believe that for a minute. But he let it go and proceeded up the nearby ridge. Without the burden of his partner, it took less than ten minutes to reach the top. Looking back, he could barely see Napoleon in the semi-dark below. Hesitant to leave his friend for long, he hastily scanned the surrounding countryside. As he had hoped, the higher elevation gave him a good view and he quickly found what he was looking for. Not more than a couple of hundred feet away, a cluster of A-frames huddled about an open glen.

He had to keep himself from running down the knoll, the loose pack of pine needles making the going treacherous. When he got back to his partner, it was to find that Napoleon had lowered himself onto the ground and fallen asleep.

Illya gazed at his friend. Even in sleep, pain and weariness was etched onto the handsome face. When Napoleon had released the blanket in order to dress in the fallen THRUSH agent’s clothes Illya hadn’t missed how much weight he had lost in the last ten days. Or the cuts and bruises which decorated his torso. Their misunderstanding seemed rather insignificant at the moment.

He knelt down on one knee and gently pushed back Napoleon’s hair from his forehead. That’s all it took to wake the other agent. “There’s some cabins over that ridge. It shouldn’t take us more than twenty, thirty minutes to get there.”

Without asking, he helped his partner up and they began a slow ascent up the incline. The short rest had helped, so at first Napoleon seemed to have no trouble with the climb and proceeding descent. But it took a little longer than he thought it would, almost an hour, what with the uneven terrain and Napoleon’s flagging energy. By the time they were standing on the front deck of one of the A-frames, his friend was visibly shaking with fatigue.

“You should sit down on one of those chairs,” Illya groused. He was on one knee in front of the door, where he was attempting to pick the lock. Napoleon had leaned against the wall next to him. “Just get us inside. I think I can manage to stay on my feet until then.”

Illya threw him a look. From what he could see, his friend looked like a gentle breeze would knock him over. He said nothing, it wouldn’t have done any good, anyway, and returned to his task. A few
seconds later, he was rewarded with the definite click of the tumbler releasing the bolt of the lock.

“Come inside.” Illya opened the door and hustled Napoleon into the cabin.

Illya pulled his flashlight from out of his coat pocket and turned it on. “Sit down while I make sure everything’s okay.”

Napoleon managed to make it over to the couch off to their left on his own steam. He lowered himself onto the shabby but clean sofa and rested his head against its back. In the meantime, Illya first secured the door then proceeded to check out the rest of the cabin. Sweeping the light from the flashlight from side to side, he first made a thorough examination of the bottom floor.

It wasn’t a large place. On the contrary, the downstairs was basically the living room with a small kitchen tucked along the right wall. The only feature which stood out was the large fireplace around which the living room furniture was grouped. Bisecting the back wall, a small hallway led further into the building. Doorways led off to a bedroom on each side, both small and sparely furnished. The door at the end opened onto a bathroom.

Upstairs was next. He took the narrow staircase which zigzagged along the back wall of the kitchen area up to the loft. Another bedroom, this one larger than the two downstairs. It looked the most inviting, with a larger bed and end tables on both sides. A large oval window looked out onto the back of the cabin. Standing would be a problem, though, as the room followed the lines of the sloping roof.

Back downstairs, he started a fire in the fireplace. By now it was dark enough outside that the smoke would not be easily seen. But to be on the safe side he kept the fire banked down, allowing it to grow only enough to heat the living room. He studied the pile of wood stacked to the side of the fireplace. There was more than enough to last the night.

Once the fire was burning to his satisfaction, Illya returned to the kitchen and began going through the cabinets. There was plenty of food, all canned, and he was able to get water from the pump in the sink. There was no power, but the stove worked off of a propane tank so he’d be able to prepare hot meals. And water. Thinking of that, he rummaged through the various pots and pans and managed to find two large enough to satisfy his needs. He filled both with water and with some difficulty managed to get them up on the range. A drawer next to it produced matches. Illya lit both burners and started the water heating.

After more rooting around, he found two working lanterns in one of the cupboards. He lit both and turned off his flashlight. No need to waste its batteries when another source of light was available. He picked up one of the lanterns and returned to the back of the cabin, this time entering the bedroom on the left.

The small highboy contained only children’s clothes, so he crossed the hallway to the other room. He was luckier this time. The dresser in this room contained adult clothes. Among the men’s items was a thick blue pullover sweater that would fit Napoleon. A further search generated a pair of black cords, only slightly too big, and a pair of wool socks. Next he located a pair of pajamas and some underwear. Those he took into the bathroom and laid them on its small vanity.

He returned to the living room, placing the lantern behind him as he sat down on the coffee table in front of Napoleon. Napoleon’s eyes were closed, his breathing even. Illya laid his hand on his friend’s arm and gently shook him awake.

Napoleon sat up. He rubbed his hands over his face. “How long was I asleep?”
“Not long. Perhaps thirty minutes.”

Napoleon noted the lantern and the warming fire. “You’ve been busy.”

“Just making sure we had everything we’d need. We should be all right here for a few days, give your ankle time to heal.”

“You don’t think they’ll find us?”

Illya shrugged. “Anything is possible. But Mr. Waverly felt the woman’s actions weren’t sanctioned by THRUSH Central. If that was the case, I doubt she or her minion would be inclined to call for help once they were in trouble.”

“I certainly hope you’re right because right now I doubt I could walk more than ten steps without falling on my face.”

“I was hoping you would attempt twenty-five.”

“Why twenty-five?”

Illya nodded toward the hallway. “I thought you might like a bath. I have some water heating. It should be just about ready.”

“You’re a life saver, tovarisch, in more ways than one.”

“I did it for myself, too. You don’t smell very good, Napoleon.”

“Gee, thanks.” Napoleon got unsteadily to his feet. “Lead on.”

With Illya’s help, Napoleon was able to reach the bathroom. While his friend undressed Illya rinsed out the tub and filled it part way from a pump similar to the one in the kitchen. Then he fetched the now steaming buckets of water and added them in. “It won’t be more than lukewarm but it’s better than cold.”

Napoleon dropped the last of his clothes on the floor and, holding onto Illya’s arm, placed one foot inside the tub. He smiled and got the rest of the way in. “It’s not bad. Besides,” he looked down at the stripes that decorated his torso, “water too hot would play hell with these.”

“You’re probably right.” Illya eyed them critically. “Very well, I’m going to heat more water. Will you be all right?”

“I think so.” Napoleon grabbed the wash cloth and bar of soap that had been sitting in the corner of the tub and began to lather it up. “I’ll give a yell if I get into any trouble.”

“You do that.” Illya collected the two buckets and left his friend to his bath, leaving him the lantern for light. He started more water heating, found himself some clean clothes and returned in time to help Napoleon out of the tub.

“There’s some ointment in here that I can use on your wounds,” Illya noted as he went through the medicine cabinet.

Napoleon finished donning the pajama bottoms then stood and surveyed his chest. “Most of them don’t look too bad. How does my back look?” He turned around.

Illya peered at his back, lightly touching the deeper lacerations. “There’s a couple I should use this on. You were very lucky,” he noted as he uncapped the tube.
“I think—ouch! That stuff’s even worse than the soap was.”

“Don’t be such a baby.” He continued with his administrations. “You were saying?”

“They had just gotten started. I think if there had been a second round, things would have been a lot worse.”

“Very likely. There,” Illya wiped the excess ointment on his trousers. “That should keep them from getting infected.”

“Thanks. Where to now?” Napoleon asked after he’d cautiously put on the pajama top.

“There’s a room upstairs. Do you think you can manage the stairs?” Illya asked as he helped Napoleon from the bathroom.

Napoleon eyed the staircase, then the doorways on each side of where they stood. “What’s wrong with the two bedrooms down here?”

“Heat rises. The one upstairs will be warmer.”

“Good point. All right,” Napoleon waved his hand at the stair, “Lead on McDuff.”

“That’s ‘lay on.’”

“Whatever.”

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Illya poked at the burning log, sending forth a swirl of sparks before the fire settled down again. He sat back down on his makeshift bed and looked at his watch. Three AM. He should be resting but his mind wouldn’t turn off and sleep had eluded him.

He’d seen Napoleon to bed, then bathed and redressed in the gray sweats and thick socks he’d found for himself. Hungry, he’d padded into the kitchen to made something to eat. After that, he’d gone into one of the back rooms and pulled the bedding off the bed. He’d dragged it all into the living room and made a place to sleep before the fire. Before turning in he’d checked on Napoleon. He found his friend fast asleep, bundled under the covers and in the same position Illya had left him over an hour before.

Six hours had passed since then. And Illya had done little else but think about the man upstairs.

When he had first found Napoleon the precariousness of their situation had kept all other considerations at bay and they had worked together like what they were, a finely-tuned partnership honed by many years of association. Even with Napoleon injured, they had managed to see their way through to safety. Any doubts he had about his relationship with the man had been drowned out by the rush of adrenaline and his overpowering joy at finding his friend alive.

He looked up but only the railing that ran along the edge of the loft was visible. Beyond was a cavern, unlit and impenetrable. Like Napoleon’s heart.

Illya mentally shook himself. When would he learn?

Napoleon was—well, Napoleon. Generous to a fault and the most selfish man Illya had ever met. Open and warm, yet so much of what he showed was mere surface. Never at a loss for companionship, yet all of his relationships had been fleeting. Except one. Illya had prided himself on
that. Of all the people Napoleon could have taken as his best friend, he had picked Illya. For some odd reason, Illya had thought that meant he was exempt from the games Napoleon played with everyone else. It turned out, he had actually given Napoleon a three point lead.

So where did they go from here? What would he say to his friend in the morning? What could he say? “You made a pass at me so I want a new partner”? Napoleon would look at him like he’d grown another head, then tell him not to be ridiculous. And there was no way Illya was going to tell him why he was not being.

The biggest problem is that Napoleon would have days to get it out of him. Trapped here until his friend was capable of the walk back to town, Illya doubted he could avoid the confrontation he knew was coming between him and his partner. Everything he never wanted him to know would come out. Napoleon couldn’t have set things up better if he’d planned them.

Now, there was a thought. Illya snorted. Even Napoleon wouldn’t go to those lengths, getting himself kidnapped and tortured just so he could corner Illya into talking to him. It was a nice thought, though, that he would mean that much to him. Bemused, Illya laid back, lacing his hands behind his head...and looked up into the face of his friend.

“Hi.” Napoleon stood over him, dressed only in his pajama bottoms. “Mind if I join you?”

Illya bolted upright. “I didn’t hear you come down.”

“Do you mind? My ankle is better but I still prefer not to use it unless I have to.” Napoleon made himself comfortable by wrapping himself in one of the extra blankets off the couch and taking a seat next to Illya. “And as far as not hearing me, I don’t think you would have heard a brass band, you were that far away.”

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Illya figured the best defense was a good offense.

“You were right about the heat. It’s sweltering up there.”

“You should have opened the window.”

“Oh, but I like it down here much better.”

Illya eyed his partner. “You look better.”

He grabbed Illya’s wrist and looked at the time. “Seven hours of sleep will do that for you.”

“They didn’t let you sleep?”

“Apparently not long enough.” He pondered that for a moment. “Illya, just how long was I there?”

“Ten days.”

“Damn,” he ran his hand down his face. “I could have sworn it was longer than that. Two weeks, at least. They were coming in and out....” He appeared to be talking to himself now.

“Napoleon?” Illya touched his friend’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Napoleon gave a short laugh. “No, but I will be.” I looked directly at Illya. “Now that you’re here.”

“Napoleon...”

“No, don’t close me out. Not now. We need to talk. I know you don’t want to. And maybe I don’t
blame you. But I don’t want what I did to destroy our friendship. It’s much too important to me.”

“Is it, Napoleon?” Illya asked, resigned to finally having this conversation.

“Of course it is. I know I was wrong to ask for what I did. I realized that right away. But I thought you wanted the same thing.”

Illya glared at him. “What? To satisfy my curiosity? Or to satisfy yours?”

Napoleon’s eyes widened. “Is that what you thought? That I was curious?”

“What else was I supposed to think? You’ve never shown any interest in men. What a coincidence that you suddenly discover you are just when you finally figure out that I am.”

Napoleon opened his mouth to reply but no sound came out. Suddenly he began to laugh, which made Illya even angrier. “It’s all just a joke to you, isn’t it? Like that night, like everything else in your life.” He started to get up and felt Napoleon grab him by the wrist.

“Wait, wait,” Napoleon gasped, trying to stop laughing and hold onto Illya at the same time. “I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing at us.”

“What are you talking about, us?”

“Just sit down, okay? I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

Illya hesitated but eventually nodded and settled back on the blankets.

Napoleon kept hold of his wrist then reached out for the other. He held them together between them as he turned his body toward Illya. His head down, he remained quiet until he had himself under control. Finally he took a deep breath and looked up. “It’s funny the lengths we’ll go to not to be hurt or to look foolish. That night at the house, I thought you were angry at me for coming onto you because you were straight. That’s why I pretended it had all been a joke. You were so upset. I figured what I had done had repulsed you. I couldn’t take the chance you wouldn’t want to be my partner anymore, so I pretended I hadn’t meant any of it.” He shook his head ruefully. “I see now it was about the worst thing I could have done. But you thought I was doing it to prove you were homosexual, didn’t you?”

“Could I have thought anything else?” Illya studied his friend, afraid to believe what he hearing yet wanting more than anything for it to be true. “I’ve never seen you so much as look at another man.”

“It’s not something any of us can flaunt, you know. Maybe in this country they can’t send us off to some sort of Gulag, but that doesn’t mean they can’t make your life a living hell.”

Illya certainly understood that fear. But it had not occurred to him it was a fear his partner shared. Which made him curious. “So you have....?” He raised his eyebrows in question.

“Not a lot, and usually with someone I’ll never see again.”

“Then why me? Surely there are just as many men as women out there who would be more than willing to share your bed. Why take the chance? My anger was misplaced, but what if it hadn’t been?”

Napoleon shrugged, then smiled sheepishly. “I was pretty sure...well, fairly sure I was reading you right. And I figured, if you weren’t interested, you’d politely tell me to get lost and that would be that. When you reacted the way you did....”
“What?” Illya encouraged.

“I’ve never been so scared in my life. I kept waiting for you to go to Waverly and tell him you wanted out of the partnership. The rejection I could put up with. I may not have liked it, but I’d still have your friendship. Suddenly, it looked like I wouldn’t have that, either.”

“We are still friends, Napoleon.”

“I’m glad.” He tightened his hold on Illya’s hands. “But is that all you want us to be?”

Illya eyed him warily. “What is it you want?”

“You, any way I can have you.”

“And how would I have you?”

“Any way you want me. But by the look on your face, I get the impression I’m not making myself very clear. I don’t want a one-night stand or a fling with you. I want everything.” Napoleon cleared his throat. “I happen to love you.”

Illya only looked at him.

“This is the point where you’re supposed to say you love me, too. You do, don’t you?” Napoleon asked, more than a little worry in his voice.

“Yes, I do.” Illya scowled. “I can’t believe you didn’t already know that.”

Napoleon smiled. “I hoped.” He finally let go of Illya’s hands and scooted around until he was again sitting at Illya’s side. He put one arm around him and drew him close.

The kiss when it came was almost a benediction. Perhaps in contrition for the first one they had, almost, shared. Illya could feel Napoleon’s lips slightly trembling against his. It gave him the courage to wrap his arm around his friend and pull them more tightly together.

“Ouch!” Napoleon reared back. “Watch the ribs. And my back. And my chest.” He grimaced. “You think our timing could have been better?”

Illya couldn’t help but chuckle. “Quit complaining. Here,” he tugged the blanket from around Napoleon’s shoulders and added it to the pile beneath them. “Lie down.”

His partner did as he was told. Illya stretched out next to him, propping himself up on one elbow. He leaned over and brought his lips down on Napoleon’s. This time, his friend answered by opening his mouth and sliding his tongue around Illya’s. The kiss deepened until it was all Illya could do not to pull closer and wrap himself around Napoleon. Instead, he pulled away.

“What?” Napoleon’s eyes were slightly glazed as he reached out for Illya.

“Wait a moment. I want to look at you.”

“You’ve seen me before,” Napoleon remarked.

“Not like this. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all. But what about you?” He looked pointedly at Illya’s state of dress.

Illya didn’t answer. It would waste too much time. Instead he quickly pulled the sweatshirt up and
off in one unbroken movement. Then he laid back down and let himself finally look his fill at his friend’s body, as he had wanted to do for longer than he could remember. As his gaze swept over Napoleon’s groin, he saw his friend shiver.

Illya smiled, glancing briefly at Napoleon’s face before returning his attention to the swelling beneath the cotton pajamas. He slowly undid the tie at the waist and parted the garment’s fly. Moving down, he lowered Napoleon’s pajamas until his friend could shove them the rest of the way off. Without preamble he straddled his partner’s thighs and lowered his head to take the burgeoning cock into his mouth.

Napoleon groaned and brought one hand to down to alight on Illya’s head, his fingers carding through Illya’s hair as he began to suck. Illya’s own hands found purchase around Napoleon’s hips, holding his friend in place as Napoleon’s thrusts into his mouth threatened to choke him.

It didn’t take long for them to find a rhythm which worked for both of them. Napoleon’s moans and half-coherent words of urging only excited Illya more. He pulled one hand away from Napoleon’s hip and used it to work his sweatpants down his thighs until his penis sprang free. Taking it in hand, he began to masturbate himself in time to Napoleon’s cock sliding in and out of his mouth.

When had he first imaged this scenario between them? Early in their partnership, surely. But never would he have imagined it would feel like this. That he would get so much satisfaction from this man’s touch, from the feel of him in his mouth, from the noises Napoleon made that told Illya that this feeling was more than mutual.

He moved his hand from Napoleon’s hip and splayed it over his taut stomach. Beneath the sleek skin, he could feel the clench of muscles as Napoleon moved, while strands of his lover’s pubic hair teased Illya’s fingers. He inhaled deeply, breathing in Napoleon’s scent. Too much. The sensations combined to overwhelm his senses and he felt his own body tense into climax.

Illya tried not to falter when his orgasm slammed through him, wanting to bring Napoleon along with him. But the organ in his mouth was still firm when the last of his seed settled on the blanket below him.

Illya glanced up, his eyes meeting those of his partner’s. He redoubled his efforts and was gifted with the sight of Napoleon’s eyes squeezing shut as his head fell back and he let himself go. A gush of warm, slightly salty liquid filled Illya’s mouth. He continued to lick at the deflating penis and sucking ever so slightly until Napoleon gently pushed him away.

“Come here, you.” Napoleon opened his arms in invitation.

Illya only took time to completely remove his pants before crawling up into his partner’s embrace. He gingerly placed his head high on Napoleon chest, away from any of the whip marks. “Is this all right? he asked as he carefully laid his arm around Napoleon’s waist.

“It’s fine. Luckily you’re lying on the good shoulder.”

They were silent for a time. Illya could hear the crackle of the fire and the sound of the wind picking up. “I wonder if it’s going to storm.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Napoleon spoke around a yawn.

“It will certainly make it harder for anyone following us. Of course, if it storms too much it will obstruct our own departure. You don’t think it will, do you? Napoleon?” Illya raised his head only to find his partner had fallen asleep. He watched the even flow of breath, the rise and fall of Napoleon’s
chest. He was alive and safe. Illya would do whatever it took to keep him that way.

Lowering his head again, he relaxed into his lover’s embrace and let sleep take him.

*****

The cold woke him. It was still dark and, for a moment, Napoleon thought himself back in his cell, the last twenty-four hours a pleasant dream conjured by his disheartened mind. But then he felt the warm body at his side and knew everything was all right. The man curled against him was real. The lovemaking was real. What they had together was real.

He tried sitting up without waking Illya in order to grab one of the blankets bunched around their feet, but both of them were light sleepers and even that small movement brought Illya awake.

Napoleon grabbed the cover and pulled it up. “Go back to sleep,” he whispered as he tucked the blanket around both of them.

Illya looked around, still half asleep but apparently fighting it. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know. Near dawn, I imagine—what are you doing?” His partner had sat up and was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“I’m hungry. It’s been almost twelve hours since I last ate. I’ll be right back.” He crawled out from beneath the covers and pulled his sweat pants back on. “Do you want anything?”

“Surprise me.” Napoleon leaned over and snagged his pajama bottoms. He managed to get them on without leaving the warmth of the blankets. By the time Illya returned, a box of crackers in one hand, a jar of preserves in the other, Napoleon had resettled himself in their makeshift bed. He pulled the blankets open in invitation as Illya approached.

His friend got in and laid on his side, facing Napoleon, then began to set up their impromptu meal. He opened the jar of preserves, the pop as the seal broke loud in the quiet of the room, and placed it between them. Then he tore open the box and grabbed a handful of crackers.

“You’re going to get crumbs in our bed,” Napoleon remarked dryly, though he didn’t decline when Illya passed the box over. He took a couple out, nibbling on them contentedly. “This is nice. Maybe we should think about buying one of these things.” He motioned to encompass their surroundings.

“You wish to buy a cabin?”

“Sure, why not? A place of our own, somewhere to get away from it all, spend time alone.”

“Away from prying eyes?”

“Yeah, there’s that.”

“You do not feel our apartments will afford the privacy we need?”

“I don’t know.” Napoleon made a face. “But I don’t think I want to find out.”

Illya was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking out what he wished to ask. “Are you saying we can’t...be together like this once we return home?”

Napoleon sat up, putting his remaining cracker back in the box. Any hunger he may have been experiencing had been effectively killed. “As much as I might think that would probably be the smartest thing to do, I doubt I could stay away from you that long. I want us to be together, but I
know we can’t. Not in the way I want us to be.”

Illya didn’t say anything, but Napoleon could tell he was upset. The cracker he’d been eating he now only played with, dunking it into the jar of preserves over and over again. And he wouldn’t look at Napoleon.

“I guess I didn’t think it through. All I knew was that I wanted to be with you. Anything past that—”
he gave a little shrug. The silence from his friend was deafening. “Talk to me, Illya,” he pleaded.

“Perhaps we should end it,” Illya finally responded.

“No,” he grabbed the items between them and urgently put them aside. Then he pulled Illya up into his arms, ignoring the discomfort of his injuries. “No, we’re not going to do that. I’m not letting you go, Illya. That’s not even an option.”

“It may be the only one we have. It could mean our jobs.”

“We’ll be careful. There has to be plenty of reasons for us to spend the night in each other’s apartments. Because it’s too late to go home after drinking or because it’s easier when we have to go out of town. We’ll cover our tracks. And we’ll find ourselves a place like this. We can do it, Illya. I know we can.”

Illya had only reluctantly brought his arms up to encircle his waist, but now Napoleon felt his lover’s arms tighten.

“I want very much to believe you, Napoleon.”

“Then do.” Napoleon pulled his head back to look down into Illya’s face. “We know how to hide in plain sight. Hiding this shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“Even if it’s the brightest thing in our lives?”

“Even then. Maybe especially then. Those type of people, the ones who think it’s dirty and immoral, they don’t deserve to see it.”

Illya didn’t answer right away but finally nodded his head. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course I am. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to get a little more sleep. The people who own this cabin may not mind us borrowing it for a few days but I’d rather not press our luck. We should probably try to make it into town later on today.”

“Only if it doesn’t rain.”

Napoleon smiled. “Right. Only if it doesn’t rain.”

But it did so they decided it would be better to stay awhile. Though Napoleon rested much of the time, they still managed to make use of the bed upstairs, which they found so much nicer than the floor. And when they left two days later, the sun was shining.

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Radiant heat will consist ....of rays coming from the sun,
that have such a momentum as to be unfit for vision.
William Herschel 1800
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