

Title: **The Macguffin Affair**

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Chapter 1: Tomorrow we'll die

My first MFU story.

Disclaimer: *the men from UNCLE don't belong to me... I belong to them. No profit on using the characters in my stories, only lots of fun.*

Author's note: *The story is inspired by real events that happened 47 years ago in my country. The original characters are not based on any actual person, dead or alive. The town in question is fictitious, only the Irazú volcano is real and very alive. Descriptions of living conditions under a volcanic eruption are based on real testimonies from people that lived through it.*

*Thank you, **Uncle Charlie** for your input and encouragement.*

THE MACGUFFIN AFFAIR

ACT I: Tomorrow we'll die.

Illya blinked and squinted. Gray clouds dimmed the sunlight and it was hard to see more than a few feet ahead. The vegetation was still scarce and almost buried under tons of ashes. There was nothing left around that looked familiar. After almost 30 months' worth of ashes, the place seemed to have been transported to another planet. Illya could not even reckon how far from civilization he was. He had been walking down the hill for hours but there was still no sign of life nearby.

He could hear his heart beating in his ears. He could hear his labored breathing. He had been running in circles, straight lines and in circles again. He knew he had to stop sometime soon. When he stopped things got worse, but his legs were about to give up and his lungs could not resist much more of this contaminated air. No one was after him yet. They probably had not noticed his absence yet. The wind was cold and he could not see farther than the palm of his hand. "Damn ashes," Illya whispered.

He slowed down and kept walking until he spotted the first green plant in miles. He took a deep breath but his lungs were already too damaged to feel any benefit from air thick with ashes. He coughed. His body screamed for a break, but he could not take the risk of passing out.

He rubbed his eyes. First thing they had warned him against. He had ashes in his hands, they got in his eyes. It hurt. A slow breeze began to cool the air. Maybe it would rain in the afternoon. It was hard to tell. He squinted and almost rubbed his eyes again. This time, he was more careful.

It seemed night, although it was still noon. Since he could not use his eyes, he had to depend on his ears. He strained them to hear a sound. Maybe there was a highway nearby, a rural road or something. The minutes passed, no motor cars, or ox wagons. He must be in the middle of the forest. The sounds around were mostly from insects and birds. Suddenly, a growl gave him a start. Were there bears in the rain forest?

"Don't be silly," Illya dismissed his own fears. "It's probably a puma... you get along with cats, don't you?" He shivered. The cold air was getting under his skin like little pins and needles. This was going to be a long, long trip.

He listened for more distinctive noises. His hearing had improved twice over the last two hours. So far, so good. He would profit from it as long as it lasted. Over the birds, insects and beasts, he could hear now a peculiar noise. Drums; not from friendly natives, though. These drums beat at a different rhythm.

Illya frowned and then, he smiled. "The Beatles?" He could hear clearly now the characteristic voice of John Lennon and *I wanna hold your hand*. "Civilization is at hand, sort of," he said aloud. He kept walking toward the music. He knew it was still far away but at least, now he had a direction to head towards.

(o)(O)(o)

Mr. Waverly received Napoleon with a laconic nod. For once, he looked concerned enough to skip certain manners. Napoleon sat down and waited. His vacation had been just canceled and he needed a good explanation. He would not waste time asking questions when he knew the answers were about to come.

"There has been a breach in security. All operations have been canceled until the problem is solved."

"What kind of breach? A mole?"

"A double agent indeed, Mr. Solo." Mr Waverly pressed a bottom of the panel on his desk and a picture appeared on the screen. "Mr. Laslo Dorian. He was cleared as agent for Uncle in nineteen sixty. Recently, we have learned that he has been working for Thrush too."

"Dorian? Wasn't he Illya's contact in Costa Rica?"

"Indeed. We have been trying to locate Mr. Kuryakin on the matter, unsuccessfully, I'm afraid."

"Illya is missing?" Napoleon felt suddenly guilty for being so upset about his interrupted vacation.

"We're still waiting. He is still in a grace period to make contact before being officially declared as missing. It has not been forty-eight hours yet." Before Napoleon asked another question, Mr. Waverly pointed at the sphere in the middle of the room. "Can you find Costa Rica on that globe?"

Napoleon shrugged. Without hesitation, he turned the sphere until he saw the American Continent. "There," he pointed with his index. "Central America, right in the middle. Nice country, rather quiet."

"Are you familiarized with Mr. Kuryakin's mission in Costa Rica?"

Napoleon frowned. "Something about an active volcano?"

The next picture on the screen showed a volcano. "On March 18th, 1963, at one twenty-five in the afternoon, this volcano began an eruption of ashes that is still going on as we speak."

"Almost two years? It must be extremely annoying. Those people have to be resilient "

"Quite resilient, they are." The pictures showed a city immersed in a cloud of ashes. People sweeping the black dust off the streets and houses. "There is no reason to believe that the phenomenon began but by natural causes at first, but it has been escalating in strength and hazard. However, scientists of the world take it as a natural disaster; some kind of curiosity to be observed and studied."

Napoleon watched the images on the screen and then, he turned to Mr. Waverly. "I take it that we don't agree with that explanation ."

"Not exactly. Eight months ago, a group of geologists established a base in one of the inactive craters. Our sources indicate that it is very likely that they are sponsored by Thrush."

"Not in a humanitarian mission, I gather."

"Not exactly." Mr. Waverly put yet another picture on the screen. He almost smiled to see Napoleon leaning forward. "You recognize it, don't you?"

Napoleon shook his head. "But Illya destroyed it the last year."

"Eight months ago in Tokyo, to be precise."

"The volcano activator device,"* Napoleon remembered.

"Corrected and enhanced by this man," Mr. Waverly changed the picture. A man appeared on the screen, Caucasian, in his mid forties, glasses, short brown hair; the intellectual type. "Dr. Douglas Spencer, three degrees in Geology and Thermodynamics, active in Thrush's Research Division since nineteen fifty-two."

"I don't remember having seen him involved in Harada's project, was he?"

"Apparently not, although he took the reins of it after the device fiasco." Mr. Waverly turned his chair to Napoleon. "We lost his tracks for a couple of months until now."

"Do you think Thrush has anything to do with the eruption?"

"I doubt it, as I told you, the eruption started at least one year before the device was presented. I'd rather say that Thrush is using it to tamper with the volcano. If so, it might be possible that the volcano activator is now capable of prolonging volcanic activity indefinitely. Do you understand the consequences?"

"Besides landslides, changes in the climate, collapsing of the economy and casualties. It would be a more efficient weapon than an atomic bomb," Napoleon said. "But, why Costa Rica? Aren't there more strategic countries in the world?" He gave the big globe a spin.

"We believe that this is just a dress rehearsal for something bigger in another country." Mr. Waverly almost shrugged. "The latest reports indicated that heavy construction material has been transported periodically to the area. They have also been recruiting staff from different parts of the world. We managed to contact one of them, Professor Theodore Manfred, just before he accepted the invitation. With his consent, we sent Mr. Kuryakin in his place." He sighed with disappointment. "Mr. Dorian was his contact. Ironically, he was supposed to watch Mr. Kuryakin's back."

"Was he working for Thrush from the beginning or did he flip sides recently?"

"We're still investigating, although that's rather irrelevant now." Mr. Waverly pressed another button and his secretary appeared at the door with papers and a dossier. "Mr. Solo, you're going to Costa Rica. You'll stay at a hotel in the capital until receiving further instructions. Miss Valerio will fill you on minor details on transportation and so forth. With some good luck, Mr. Kuryakin is just following the protocol regarding breaches in security and he'll report within the next forty-eight hours. You're Mr. Kuryakin's new contact."

Napoleon stood up. He stole a second to bow to the lady before turning back to Mr. Waverly. "I'll do my best to bring Illya back."

"Mr. Solo, this mission won't end with you finding Mr. Kuryakin. There is still one operation in progress that must be completed at any cost. Understood?"

"Loud and clear sir," Napoleon said with a smile.

(o)(O)(o)

The music was getting louder. Illya's ears resented the noise and yet, he almost laughed. He should be the last person to complain about rock 'n roll music. He loved *The Beatles*... but not that loud. He stopped for a second. The road was now in sight. He had to be careful now. No one should know he was there.

A few feet farther, he saw a white picket fence. There was a nice little house in the middle of the field and at least two people around. Illya took cover behind a big rock

and some pine trees. He watched a boy playing with a dog and a young woman, cleaning the front windows. She sang along with the radio and her voice echoed against the emptiness of the landscape.

She finished and turned to the boy. "Marcos, ponga la leche en la bici. Voy a barrer aquí y nos vamos." *Marcos, put the milk on the bike. I'm going to sweep here and we'll leave.*

Illya listened to that and sighed. With some luck, they would go away for the night. All he needed was a place to sleep, a place to regroup and think. He saw the boy, a twelve year-old, loading the basket of his bike with two containers. The woman must be in her early twenties, dressed in a faded striped shirt and light blue capri pants. Her dark brown hair was braided under a kerchief and an old plastic apron protected her clothes from the dust. She finished pushing the ashes away, dusted the broomstick and left her apron somewhere inside the house. She grabbed the small transistor radio and hung it on her bike. Soon, they were rolling down the hill to the rhythm of rock 'n roll.

Illya stood up. He tried to take another deep breath but the ashes dried his throat. He coughed until his lungs hurt. A light drizzle made him shiver and he had to push himself forward to start walking again. His condition was deteriorating too fast and the cold and the ashes did not help at all. He could not think of anything else but lying down and sleeping a little.

The door had a lock, as expected. Illya looked for a pick inside his mouth. Breaking a lock was easy and he had the fastest fingers in the agency. Today, he reckoned he would have broken his own record. Through the tip of his fingers, he could sense every tiny change in the mechanism inside the lock. He smiled. Maybe those men from Thrush did not know actually what they had given to him. Or his body had just assimilated the drug without much trouble and he would be all right after all... Or... the drug was working slowly throughout his system and sooner or later, all his senses would collapse at once. In any case, he would take advantage of his recently acquired skills for as long as they lasted.

The moment he put one foot in the house, he felt transported back in time to the 19th century. There was no electric power. The living room was rather small, although the old furniture was neatly placed. The kitchen area was at the rear. There was an iron stove, iron utensils, and the back door consisted on a big wooden board locked with a chain. The shower was right next to the pantry, and as he had guessed, there was an *outhouse* several feet away in the open field.

There was a pair of steps heading to a second level to the bedrooms. Illya counted four doors on the aisle, but he did not bother in checking all of them. He entered the first room on his left. Although spacious, there was only one bed and an armoire. Illya looked around frantically for blankets and anything that helped to keep him warm throughout the night. He found only two quilts.

He felt light headed and he could barely keep his eyes open. He was so tired that did not bother to take his shoes off. He threw himself on the bed and regretted it greatly. The hay mattress was as hard as a rock. But the fatigue was stronger than anything else. He would take care of bruises and concussions later.

He lied on his back; his eyes were completely used to darkness. Noises that usually stayed in the background were a cacophony of beats right at the core of his brain. The quilts, made with soft fabrics, grazed his skin mercilessly, and the smell of sulfur was simply unbearable. He thought of Louis Campbell*. An agent from Uncle, a young man with a brilliant future. They had not been friends, they might have worked together, but not so close as to get acquainted with each other. Their conversations had been always at a polite level during Uncle agents meetings or a sporadic party at the office. He smiled a lot, total success with the ladies... second to Napoleon Solo, of course... Then, he disappeared. For three days, they looked and searched. Illya was in another case, he did not learn about Louis until Mr. Waverly took him and Napoleon to see the agent that had been rescued from some Thrush quarters.

This was not the Louis they had met at parties and meetings. This Louis was mad. He screamed and yelled. He shivered, overwhelmed by noises only he could hear and things only he could see. They observed him through a security glass that seemed to mean nothing to his heightened hearing, sight and smell. Napoleon called him but Louis did not recognize him or Illya or Mr. Waverly. Louis laughed at them, he screamed, he cried...

It seemed to Illya that Louis was now in a box. He heard but he could not listen, he saw but could not look... Little by little, he went crazy...

"I'm not going crazy... Not... Going... Crazy... Put your mind on something else, Illya... Count sheep, sing songs... Think about tomorrow..." he said aloud. "Tomorrow... what will happen tomorrow? Oh, yes... Tomorrow we'll die..."

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon put his suitcase on the bed and went to the balcony. The sight was as depressing as it was when he came out of the plane. The sky was cloudy but it did not rain. The colors were dull, the streets were all black. Although the sun was there, people walked with umbrellas, handkerchiefs covering their mouths and noses and glasses to protect their eyes. Life went on. There were always things to do, places to be. At least, the volcano had not taken away that yet.

He went back inside and took some papers out of the suitcase. He would read the files about the volcano while waiting for the phone call. It had to happen soon. Illya was more punctual than he. He would find the way to communicate with Uncle. They could not count him off so fast.

"*Volcán Irazú*," he read. "*From an indigenous village called Iztarú, meaning "Mountain of thunder."*" Napoleon nodded. "No kidding. *Highest active volcano...it is possible to see both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans on a clear day.*" He raised his eyebrows: that would be a sight to see, he thought. He turned the page to an aerial picture of the volcano. He looked attentively for anything out of normal. "Now, if I were from Thrush, where would I put a secret laboratory?"

(o)(O)(o)

Illya woke up with a scream. He had been struggling to get some sleep surrounded by all kind of noises. Insects, little animals, the rain rattling on the ceiling. Morning broke and the noises changed. Now, he could hear motor cars and people talking miles away from him. Someone screamed. It took him several minutes to realize that it was him.

He got up, shivering and could barely stand straight. After a second, he tried some steps. He staggered but did not fall. His head began to hurt with all the noise and strong smells around. He tried to breathe steadily but his lungs did not receive enough air. He felt cold sweat forming in his forehead and his hands trembled. "Stop it! Don't you dare..." He gasped. He would not allow himself to faint out of an anxiety attack.

Illya was about to resume his way to the living room when the sound of a bicycle coming up the hill alerted him. He reckoned that it was still far enough for him to rush out of the house without being noticed. The stairs were not a problem, and the living room was empty. But when he opened the door, the sulfur in the air took his breath away. He almost blacked out for the second time in less than ten minutes. He closed the door and struggled all the way back upstairs.

He heard music getting louder. "*She's not there*," Illya whispered the song's title in an attempt to keep himself awake. "T-the Zombies..." He heard steps at the main door, steps around the living room... steps coming upstairs... "A very slender person... probably a woman... tennis shoes..." Under other circumstances, he would have had some fun with his present condition. But there was nothing to laugh about when all his senses were conspiring to cause him as much discomfort and pain as possible. He placed himself behind the bedroom door. "...smells like roses... breathing too fast... scared of the intruder..."

The door closed quickly behind the young woman of the day before. She stared at him with wide eyes and an iron frying pan in her right hand.

"¡No se mueva! ¿Quién es usted y qué está haciendo en mi casa?" *Don't move! Who are you and what're you doing in my house?*

Illya's intentions were to be polite and dodge the frying pan at the same time. But his strength did not last that long. He leaned against the wall and smiled faintly. "Please... Por favor... no..." Everything went dark after that.

**The Cherry Blossom Affair, season 2, episode 10: Professor Harada, from Japan, has developed a volcano activator for Thrush.*

** The Minus-X Affair, season 2, episode 29: Louis is an Uncle agent kidnapped and used by Thrush as a guinea pig to test a new drug called Plus-X which heightens all human senses. The drug was not entirely developed at that moment and the experiment was a failure. Overwhelmed by the erratic effects of the drug, Louis went insane. A/N: They never mention Louis' last name, so I came up with Campbell.*

ACT II: *Wear my ring around your neck.*

Illya saw fire coming from the center of the earth, rocks falling from the sky. Thunder and lightning got on his way. He could not escape. He was cold and warm, and his head pounded. He was scared as he had never been in his life. He wanted to scream but his voice never came out. Then, he woke up.

He opened his eyes. From what he remembered, he was back in the bedroom with the bed as hard as a rock. He felt something on his forehead. It was cold and wet but after a moment, it burned. He moved his head and raised his hand to take it off. Someone was already next to him grabbing his arm.

"Tranquilo, todo está bien." *Be quiet, everything is all right.*

Illya stared at her with curiosity. The woman was young, with brown eyes, a kind smile. She did not look scared, although she kept the frying pan next to her. Illya felt compelled to give her an explanation.

"Sorry I scared you..." He frowned while remembering the proper words. "Am... Lamento haber-"

"Don't move. I see that you're sick, but I still can hurt you."

A twelve year-old boy came in running to join the woman. He stared at Illya warily.

"Don't need to get violent, I'll leave now," Illya sat up. He was light headed and his hands trembled. He leaned his back against the wall to allow the dizziness to pass. "In a couple of minutes."

"¿Está hablando inglés?" *Is he speaking English?* Asked the boy.

"Sí, pero con acento," *Yes, but with an accent,* the woman said.

"También hablo español, con acento," *I also speak Spanish, with an accent,* Illya smiled. "Your English is good."

"Yours too." The woman smiled, putting the pan on her lap. "I teach English in town."

"Usted no estaba hablando inglés hace un rato," *You weren't speaking English a while ago.* The boy narrowed his eyes.

"You were talking weird in your dreams. My brother thinks you're a Russian spy," she mocked. "Are you?"

Illya sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Not quite. I'm Russian, yes but-" His ears began to ring painfully and he lost his line of thought.

"Are you sick?" The woman said before sending her brother for water.

Illya covered his ears against the noise that only he could hear. He had to concentrate to keep himself awake. "It's just some blinding pain that comes and goes..." He breathed heavily and his lungs hurt too. He did not let it show. "It's gone now."

The boy was back with a glass of water. At his sister's sign, he gave it to Illya. Only then, did Illya noticed he was thirsty. However, he was not able to have more than one sip. The taste of the water made him nauseous. He put the glass on the night table and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, the taste is too strong."

"It's pure water," the woman frowned.

"No parece ladrón," the boy said.

"A thief? No, I'm not."

"But you opened the door the way thieves do," she said.

"I didn't want to break a window. I thought the house was abandoned... I needed a place to sleep-"

"¿Se perdió?" The boy asked.

"Lost? Yes..." Illya made an effort to smile amid his discomfort "I lost my way... in the mountain... the cold and the ashes-" He shuddered. The noise was getting more uncomfortable and he had to cover his ear. "Would you mind turning off your radio?"

"My what?" The woman frowned. "Oh," she went to the window. "It's on my bicycle. I didn't know it was still on. I can't hear it from here." She opened the curtains and Illya crawled back.

"The light!" He covered his eyes with his arms.

"Ay, perdón!" She closed the curtains immediately. "What's wrong with you? Are you sick? Do you need a doctor?"

"No!" Illya caught his breath and leaned against the wall. "Listen, Miss-"

"Mayela," she finally smiled. "And this is Marcos."

"Mayela and Marcos," he repeated. "Nice to meet you. I'm Illya and I'm not sick. I'm just very tired... I-it was a very long walk." A sudden chill made him rattle his teeth. "S-sorry. It's getting cold in here, isn't it?"

"Temperatures have been dropping quite often lately," she said. "Anyway, those wet clothes of yours don't help, I'm afraid." She went to the armoire. "I thought we had left some clothes here when we moved."

"You moved? I thought you said this was your house."

"It is, but we don't live here since the volcano exploded two years ago. I just come every two or three days to clean up and make sure no one has broken in... Well-" she smiled.

"I said I'm sorry," Illya smiled too. His energy began to fade away. He covered his ears with his hands and gasped. "Mayela? Your radio is too loud."

"Vaya apague el radio," *Go and turn off the radio*, she ordered her brother.

As the dizziness subsided, Illya got up very slowly. The radio had stopped but the sounds in the surroundings went on. He could hear voices and music, motorcars and animals from different directions. The smell of sulfur and wet grass turned his stomach; and the wet clothes burned his sensitive skin. His awareness of every single thing in motion was overwhelming. His mind took him back to Louis... "I'm not going crazy," he said to himself. "I won't go crazy."

"Excuse me?" Mayela turned to him.

"Sorry, I was talking to myself. Don't mind me," he smiled.

"I'm going to the kitchen, do you want to come?"

Illya took some steps and nodded. He followed the woman downstairs. Illya squinted while his eyes got used to the light. There was no sun, but the cloudy sky shone just the same. "What time is it?"

"Almost four," she said.

Marcos was already in the kitchen pouring water in a pitcher through a fabric bag. Illya looked at him working and had to satisfy his curiosity. "¿Qué haces?" *What are you doing?*

"Café... Coffee," he said.

"We don't have electricity. This is the way to make coffee around here." Mayela explained. "Do you find it funny?"

"Colorful." Illya staggered and had to sit down. "So, no electricity? I suppose it would be pretentious of my part to ask if you have a telephone."

"No telephone, I'm sorry." Mayela poured the coffee in three mugs. She sat in front of Illya. "But there is one in town."

"One telephone for the entire town?" Illya smelled the coffee and winced in disgust. He pushed the mug away from him. "Sorry, that smell is too strong."

Marcos laughed and Mayela elbowed him.

"It's okay, American coffee tastes like hot water to me," she shrugged. She looked at Illya with concern. "Are you all right?"

"Marvelous." Illya wiped sweat off his forehead. "Listen, about the telephone..."

"Oh, yes. There is one at the *comisariato*, the- grocery store. You go and tell the manager the number you need, they dial it for you. Are you sure you're okay? You look so pale."

"Allergies." Illya glanced at his watch. "Three forty-five? In the afternoon."

"Yes," Mayela looked at him cautiously. "Are you sure you don't want some coffee? Sweet bread, or cookies with butter?"

"Oh, please. No more talking about food." Illya did not dare to breathe deeply. If he did not get in contact with the agency soon, he would be declared MIA. All his privileges would be revoked, no more retirement plan or insurance whatsoever; not to mention that the still-in progress mission would be classified as Incomplete. "Mayela, I need to communicate with my- er, uncle. He must be very worried about me."

"I could go to town and see if the taxi is available and come back for you-"

"*The* taxi? I gather you have only one in town?" Illya rubbed the back of his neck. "Never mind, I don't think I could make it that far, anyway." He closed his eyes for a moment to clear his mind. "Do you have pen and paper, here, now?"

"Of course." She fetched her bag and came back with a small agenda and a pen.

Illya wrote down a number. "Pay attention, Mayela. This is really important. You have to call this number for me."

"To the United States? That's an international call, those are very expensive."

Illya smiled. "It's collect. You call and wait for it to ring once, then hang up. They will return your call five minutes later. Let it ring twice before answering it." He wiped more of the sweat beading on his forehead. "To whatever they ask, you will say *Illya found the macguffin*. They will tell you the hour they'll come, and then, they will hang up."

"Macguffin?"

"Macguffin. Don't forget that name, or mine." He panted. "Do you think you can do this?"

Mayela stared at the piece of paper for a moment. "Are you a spy, Illya?"

"Do I look like a spy to you?" His eyelids began to weigh with exhaustion.

"I don't know. You just look sick." She helped Illya to get up. "Come, I'll put you to bed. I'd bring you a doctor but there is-"

"Don't tell me, there is just one in town?"

"No, he only comes every two weeks."

"Of course, what was I thinking?"

By the time they got to the room Illya was leaning heavily on her and on the walls. "You should change those clothes before you catch a cold." Mayela helped him to sit on the bed. "Marcos, busque entre la ropa de Toño a ver qué le sirva." *Marcos, look in Toño's clothes for something that fit him.* She turned to Illya. "Toño, Antonio, is my other brother, the oldest. I'm sure he left some pants and shirts, he was too lazy to pack."

Illya lied down, staring at the ceiling. Although he knew it was an irrational thought, he was afraid of closing his eyes. He must have dozed for a second when a slight tremor woke him up. Soon, it was strong enough to rattle the wooden walls. Illya tried to sit up but his weakness made him very slow. The cracking sound felt like a loose train coming inside the house.

"Mayela!" Marcos yelled, running back into the room with a load of clothes.

"It's all right," she said helping Illya to sit up. "Ya pasó. It's over."

Illya closed his eyes and covered his ears. He shook his head and gasped. "No, it's still on!"

After one minute, he could feel everything going back to its normal quietness. Mayela rubbed his back, while talking in a reassuring voice. "It was just an earthquake." She smiled when he opened his eyes. "Are you afraid of earthquakes? It was too small."

"Just one earthquake? It could be the volcano." Illya could hear the earth rumbling beneath his feet.

"Or just an earthquake. We have a lot every year." Mayela began to untie Illya's boots. She heard him laughing. "Now what?"

"One phone, one taxi, one doctor every two weeks, but you have a lot of earthquakes."

She laughed too. "We can't live without them." She pointed at the clothes. "Do you want me to help you to change?"

"I think I can manage. Thank you."

She opened a bag. "Here's a flashlight. I don't know if I should leave you alone for the night."

"I'll be all right. All I need is peace and quiet. Believe me." He tried the flashlight and nodded. "And by the way, I'm not afraid of earthquakes."

"I never thought you were. Here's fresh water on the table. I'll be back tomorrow. Do you want me to bring you anything?"

"Just the news that you passed the message." Illya's voice was weakening. "Do you remember the message?"

"*Illya found the macguffin.*"

"Correct," Illya nodded. His expression hardened for a moment. "One other thing, mejor que nadie más sepa que estoy aquí. Ésto es entre nosotros, ¿está bien?" *It's better if no one else knows that I'm here. This is between us, all right?* He waited until both youngsters nodded. "Buenas noches."

"Buenas noches," Mayela got up quietly and took her brother by the hand.

"Le dije que era un espía," *I told you he was a spy...* Illya heard the boy telling his sister as they went out. *Clever boy*, he thought. He listened to their bikes rolling down the hill. Twenty minutes later, he could still hear them. That was probably the distance to downtown. "That town is too close." Illya shook his head and tried to put his mind on something else.

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Napoleon came down to the bar on the first floor of his hotel. He could see that after an earthquake, people like to gather around and talk about it. The bartender had just tuned in the news in the only TV station on the country. Spanish was still evasive to Napoleon but if he concentrated hard enough, he could catch every other word. The reports were about a small earthquake, no physical or material damage... They still didn't have the origin or magnitude.

"What would it be, sir?" The bartender cleaned the section of the bar in front of Napoleon. "Anything for the aftershock?" He grinned.

"Surprise me," Napoleon smiled. "Do you have many of those around here?"

"Several throughout the year." The bartender prepared the drink and served it with a napkin. "But this one is nothing, just to wake you up."

"How about the volcano? Has it brought much trouble?"

"More or less. The action is in the mountains, tourists like to risk their lives to get a picture of an active volcano. However, here in the city, it's not that much fun, too much ash. Everything is dusty, the damn thing gets everywhere, in the engines, appliances, your underwear..."

"How long has it been? Two years?"

"Next March will be two years. It was so weird. We had Kennedy's visit in the morning and in the afternoon, the volcano exploded." The bartender shook his head. "We were fascinated with the black rain. People collected ashes in bags as a souvenir. Who would've known that two years later, we would be still sweeping this stuff off the streets and roofs. Scientists come to see the phenomenon, but so far, they have no explanation or answers."

"What do they say?" Napoleon asked.

"It'll go away when it goes way."

"Good policy," Napoleon nodded. He was about to leave when the TV channel began to blink and jump. The bartender shook his head and dodged graciously his costumers' protests.

"¡Comprate un tele que sirva!" *Get a television that really works!*

"¡Tirá ese gajo!" *Throw away that piece of junk!*

The bartender wiped the bar as if he had not heard them. He looked at the wall clock and snorted. "Never fails."

"Beg you pardon?" Napoleon sat down again.

"The TV, it gets scrambled every time the volcano trembles."

"Really?"

"The TV station antennas are on the top of the volcano. There is better reception up there. I suppose the eruptions interfere with the signal." The bartender served another costumer and turned back to Napoleon. "It has been rather quiet this week. Maybe the worst is over."

Napoleon nodded and frowned. "Maybe," he mumbled to himself.

(o)(O)(o)

Mayela rode her bike to the Comisariato Hermanos Lopez. It was almost 6 pm and Rafael, the clerk, was about to close. She asked for the phone and payed the fee in advance. She dialed the number Illya had written in the notebook and waited. Following the instructions, she hung up and waited. Rafael Lopez was intrigued.

"¿Diay qué? ¿Se equivocó de número?" *What? Wrong number?* He laughed.

"No contestan," *No one answer* she shrugged. "Ahorita me llaman." *They'll call me back right away.*

The phone rang and she waited. Two rings and she answered.

"*Del Floria's Tailor Shop,*" a woman's voice said.

"Este... Illya found the macguffin."

"*Illya? Is he all right?*"

"Sí, sí, I mean, yes." Mayela frowned.

"*Stay on the line, please.*" The voice went away for a moment. "*Miss? Are you still there?*"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow, three in the afternoon, local time."

"But where?"

"Right where you are."

(o)(O)(o)

"The macguffin?" Napoleon could not remember that code name.

"Yes, it's a term that Alfred Hitchcock uses to refer to the subject of a quest in his movies; nothing specific, just any object. Mr. Kuryakin began to refer to this mission as the macguffin, for we did not have a clear idea of what we were looking for," Mr. Waverly explained. "Just a little of that Russian wit of his, I suppose."

"Yeah, so much like Illya," Napoleon said. "So, he found it already."

"That is what the message says. Now, we only need to find him. The coordinates indicate that he must be in a small town, about two hours east from the capital, the name is San Juan de Aquinas. That's the last stop en route to the volcano, by the way."

"San Juan de Aquinas." Napoleon looked into a tourist booklet. "I got it. I'll be on my way tomorrow morning."

"Proceed with caution, although the caller seemed to know where to reach us and what to say, we still don't know what awaits us up there, exactly."

Napoleon turned off his communicator. He would spend time tracing a route for his trip.

(o)(O)(o)

Dr. Douglas Spencer entered the computer room at the compound. Although it was cold outside, the underground installations were stuffy and smelled like sulfur; just the delights of working under a volcano. He hated his workplace, it always put him on a bad mood; especially when he had to meet with his staff.

Four men, wearing white gowns and surgical gloves, received him with sour faces. Spencer smirked and prepared for battle.

"All right, gentlemen, what can I do for you now?"

"Doctor Spencer," the oldest said stepping forward. "My colleagues and I have been talking about this new plan, Vesuvius. It's a little too drastic, don't you think?"

"Yes," another of the men spoke. "We were so close with the original plan, why change it right now?"

Spencer sighed. "Gentlemen, do I have to remind you why you're four now instead of five? Your colleague, Dr. Theodore Manfred turned out to be a spy in disguise. He escaped with the VIRGIN, and gentlemen, you know that without the VIRGIN, we can't activate our volcanic device."

"But, operation Vesuvius?" The first man asked. "Isn't it too much? I mean, we're talking about the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands of innocent people."

"Well, don't blame it on me, blame it on that Uncle agent." Spencer went to his desk and pretended to be busy. "All I ask of you, gentlemen, is to finish with the self-destructive mechanism in order to blow up this damn mountain once and for all."

"Isn't there the slightest possibility to get the VIRGIN back?" Another of the scientists asked. "We still have time to rectify the original plan, right?"

"You're scientists, the deadline is in two days. Start working," Spencer shrugged. "But, from what I've been told, this Uncle agent is really sneaky." He sat down and grinned. "Although, he must be feeling somewhat out of sorts at the moment."

Laslo Dorian entered the laboratory, carrying a piece of paper. "The night shift report, Dr. Spencer."

"Off to work, my friends. Chop, chop, chop," Spencer said to the group of scientists. Just one look at it made Spencer smile. "So, he made it after all. One thing is sure about Mr. Kuryakin, he doesn't know when to quit." He wiped some sweat off his upper lip. "Have we been able to find his position yet?"

"Almost. Intelligence believes he's still in this area. Mr. Solo is coming this way too."

"Napoleon Solo? What an honor," Spencer said. "It's a pity that we can't invite him to the party. Are you ready for him too?"

"Absolutely. We'll be waiting for him. Er, Doctor Spencer," he cleared his throat.

"Yes, Laslo?"

He looked around at the scientists gone back to their work. He kept his voice down. "Well, I was wondering, how far do you want us to go with them?"

Spencer exhaled impatiently. "Have you found the reagent yet? No? Do you know where to look for it?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "Why is that?"

"Because Kuryakin stole it."

"Exactly. You must bring that little nuisance back in here, alive, or at least, don't kill him until he tells you where the VIRGIN is."

"Understood. How about Mr. Solo?"

Spencer shrugged. "I don't have any concern regarding Mr. Solo. Dispose of him at will." He turned to his workstation. "Leave now."

(o)(O)(o)

Mayela came back early. She left several bags in the kitchen and went upstairs. She found Illya sleeping restlessly and still in his wet clothes. She had not called his name yet when he opened his eyes.

"Sorry, I just came in. Good morning." She went to open the curtains.

"The light, Mayela! No, please!" Illya anticipated the pain and pulled the blankets over his face.

"Cierito! I'm sorry," she turned. "Did you sleep well? It was very cold last night."

"I noticed," Illya winced.

"Are you in pain?" Mayela frowned. "Do you have a fever? It seems that you caught a cold."

"I don't have a c-" Illya sat up and sneezed. Pain crawled behind his eyes, nose and ears. He had to lean his head on the pillow.

"Salud!," *Bless you* she said. "You're such a, what's the expression? Such a mess?"

"I suppose." Illya sniffed and rubbed his eyes. "Did you send the message?"

"Oh, yes. Del Floria Tailor Shop? I almost hung up because I thought I'd got the wrong number." She smiled. "They said that someone will come to town at three this afternoon. How do they know where you are?"

"They know. What time is it? I'd better get ready." Illya got up and almost fainted. He sat on the edge of the bed and held his head with both hands. "In five more minutes."

"I don't think you will make it to the main door within half an hour." Mayela shook her head. She reached in her purse for something and poured water in a glass. "Here," she gave Illya two pills, "It's aspirin."

"You're an angel." Illya swallow without giving it much of a thought. Immediately, he wrinkled his nose in disgust. "They're sour and the water is-"

"It's pure water. There's nothing wrong with it," Mayela protested. "I think it's you, Illya."

"Yes, me too," Illya forced himself to smile. "My taste is going crazy."

"You're getting very sick. You should have changed those clothes already."

Illya took a deep breath. "All right, you may help me with the shirt."

She unzipped his jacket and stared at the jump suit. "Are you with the scientists?"

"Scientists?"

"Yeah, the ones working in the volcano." She pulled his undershirt off his head and reached for her brother's plaid flannel shirt.

Illya buttoned it and stood up. He took the clean jeans and looked at her. "Turn around and close your eyes." He smiled at her covering her eyes with both hands. "What do you know about those scientists?"

"Well, they started to come after the first eruption. They have their camp up there."

"How do you know that?" Illya sat down again to tie up his boots. "Have you seen them?"

"All the time," she shrugged. "Well, on weekends. They come to town for provisions. My brothers deliver the milk for the camp, every morning. Sometimes I go with them. How come I didn't see you there before?"

"I was held undergr-" A violent cough interrupted him. For a moment, he could not talk or breathe.

Mayela stared at him, warily. "Are you sure that you can go all the way to town? It's a good thirty minute walk."

"Is it the taxi's day off?" He panted.

"Actually, yes," she laughed. "It's Sunday."

Illya nodded. "Sunday?" Time was going too fast. He had lost at least two whole days already. *You have to put yourself together*, he thought. "I should get going." He took one step and felt dizzy.

Mayela looked at him and gasped. "Illya? Your nose is bleeding." She ran to her purse for some tissue.

Illya sat on the bed and wiped off the blood. "It's the sulfur, my nostrils are sore. I must have broken a blood vessel. It'll pass soon."

"I don't think you should go anywhere like this." Mayela sat in a chair in front of him. "Do you want me to call your uncle again and tell him-"

"There's no time. They must come today." Illya got up again. He felt weak and clumsy. He paced around until his balance came back little by little. "Listen, it's important for me to be there-" A wave of pain sent him down on his knees. He clenched his teeth in a effort to suppress a scream.

Despite the disarray, Illya managed to sign Mayela to stay away. He crawled to sit on the bed and waited until the episode subsided. Mayela did not take her eyes off him, biting her nails quietly. "I don't think you can make it, Illya."

He rubbed his face as though wiping the pain away. He shuddered but smiled at her all the same. "I have no choice, I need to talk to them." Illya struggled to stay alert. "I have to go."

"But you can't even walk," she said. "There must be another way."

"Lower down your voice, please." Illya gasped. "Another way," he muttered. Suddenly, he found a solution. "You could bring them here."

"Sure... but they don't know me and I don't know them."

He looked at the chain that Mayela was wearing around her neck. "May I have that?" He took off his ring and put it on the chain. "You'll wear my ring around your neck." He gave the chain back to her.

"And do what? I sit there just waiting?"

"Pretty much, yes." Illya crawled back in the bed to put his back against the board. He could see suspicion on Mayela's eyes. He grinned. "It's nothing hard to do. You can manage."

"All right," she said. "But if the person turns out to be a maniac, I'll be very angry at you."

Illya smiled thoughtfully. "If it is who I think it is, you'll be relatively safe."

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon jumped on his seat and his head hit the roof. He tried to laugh. The girl in the rent-a-car agency had warned him about the bumpy road. It was a good thing that he had settled for the jeep instead the convertible. This kind of adventures were not particularly his cup of tea, but it was not so bad. He was too busy assessing the extreme conditions of this part of the country. Two years of sulfur and ashes were taking their toll all over. Vegetation was yellow and the few cows he had seen looked ill for lack of good nourishment.

He looked ahead. The *mountain of thunder* seemed to watch him from a distance. Clouds stuck on the slopes of the volcano, giving the impression that the mountain was floating. The landscape was breathtaking. As though in schedule for the accidental tourist, a column of smoke went up at the top, and a small shower of rocks rolled down the side. The volcano roared and sounded like a plane taking off. Volcanoes were not a bad thing. Natural phenomena happened unexpectedly, but if on top of it, they added Thrush to the equation, someone would have to put a halt to it.

Another bump on the road and he spotted a sign. "San Juan de Aquinas, 1 kilómetro," he read. Until this moment, he had not allowed himself to think of Illya. His partner was

resourceful and an overall survivor, but he had this tendency to get into very interesting problems. Napoleon could hardly wait to see what Illya was up to now.

Mayela bought a bag of potato chips at the *comisariato*. A man in camouflage jacket and khaki pants came to the counter with a picture. He spoke English with the clerk but there was not much communication between them.

"Maye!" Rafael called her. "Necesito traducción, please." *I need translation here, please.*

She remembered immediately what Illya had said about talking to strangers. She got concerned. The man looked nice but serious. He showed her the picture. It was an ID card. She did not have time to read the name, but there was no doubt it was Illya in the picture. She hesitated for a moment. Maybe, this was the man they were waiting for. Maybe not. She sighed and shook her head.

"He hasn't come this way." Mayela did not feel that was a lie. Technically, Illya had not come downtown. She waited until the man left the place. Then, she went to sit on a bench at the *plaza*, the grassy square that served as the football soccer court. As every Sunday, boys and young adults gathered to play *la mejenga*, soccer jam. Next to the National Soccer Championship, this was the most popular activity in town.

Two of the young men waved at her. She smiled, but her eyes were on the main road, watching for any new car coming to town. Traffic was usually slow. There were visitors making one last stop before climbing up the road to the volcano. But even those were fewer now. The authorities had declared the zone as dangerous after a couple of accidents.

She looked at her watch. Three o'clock and no one that looked like a spy, or whatever Illya's people were had arrived. She saw one car, Elenio, the taxi driver; her father's ox cart was also rolling down the main street. As every day, he would look for Mayela's older brother and a friend to make the milk deliveries for the evening. Mayela giggled. What would her father say if he knew she was there waiting for a stranger... in a car? A black car passed by and went to park in front of the Comisariato. More tourists, she thought.

Suddenly, a jeep crossed the road, blowing its horn to the ox cart. Somehow, Mayela knew this had to be him.

Napoleon parked at the verge of what looked like the curb of the sidewalk. He got out and felt like every pair of eyes was on him. After some seconds, they turned back to the game and other things. Napoleon adjusted the collar of his jacket as he felt a light drizzle. There was also a strong smell of sulfur in the air and ashes, now a familiar trait, covered most of the street.

He looked around, hoping to spot his contact. His usual move would be walking toward the crowd; maybe Illya would be there. But of course, these missions were never that easy. He was about to complete his first turn to the match court when something caught his eyes. Illya's ring.

The brunette wearing the ring looked at him intently. She was in a light lavender dress, white shoes, no heels and a matching purse. She did not look threatening in any way, although, based on experience, that would not fool Napoleon. Even so, he allowed himself to smile. At least, she was pretty. As he walked closer, two little old ladies came to sit next to the girl. Napoleon slowed down.

"Y ¿cómo está su mamá? *How's your mother?*"

"Por ahí vimos a su papá, *We've just seen your father around.*"

"Bien, gracias, *Fine, thank you,*" Mayela put on her best smile. Her aunts were nice and friendly, but it was really hard getting rid of them. She saw this tall man, dressed in fatigue clothes, crossing the street toward her and panicked. He could be a killer or something worse. He might have a gun under that jacket and knives in his boots. *Easy, Mayelita, too many spy movies,* she thought.

Napoleon stood next to her, took out his sunglasses and bowed to the ladies. He pretended to watch the game. His Spanish was rustic but he had mastered several sentences from other trips to Latin America. "¿Cómo van?" *How are they doing?* He asked.

"Cero a cero," Mayela answered with a wary frown.

Napoleon looked at her and smiled. "I hope you speak English, this is as far as I go with my Spanish."

Mayela felt relieved. At least, he seemed as friendly as Illya. "American?"

Napoleon nodded. The ladies next to Mayela were more interested in him than in the game or anything else in town. One smile from him and they giggled.

"¿Es amigo suyo? *Friend of yours?*" One of the ladies asked Mayela.

"Sí, sí, amigo de ella, *Yes, her friend,*" Napoleon ventured to say. He turned to Mayela and pointed at the chain on her neck. "I think we need to talk."

Mayela excused herself to her aunts and walked away with Napoleon. He leaned on the fence of the church garden and looked around. "Everybody is staring at us. You must be very popular."

Mayela smiled. "It's a very small town. If there's nothing on TV, we come here and stare at each other."

Napoleon laughed. He did not lose his friendly expression when he turned to her. "Where is Illya?"

"Are you his uncle?" She frowned.

"No, but you're wearing his ring. You called us yesterday. Is he all right?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "He's in my house, up the hill, that way," she pointed with her chin. "He wanted to come but he's too weak."

"Is he wounded?"

"No, but he looks sick. He says it's his allergies but--"

Napoleon grabbed her by the hand. "Come, you've got to take me with him now."

She stopped when they got to the car. "I don't know if I should get in there with you."

"You came this far with that ring. I guess Illya is expecting you to return it." Napoleon spoke softly, giving her his trademark smile. "Maybe it'd help if we introduced ourselves. I'm Napoleon Solo."

Mayela hesitated before shaking his hand. "Mayela Gonzalez."

"Nice to meet you, Mayela." Napoleon started the engine, with Illya on his mind. What did she mean he looked sick?

Mayela kept an eye on the people staring at her. She was leaving in a car with a stranger... a man. If her father had not seen her yet, her aunts would fill him in later. She was in trouble. They both were too much into their own thoughts to notice that the black car was rolling out of town right behind them.

"Mayela, how far is your house?"

"In this car? Twenty minutes, maybe."

Napoleon shifted gears resolutely. "We'll make it in fifteen."

The car behind them sped up too.

ACT III: *Estos gringos locos...*

Illya opened his eyes with the certainty that something was about to happen. He had tried to sleep several times but the noise in the surroundings kept him wide awake. The last half hour, he had been counting motor cars, five in total. Not one of them had come close to the house. Until now.

He strained his ears and reckoned that at least two cars were coming up the hill. *It must be Napoleon*, he thought. It had to be Napoleon. Illya got up and went to the window. It had been almost forty-eight hours since the effects of the drug began to manifest and he

was still amazed at what he was capable of doing. Throughout the trees and precarious light, Illya could see the jeep. He smiled with relief.

Almost immediately behind, he saw another car. Illya's heart pounded. Thrush. He had no way to warn Napoleon, or help him whatsoever. He would have to trust that his friend could manage on his own.

(o)(O)(o)

"Do you work together, Illya and you?"

"Sometimes, when the situation calls for it." Napoleon occasionally would look at her, but his eyes were on the rear mirror. "We're not like family, but I think we're good friends. Where did you meet him?"

"In the house. I almost called the police but he fainted. He's feverish and in a lot of pain. I tried to make him eat something but he refused."

"Illya doesn't want to eat? That's a first, indeed," Napoleon frowned. "We'll do something about that," he said. The car behind them was getting closer. There was no doubt now. "We have a tail."

"A what?" Mayela turned to see a black car speeding toward them. The first bump almost threw her from her seat. "¡Ave María Purísima!" *Holy Mary!*

"Hold on!" Napoleon steered from left to right, keeping the car still on the road.

"Who are they? What do they want?"

"Right now, or generally speaking?" Napoleon took a curve without slowing down. *Bad move, we'll roll over in the next one*, he thought.

Illya watched desperately through the window. He hit the frame and yelled. "Napoleon! Be careful!" He was helpless, there was nothing else for him but to watch and wait. He sat on the bed, head in hands, trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly, he heard steps coming to the house. *One man. Slightly leaning to the left...because he's carrying a gun in his left hand.* He cursed himself for getting so distracted. He should have paid attention to other noises coming his way. He ran to the kitchen as quietly as possible. He could hear his own heartbeat and was thankful that the other guy could not.

He would surprise the man from behind; maybe grab some of those iron utensils and beat him repeatedly. One more step and he was in the kitchen. The man seized Illya's hand and pulled him toward him. He punched him and threw him on the floor. Before opening his eyes, Illya felt a boot on his chest.

"Let me guess," Illya gasped. "You are in Plus-X too?"

"Just the correct dosage," the man nodded. He aimed his pistol at Illya's head. "Now, should I put an end to your misery?"

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon took another curve. He felt he was in Switzerland with all the turns and uphill roads. Only these were not as well paved. Holes, gravel and ashes threatened to make the car skid out of the road. He had to slow down, but the guys behind him would not allow it. Napoleon hated to be confrontational, especially with an innocent sitting next to him, but there was no other choice. He turned to the young woman, who was struggling to stay in her seat through the bumps and curves.

"Mayela, listen," said Napoleon in a casual tone. "When I stop the car, open the door and run. Find some big rock or tree and stay behind. Don't move until I call you, okay?"

Mayela could not find her voice to say *yes*. All she could do was nod and process the rest of the information. The car stopped abruptly, she heard Napoleon yelling something like *Now!*, and she jumped toward the open field. There was no forest on that side of the road, only open field. She found a group of rocks. There was a first shot and she hid her head in her hands. All the prayers she had learned as a child came to mind at once. She glanced at the shooters and recognized the man in camouflage jacket from the comisariato.

Napoleon used the car as a shield. He counted two men shooting at him. He answered the fire and ran to the other side of the road. He dragged their attention far from the girl, which was good. It meant that they wanted him, or better yet, they wanted to kill him and not her. They must have intercepted the call to Uncle quarters. Anyway, this confirmed that it was a Thrush operation. At least, that was familiar territory.

The men moved forward and ducked. Napoleon rolled over to one side and waited.

"Did you get him?" The man in the jacket asked his partner in the khaki jumpsuit.

"No, I can still hear his heartbeat," he said.

Napoleon's eyebrows rose at once. That answer did not make much sense. He had to try something. Napoleon grabbed a small rock and threw it to his right. The man in the jacket prepared to shoot in that direction but the other man stopped him.

"It's just a small rock, he's on the opposite side."

Napoleon's jaw dropped. It was as though that man could read his mind in detail. Of course, it had to be something else. He had almost figured out it when a flurry of shots raised a small cloud of dust and grass. He waited. The jacket man stood up to get a better shooting position but Napoleon was faster with his gun. The other man took advantage of Napoleon's distraction and opened fire.

Mayela could see one man falling down before the other one shot again. She could hear someone moaning. Could it be Napoleon? She panicked.

(o)(O)(o)

Illya pushed up the boot on his chest, making the man lose his balance. He fired as he fell and the shot felt like needles in Illya's eardrums. He screamed.

"This is too easy," the man said. "I would've preferred that Doctor Spencer didn't waste the drug on you. This stuff is too good to throw it away on simple minded Uncle agents." He got up and shrugged. "I would've shot you in the head, but hell, looking at you like this is rather funnier."

"Funnier? I still can beat you." Illya sprung up and charged. "It's the same drug, you know?" He crushed the man against the wall and punched him in the mid section. The man fell to the floor; he had lost the gun but before Illya could reach it, the man took a flashlight out of his jacket and lit Illya's eyes.

"I know. But in your case, it's out of control," the man laughed. Blinded and in excruciating pain, Illya did not have much choice but to withdraw. He felt the man pulling him outside the house and throwing him on the ground. "Fighting you under these conditions is way too easy." The man grabbed Illya round the back of his neck and rubbed his face in the mud. Now, on top of everything else, Illya was suffocating.

(o)(O)(o)

The Thrush agent turned to look at his fallen partner. He shrugged. At least, he would not have to share the commission for putting down one Uncle agent. He watched the rocks where Napoleon had been hiding. He knew that he had not missed. Napoleon's heart had slowed down. He should be dying. Even so, he hesitated to get closer just yet. After a prudential amount of time, he started to walk. He was still a few feet away when Napoleon rolled on his stomach and opened fire. The second agent was dead before hitting the ground.

Napoleon could finally take a deep breath. He did not put aside his pistol until he made sure there were no more surprises from Thrush. The immediate procedure was to get in contact with HQ.

"Coordinates registered. We'll contact with local authorities immediately."

"Thank you." Napoleon put his pen back in his pocket. He walked to the road and signed for Mayela to come out.

The girl stared at the improvised battlefield. She was pale and shaky. "They're dead."

Napoleon nodded in a condescending way. He never stopped to think about the killing. He had been trained for survival. Only bystanders like Mayela made him talk about it once in a while.

"I can't explain how this works, but our organization ensures and enforces law and order in the world, and they," he pointed vaguely at the bodies, "well, they don't."

"Like police? Interpol?" She still looked concerned and shocked.

"United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, Uncle."

"Uncle! I knew it couldn't be Illya's Uncle on the phone, it sounded like a woman to start with." Mayela glanced at the bodies and frowned.

"What is it?"

"Their uniforms, they're dressed just like Illya."

Napoleon nodded. Now he knew that Illya had been working in the right place and with Thrush people. Napoleon put his arm around Mayela's shoulder and started walking.

"We need to go on now, before someone else comes."

"Someone else?" Mayela stared at him.

"Don't fret, we know what we're doing."

(o)(O)(o)

Illya felt dirt in his mouth and his nose. He could barely breathe as the struggle continued. He knew that if the situation did not improve in the next few seconds, he would pass out or worse. In a last-minute move, Illya managed to get on his knees and push his attacker to one side. They wrestle bare handed in the mud. The pistol was not in sight. Several cracking shots made them both turn their heads down the hill. Illya stopped for a second, figuring that the worst had just happened. The Thrush agent laughed and pinned Illya down.

"Well, that's done. Now, I have to ask you a question and then, I'll kill you, okay?"

"Okay?" Illya coughed.

"Where is the VIRGIN?"

"The what?" He managed to chuckle. "I think you're looking in the wrong place my friend. No virgins around."

"Don't get smart with me! You know what I'm talking about!"

"Hey, don't blame me, I didn't come up with that ridiculous name!"

The man loosed his grip on Illya. "Yeah, that Spencer is certainly lacking a couple of screws."

"What do you know? I think I found one right here!" Illya grabbed the man's arms and catapulted him over his head with a knee on his chest. He jumped up through the open door. He saw the pistol concealed behind the sofa. He darted forward as he heard the man running toward him.

The man saw Illya grab the pistol, turn around and open fire, everything almost at the same time. The bullet hit him in the stomach. He fell backwards right in front of the main door. Illya sat on the floor for a moment, catching his breath and thinking of the smartest step to take next.

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon drove to the entrance of the house. The path was nice, surrounded by pine trees and seasonal flowers. The fields were green, although there were spots of yellow in the grass. The sound of ashes under the tires reminded him of the mission yet to accomplish. Despite everything, this was a beautiful place... Except maybe, for the body lying on the porch.

"Cielos!" *Good heavens!* Mayela covered her mouth with both hands.

Napoleon grabbed her arm to catch her attention. "Stay close," he said taking out his gun.

He walked slowly, keeping the girl at his back. His instincts told him that there should not be any more strangers. He checked on the man and shook his head. Mayela crossed herself. He knew this was too much for a young woman living the peaceful life in a rural town. But the circumstances almost never allowed them to spare the innocents.

"Illya?" He called and waited. There were noises in the kitchen. He left the girl in the living room. "Don't move. If anything happens, run to the car."

Napoleon crossed the kitchen area and two hens jumped out of the shower. He aimed as the door began to open. Then, Illya came out. His hair dripped on a towel around his neck, while he buttoned up the last button of a plaid shirt that Napoleon had never seen on Illya. The jeans, old and faded, were also out of character.

There was no surprise in Illya's face when he saw Napoleon. He reached for his boots and socks and sat on a chair to put them on. "You can put that thing away, I surrender." Illya rubbed his hair with the towel. He looked at his friend and smiled faintly. "What kept you?"

Napoleon stared at him for a minute. Pale skin, reddish eyes, he made the inventory before asking. "Did they torture you?"

Illya looked over Napoleon's shoulder and his expression softened. "Mayela. I think I ruined your brother's clothes. I found some more, though. I hope you don't mind."

"That's okay." She hugged herself. "You took a shower? It's pure icy water."

Illya shrugged. "It reminds me of home. I grew up without hot water too."

"But you have a cold-"

"I don't, it's just allergies." Illya ended the sentence with a sneeze. Almost immediately, his nose began to bleed.

Napoleon crouched in front of him. "Cover your nose with the towel and breathe through your mouth. Hold your head up-"

"It's not my first bleeding nose, you know," Illya pushed him aside.

"It started this morning. I think he should go to a hospital." Mayela shook her head. She turned to the living room. "Mr. Solo, este... what do you plan to do with the-" She pointed at the body in the main door.

Napoleon sighed. He had almost forgotten that part. He stood up. "Get Illya in bed. I'll be right back."

Illya looked at her as she stared after Napoleon. There was anguish in her eyes and who knows what she must be thinking about these two strangers taking over her house, killing people all around. He stood up and checked that the bleeding had stopped. "I think I ruined your towel too," he smiled shyly. "Please, don't be scared, we're-

"Like secret police, I know. Mr. Solo explained that to me already... It's just that, well, three men have died, one was on my porch..." She turned to Illya. "Do you need help?"

Illya's first impulse was to say no. He was perfectly capable of climbing up stairs. However, this was not the moment of showing his stubborn side. The young woman was scared and in need to be needed. He looked at her gently and tilted his head. "Yes, please." He put his arm around her shoulders and allowed her to put hers around his waist. "Gracias."

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"I still don't know what's wrong with him, but he looks a little beaten anyway."

"Very well, Mr. Solo. Check on him and have him brief you on the mission status. The latest weather report indicates drastic changes coming up over Costa Rica and our experts strongly suggest that they might be related to the unusual volcano activity." Mr. Waverly was not a man of emotional displays. He was satisfied just to know that his agents were still alive and on their feet.

"Well, those three goons did not come just for the ride, I can tell." Napoleon looked for one last time at the three bodies in a car. "Did you talk with the local police?"

"Better yet, we called our division for the Caribbean."

"We have a department in the Caribbean? I thought that the South American division covered the entire zone."

"There are too many countries for just one division. Of all Central American nations, Costa Rica offers the most stable conditions to work. "

Napoleon smiled. "Is there also a Del Floria's and all?"

"Of course, Sastrería Del Floria. It's stationed in Puntarenas, Costa Rica's Pacific coast. They have been informed already about the situation. We got full cooperation from the government too. The reports will indicate an accident related to alcohol consumption. There will be no questions asked."

"Glad to hear that. I'll keep you informed of our progress. I'm now returning to the house. Solo out."

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Illya let Mayela take off his boots and help him to lie down. He felt tired and poorly, but he would fight any cold symptoms all the way. He did not need any sickness on top of everything else. "You don't have to do all this for me, Mayela. Sorry I have been so much trouble."

Mayela wiped Illya's forehead with a wet cloth. "You're no trouble, Illya. It's just that I didn't know that people would try to kill you and your friend."

"We'll leave in the morning and you'll be safe, I promise."

"I feel safe," she shrugged. "More or less. You can stay as long as you want to. I'll bring more food tomorrow."

Illya winced and turned to the window. "Napoleon is back."

Mayela did not hear the car until two minutes later when it rolled up to the entrance and parked outside. Napoleon entered the bedroom. He disguised his concern with a casual attitude. "Good thing that blanket has some color on it. I can hardly see you with all that whiteness."

Illya glared coldly at him. "Meet Napoleon Solo and his unique sense of humor."

"Oh, we already met," Napoleon came to kiss Mayela's hand. "Sorry for the bumpy ride. You haven't seen us at our best yet."

"Por la víspera se saca el día," Mayela said with a giggle.

Napoleon turned to Illya for a translation.

"You can tell the day by looking at the morning."

"Fair enough." Napoleon took a sit on the edge of the bed. "Now, tell me, Illya, what's your story?" He noticed Illya's reluctance to talk in front of the girl. "Oh, Mayela," said Napoleon, "I need to talk with my partner alone, you don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

The door closed behind the girl. Napoleon looked at Illya earnestly. "Well? What happened?"

Illya straightened up in the bed. There were details and facts that had to be discussed and he would try not to let anything out. "The volcano activator is working again. Thrush built a laboratory in one of the secondary craters of the volcano. I entered with the last group of recruited scientists and-

"Illya, I know that part already. Laslo turned out to be a double agent. We'll have time to discuss that further. Now I need to know what they did to you. You really look sick."

"I'm not sick!" Illya snapped. He noticed Napoleon's puzzled look and he calmed down. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, not like that. They injected me with some drug."

"Plus-X by any chance?" Napoleon caught a surprised glance. "I figured that the men who intercepted me on the road were on something. It makes sense that Thrush didn't throw the drug just because we busted their first trail."

"They have been using that drug on themselves, you know, to keep them alert while working on the volcano."

Napoleon saw Illya shiver and he frowned. "They used it in you? But why? That would enhance your own senses and you could use them against them."

"They gave me an overdose, Napoleon." Illya rolled up his sleeves to show him the marks of needles in his arms. "I passed out at the fourth injection... I reckoned they gave me at least four times the normal dose."

"Illya-"

"They must have thought that I'd collapse right away. But the effects started so slowly." Illya grinned weakly. "It was easy to find a way out. I don't think they knew about my running away after twenty-four hours later. I could see, hear, smell... feel... You should have seen me, Napoleon," he chuckled, "I could anticipate their movements by their heartbeats. It was like magic..."

There was a touch of pain in every word. Napoleon did not dare to interrupt but his concern grew.

"When I finally went outside, I felt so connected. All my senses were open to everything around. I heard everything, saw everything..." He stopped. He closed his eyes, wincing in pain.

"Illya? Are you all right?" Napoleon leaned forward.

"Can you hear the wind in the leaves..." Illya opened his eyes and looked through the window. "I could tell you how many leaves are in each tree from here to town... And under it-"

"I understand, Illya. It's okay. You should-"

"Under it," he gasped, "there is a hum from the laboratory underground... under the mountain... I can feel it in my skin, in the tip of my fingers..." He shivered as he turned to Napoleon. "And I can't turn it off. Napoleon, I hear it night and day..." He grabbed his friend's hand. "I can feel the blood running through your veins, I can hear your heartbeat. I can tell that you're getting scared of me..."

"Not of you, but for you." Napoleon tried his best to calm him. "I'll get help, I'll call HQ-"

"Do you remember Louis?" Illya said suddenly. "He didn't remember us. H-he was helpless, lost in his own madness. He could not stop it or turn it off!"

"Illya, stop it. It's not the same. The drug they used on Louis was still experimental. It was not ready. They have certainly improved the formula since then. Whatever effect it has, will pass soon."

Illya's energy faded as fast as it had risen. He leaned his back on the wall and shook his head. "Well, it hurts all the same. I've been able to control it so far, but I know that it's a matter of time for it to take over... The pain comes and goes, each time, it comes back stronger. And the noise... It's everywhere..." He looked at Napoleon. "I'm falling down and I don't know when it's going to stop."

"Take it easy, Illya," Napoleon said softly. This was not the development he had expected. He had not seen Illya so out of sorts since the time he was attacked with fear gas.* At least, that time he had got medical help almost instantly. Today, it would require some of Napoleon's ingenuity to keep his friend from falling apart.

They heard Mayela from the kitchen, calling them to dinner. Napoleon smiled. "Illya, how long it has been since you ate for the last time?"

"What?" Illya stared at him. "Haven't heard what I said?"

"Yes, and I think that most of it happens because you're too weak." Napoleon stood up. "You need to eat and drink something." He smiled mischievously. "If your sense of smell is growing, you must have noticed that something good is cooking in the kitchen. Stay here, I'll be right back. Try to rest."

Try to rest? Illya almost chuckled at that. The moment he closed his eyes, voices coming from everywhere overwhelmed him. Rest would not come easy any time soon.

The day was fading away and the house was getting darker. Only one light illuminated the way to the kitchen. Napoleon took some minutes to enjoy the simplicity of the moment. The table was already set with pots of different kinds of food. Mayela was still working at the stove, giving the final touches to another dish. She smiled at Napoleon.

"This smells good," Napoleon said, looking at the pots on the stove. He turned to the table and smiled. "What we have here?"

Mayela saw him studying the kerosene lamps and the wood stove. "Yes, we still don't have electricity."

"I've seen those in a museum." Napoleon sat at the table.

"How's your friend?" She poured a glass of lemonade for him.

"Talking weird, but that's the least of his problems, I guess. I'll take him back home tomorrow, he needs a doctor."

"I'm making chicken soup. It'll help with his cold." She noticed Napoleon's condescending look. "He doesn't have a cold, does he?"

"I'm afraid not."

Mayela looked at him seriously. "Mr. Solo, why are you here? You and Illya came to our town looking for something."

Napoleon nodded. "Mayela, for your own safety, I can't tell you everything. But you deserve an explanation. Our organization has good reasons to believe that the volcano activity doesn't respond completely to natural causes. We're here to locate, isolate and dispose of anyone and anything that might be interfering with the normal course of events."

"Those men on the road? Are they responsible for the volcano eruptions?"

"Not all of them, I guess, but we hope that once they're removed from here, the volcano will return to normality, whatever that means for an active volcano." Napoleon smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry about anything. We'll protect you and your people, I promise."

"And Illya? What's wrong with him?"

"Well, he got too close to those men and-"

"I let my guard down." Illya appeared at the door. He had heard enough of the conversation from his bed. He would not say more about his condition. There was no way to explain how his five senses had gone berserk all of a sudden. He nodded barely when Napoleon and Mayela turned to him.

"Hey, Illya, come and have drink." Napoleon was as cheerful as always.

Illya came closer and lifted the glass. The smell of lemon, water and sugar, combined with the kerosene of the lamp made him suddenly nauseous. "That smell is too strong," he wrinkled his nose. "I can taste it in my mouth... Excuse me." He had to walk away.

"I'm so sorry," Mayela said to Napoleon. "It's the kerosene. I can use candles-"

"No, it's okay," Napoleon signed to her to stay put. He took a bowl and poured some soup in it. "I know how to deal with sulking Russians."

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Napoleon found Illya leaning on the railing on the front porch. His eyes were absently fixed on the trees and the open field. He was too busy trying to even his breathing to pay any attention to his friend. Napoleon would not be discouraged. He looked at the open field and smiled.

"What do you know? The cows actually come home," he said at the sight of the cattle coming down the hill.

Illya extended an open hand and dust fell on his palm instead of rain. He shrugged with a mirthless smile. "This could be a nice place if it weren't for the ashes."

"It still is, and we'll do all we can to make it better," Napoleon said. "Illya, you need to stay strong."

"I can't eat, everything tastes like ashes." He shut his eyes and tears rolled down his cheeks.

Napoleon's eyes narrowed. "Are you crying?"

Illya glared at him, shaking his head. "What? No! It's those damn ashes. They get in my eyes and it stings."

Napoleon grabbed his arm before he touched his eyes. "Don't rub them, it's worse if you do," he said, taking out his handkerchief. "Here, be careful."

Illya cleaned his eyes as much as he could. He lowered his head and sighed. "This is such a mess, Napoleon. I thought it would be so easy, just hit and run... and suddenly everything went to--"

"Ashes?" Napoleon touched Illya's arm. "All right, tell me, how far did you get?"

Illya shrugged. "I neutralized the unit by stealing a reagent that triggers the mechanism. My idea was to put some explosives around the compound. But they caught me before I could do that."

"A reagent? The macguffin?" Napoleon was pleased to see Illya nod with a smile.

"Before I came to Costa Rica, I talked with the experts in our department of Science. We concurred that the volcano activator must have some trigger. They did not know what to expect, so I came up with that name..." he chuckled. "I could've called it that blasted thing, but that word didn't seem too appropriate in front of Mr. Waverly."

Napoleon grinned. "Do you still have it?"

"No. I had to swim the volcano's lake in order to get out of there. The reagent contains some chemicals that explode at contact with water." Illya turned to the mountain. "I hid it up there, in a subterranean cave."

"You don't think they found it already, do you?"

"I don't think so. The volcano activator stopped working since I left. I've heard them igniting it a couple of times, but it won't work properly without the missing piece. The man I killed came looking for it." Illya did not sound cheerful about that.

"So? What's the problem? You actually stopped the machine."

"Yes, I stopped it, but I didn't destroy it. They're moving out. They'll start it all over."

"We'll be ready," Napoleon shrugged. "We know where to hit them now, it'll be a matter of time-"

"Oh, Napoleon, don't you understand? I was so close... I could have put an end to it right there." He lowered his eyes and rubbed his temple. "Maybe I'm just talking nonsense."

"Look at me. You're tired and weak. You need to eat. I doesn't matter if it tastes like cardboard. Your body needs the nourishment."

"You sound like my mother," he smiled slightly.

"I don't care if I look like your great grandmother. You'll drink this, okay?" He put the bowl in Illya's hands. "Now, close your eyes and hold your breath."

Illya stared at the bowl. His shoulders lost tension as he grimaced at Napoleon. "You really think we can fix this?"

"In a heartbeat. Next time, they'll be history," Napoleon smiled. "Go ahead, drink."

Illya had barely had two sips when something started him. "A car is coming up the road."

They both ran into the house. Napoleon collected Mayela, looking for a safe place to put her while they faced whomever was coming. "Do you have a basement?"

"In this house? No," she said, glancing at Illya by the door, cocking his pistol. "What's going on? What's the matter?"

"I don't want to alarm you, but there's a strong possibility that the men we met on the road have some friends looking for them." Napoleon grabbed her by both arms. "Listen, go upstairs, find someplace to hide."

"And wait until you call me," she sighed. "I think I've learned the routine."

Napoleon joined Illya. He had his gun ready. "Is that loaded?" He pointed at Illya's pistol, the one that the Russian had collected from the man from Thrush.

"It still has half a round, I guess."

"You guess?"

"An educated guess," Illya said, turning to the road. "The car is at the entrance."

As they prepared for a burst of shots, the car blew its horn instead. Illya moaned at the piercing noise and glanced Napoleon for an explanation. "They must be new in spy business," he shrugged.

Mayela did not have to peep through the window. She came running downstairs. "Es mi papá!" She passed them on her way out.

"Her dad?" Napoleon was puzzled, but put away his pistol as quickly as possible.

Illya did the same and came to Napoleon's side. They saw a man in his late fifties coming down an old pick up truck. He was with a younger man. They did not look happy when Mayela greeted them. He stared at Illya and narrowed his eyes in a threatening way.

Illya turned to Napoleon, who looked quite relaxed and smiley. "What's that smirk about?"

"It occurs to me that for once, I might not be the one standing for a shot-gun wedding."

Illya rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. Bad move, the smell of diesel from the truck and kerosene from the lanterns turned his stomach. Napoleon laid one hand over his friend's shoulder and gave him a reassuring glance.

Mayela entered with the men. "Éste es mi papá, Rubén Gonzalez, y mi hermano Antonio." *This is my father, Rubén Gonzalez and my brother Antonio.*

"Nice to meet you," Napoleon held out his hand but the man only glared at him.

"Esa es mi camisa," *That's my shirt.* Antonio frowned.

"Su ropa estaba mojada, no moleste," *His clothes are wet, don't make a fuzz.* Mayela tapped his brother on the shoulder.

"Y estos hombres, ¿quiénes son?" *And these men, who are they?*

"Ellos, este-" *They, er-*

"Turistas..." *Tourists.* Illya rushed to say. "Perdí el camino en la montaña y hasta ahora pude salir." *I lost my way in the mountain and I couldn't come out until now.* He looked at the men staring at Napoleon. "Él es mi hermano, vino a recogerme." *He is my brother, he came to pick me up.*

Napoleon saw the man's expression softening a bit, while he conferred with his daughter. Napoleon turned to Illya and whispered. "Now we're brothers?"

"These people respect family, it's a cultural thing."

Illya tried not to eavesdrop but his hearing was extremely sensitive already. From what they said, things were going rather well.

Finally, Mayela's father looked at them and shook his head. "Estos gringos locos, se pierden en la montaña y después tiene que andar la Cruz Roja detrás de ellos." *These crazy gringos, they get lost in the mountain and then, the Red Cross has to go after them.*

"What did he say?" Napoleon asked.

"Besides we're a pair of crazy gringos?" Illya smiled faintly. A new wave of pain hit his ears. He sought Napoleon's arm for support

"¿Y a él que le pasa? ¿Está enfermo?" *What's with him? Is he sick?* Mayela's father asked.

"No," Illya gasped, "sólo estoy cansado." *I'm just tired.*

"He's the black sheep of the family, always getting in trouble. Mum worries so much," Napoleon sighed while Mayela translated.

Illya saw with satisfaction that the older man stared sympathetically at Napoleon. Maybe Solo had managed to connect with him. It did not matter that it was at Illya's expense.

"Está bien, pueden quedarse esta noche. Mayela, usted se viene conmigo." *All right, they can stay for the night. Mayela, you come with me.*

Mayela nodded. She turned to Napoleon and Illya. "I don't know if we'll meet again. Take care."

"We'll be gone in the morning," Illya took her hand in his. "Thank you for everything."

Napoleon kissed her hand and smiled. "You've been so kind. We'll meet again."

Illya stayed in the porch, staring at the rear lights of the truck. He leaned forward to rest on the railing. "At least, we got the innocent out of harm's way."

The wind whistled in the trees, bringing temperatures down. Napoleon adjusted the collar of his jacket and turned to Illya. Besides a slight tremor in his hands, the Russian looked like a statue. He was obviously lost in thought somewhere else. Napoleon was very familiar with those moods and he usually ignored Illya until they were gone. However, under the present circumstances, that might not be the best course of action.

"Illya, I need to call Mr. Waverly now... for debriefing, all right?"

Illya closed his eyes, making an effort to concentrate on Napoleon's voice. "I crushed that thing once and I'll do it again, and again... until they get tired of rebuilding it."

"I know, and you'll do it, some other time." Napoleon took out his pen. "Those men will come back for you."

"I could come back and finish what I started-" A sudden cough interrupted him.

"I'm sorry Illya, I'm putting my foot down on this one. You're coming home."

Illya grabbed Napoleon's hand before he could turn on the pen. "Let's talk about this. Napoleon, I don't usually beg for anything but-"

Napoleon felt compelled to give his friend a chance. But as senior agent, he had the responsibility of doing what would be better for the mission. There was too much to think about before coming with a decision. "It's been a long day. You must be tired too. Can we talk about this in the morning? I won't make any recommendation until then, okay?"

Illya smirked. He hated it when people were condescending just to avoid the argument. But Napoleon was right. He was beyond tired. He would not gain anything if he could not prove that he was perfectly capable of carrying on with the mission. He turned on his heel and went upstairs. "Don't stay up too long, it's school night."

Napoleon shook his head. There must be nothing more stubborn than a sick Russian. He walked a few feet away from the house, reckoning that even Illya's enhanced hearing would not reach him that far. He took his pen and twisted the cap. "Relay channel D to New York, please."

**The Quadripartite Affair, season 1, episode 3*

ACT IV: *I told you about those opiate analgesic drugs...*

"I understand your frustration, Mr. Solo. Mr. Kuryakin can be a little exasperating sometimes," said Mr. Waverly.

"Exasperating? Yes, that's another way to put it." Napoleon stared at the cows sleeping nearby. He almost envied them, living without any worry at all. People taking care of their necessities... "I just want to know how I can help him. I think he's getting worse."

*"I sent for Doctor Tower. * He was in charge of agent Campbell after we found him."*

There was a little pause. Napoleon used to remember Louis, a very efficient young man. He had talked to him; they had worked together in several occasions... Last time Napoleon saw him, Louis was too concerned about the smells and noises around him than to keep a straight conversation with anyone. His eyes had shifted from one thing to the other... He had screamed in pain and desperation... Napoleon had signed his discharge papers... Mentally unfit...

"Mr. Solo, here's the doctor. Go ahead." Mr. Waverly passed his microphone to the doctor.

"Napoleon, I've been analyzing the data you sent. I have to trust Mr. Kuryakin's figures about the overdose. If he was given four times the usual dose of Plus-X, we're in trouble.."

Napoleon rubbed his forehead. Until that moment, he had still hopes for a simple solution. *As though we ever had one of those*, he thought. "I see, Doctor. Any suggestions? What should we expect?"

"Plus-X is a drug with very particular properties. It works directly on each one of the five senses."

"I know that already, George. What else can you tell me?"

"Well, in order to work properly, our senses must be in constant communication with our brain. That's the only way we can identify and discriminate what we see, touch, smell, hear and taste. When that communication is interrupted or altered, our perception of the world changes. See? Take hearing, for instance. We're surrounded by constant noise, all the time. There is no such a thing as complete silence. But our brain protects us from being overwhelmed by the sounds that we don't need. We hear them, but we don't listen to them. Plus-X heightens the senses but only to levels still manageable by the brain. Are you following me?"

"I'm afraid so. If Illya received an overdose, his brain must be going through an overdrive. No wonder he's got those headaches."

"Headaches? Is he presenting other symptoms? Bleeding nose or ears?"

"Bleeding nose. It started this morning, so I was told." Napoleon looked at the house. Somehow, he knew Illya was staring at him. He must be listening to the conversation too. "Is there anything we can do to help him?"

"If he were here, I'd get him sedated and isolated for a couple of days, or the time it takes for his system to wear off the drug. Every minute he's awake must be excruciating, and it will get worse. There could be permanent damage; he could lose his hearing or his sight... More so, too much stress and constant pain could cause him a nervous breakdown."

Napoleon pinched the bridge of his nose. He had come prepared for Thrush's low blows, but not this low. He cleared his throat. "I understand, Doctor Tower. I suppose the best course of action at this point is to send Illya back to the States."

"The sooner, the better, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon opened his mouth to say something else when Illya appeared on the road walking determinedly toward him. He stopped right in front and glared at him. "Enough of talking about me behind my back. If you think you can take me out of this operation just like that, you're-

"Is that you, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly's voice was soft but firm as always. *"We did not mean to talk about you behind your back. We're actually concerned about your health. How are you holding on?"*

"I'm rather-," Illya found it impossible to lie to him, "I'm holding on just fine, sir."

"Doctor Tower suggests that it would be to your own benefit if we separate you from the case and bring you back for treatment."

"Mr. Waverly, I can't go back now. My work here is not done." He stared at Napoleon as though calling for backup.

"I understand your urgency, Mr. Kuryakin, you've worked this mission from the beginning. Having destroyed the first volcano activator, you must feel responsible to put an end to this operation once and for all. But due to your present condition we think that it would be wiser for you to step back and let Mr. Solo carry on with the rest of the mission."

Napoleon saw Illya clench his jaw. He could feel the quiet despair of someone determined to put up a fight till the very end. Illya would not yield. The way Napoleon saw it, he had only two roads to take, and either could mean the loss of his dearest friend. He took a deep breath. "With all due respect, sir, I don't think I'm qualified to complete this mission on my own."

"Mr. Solo, we have no time to play games. Either you are ready, or we suspend the mission. There is no way Mr. Kuryakin can continue-"

"Mr. Waverly, this is a two-man mission. Illya got in trouble because he was betrayed by his partner. If you want me to complete the operation, I'm going to need Mr. Kuryakin with me."

A long period of silence preceded the answer. *"Mr. Solo, you're at the head of the operation. Mr. Kuryakin, don't overdo it, if you're in no condition at anytime-"*

"I'll remove myself from the mission," Illya almost smiled.

"Proceed with caution, gentlemen."

The communication ended and Napoleon put away his pen. He looked at Illya who was getting ready for a reprimand. "I will be fair and not accuse you of eavesdropping. But still-

"I'm sorry. I just can't go back like this." Illya lowered his eyes. "If something is happening to me, I need to do this before it's too late."

"It's not too late, Illya. They can help you, you heard Dr. Tower."

"And do what? Give me a nice padded-wall cell next to Louis'?"

"I don't want to hear another word about Louis. It's a completely different situation and..." He paused to lay his hand on Illya's shoulder. "That will never happen to you, I promise." Then, he looked seriously into his partner's eyes. "Now, you have half a day to convince me that we can complete this mission."

"Thank you," Illya nodded. Then, he shut his eyes. "Napoleon, I was coming to tell you something else and I almost forgot... Three men in a truck came out of the compound a few minutes ago."

"You heard all that from the house?"

Illya glared at him, as if that should have been understood already. "Aren't you paying attention at all? At this point, the only thing I still can't do is read minds." He shook his head. "We still have some minutes before they arrive. I can hear the engine coming down the hill as we speak."

Napoleon brushed the hair off his brow. He did not have plans for any more confrontations that evening. "What if they don't find us home? We still have some work to do regarding the mission," he shrugged.

"Are you suggesting we run like cowards?" Illya's eyes glowed mischievously. "How would you call that in a report?"

"I'll call it *regrouping* and we're not running away. Technically, we shouldn't know those men are coming after us," Napoleon said. "I don't hear a thing, and you?"

Illya understood and sighed. "I hear everything, but it's hard to say what is what."

"That's all we need to know," Napoleon smiled. "Get in the car. Let's take a look at what we're up against this time."

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They took a secondary road to avoid any unwanted encounter. Napoleon kept struggling with the poor visibility and the innumerable bumps. He squinted through the darkness and chuckled. "Good thing we have a full moon tonight."

"It's only five in the afternoon," Illya barely acknowledged the joke. He was too absorbed in more immediate things. "You'd better pull up here. We have to walk the rest of the way."

Napoleon reached for his backpack. He took out two pairs of infrared binoculars and offered one to Illya.

"I don't need them," Illya said, getting out the car.

Napoleon followed him, keeping his concern hidden behind occasional superficial jokes. "Show off," he whispered.

Illya thanked him quietly for underplaying the gravity of his situation. At least, one of them would keep the other from going insane. "There is a path in that direction. It goes all the way up to the top. We will have a better view of the base from th-" A violent cough interrupted his last word. He leaned on the car until it subsided and he could catch his breath. He glanced at Napoleon, staring at him impassively. "Allergies-" he gasped.

"Sure," he passed Illya his canteen. "Have some water."

Illya grimaced. "I don't think I can drink it."

"It's just water, Illya. You need it, no matter how funny it might taste, all right?" Napoleon pushed the canteen back to his friend. "Hold your breath; cover your nose and drink." He tried not to laugh as Illya's face wrinkled in disgust. He would not even comment upon it. "Good. Now, lead the way, Superman."

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"Dr. Spencer? Daniels just reported. The house is empty." Laslo Dorian hated his work as the doctor's aid and it was worse when he was the bad news bearer. The doctor was not a patient person.

"I have no time for a wild goose chase, even if they are geese from Uncle. We're almost done here. You should be helping with the packing. Forget about the agents and-"

"But we have a lead, sir."

"A lead?" Spencer turned from the console and took off his goggles.

"There are witnesses that saw Solo getting in the car with one of the locals. A woman. That was right before the Red Cross reported the accident on the road."

Spencer smirked. The "accident" involved the loss of two of his men. He knew that the man responsible for it must be one of Uncle's top agents. "Is she still with them?"

"Her family lives in town. Our agents are going to her house now. Daniels requests instruction of how to proceed in case they don't find the agents."

"In case they don't find them, they should not leave witnesses, of course." The doctor shrugged and went back to his work. "Now, pick up the maps and blueprints. We must leave this place as we found it."

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"On your right, you can see the main entrance," Illya pointed at the semi-darkness. "That's the official building, but the real action occurs underneath."

Napoleon followed Illya's voice with his binoculars. Through the infrared lens, he could spot certain points, images of doors and platforms. Even so, telling the objects apart from each other, required a lot of interpretation.

"The first structure is just a decoy; the laboratory of *experts*, so they call themselves. The authorities leave them alone because they think it's just part of some research on geothermal energy. Do you see the trapdoor in that corner?" Illya pointed to his left.

"I can't even see the corner, Illya," Napoleon lowered the binoculars and rubbed his eyes. "I hate these things. My eyes are getting sore and my knees are killing me." He sat with his back against a rock. "And I have ashes in the most uncomfortable places."

Illya chuckled. "Tenderfoot." His tone was more like a reproach than a joke. Some of his usually caustic sense of humor was missing. "We could get closer, but it's getting late and they might detect us with their security sensors."

Napoleon looked at him. Illya's eyes were reddish and teary. He seemed constantly irritated and shivery. Doctor Tower's talk about permanent damage made Napoleon felt guilty for not insisting on getting Illya out of that mission. Although he had been trying hard not to think about Louis, the name kept coming back at every step. He wondered how long it would be until Illya finally snapped. "How are you doing?" He spoke in a casual way.

Illya sighed and shook his head. "I have to ask you one thing; two things, actually. One, stop asking me the same question every five seconds and two, keep your voice down. Everybody here who is not Napoleon Solo, is on Plus-X. Their senses might not be as acute as mine, but I'm pretty sure they are listening."

"Right. I'm sorry-"

"Don't be sorry, just do as I say!" He sat back, rubbing his temple. "Damn!"

Napoleon picked up their equipment without saying a word. He could not stop thinking about how mad Louis was the last time they saw him, so aware of everything around him and yet, completely out of his senses. "We can call it a night." He spoke softly. There was no reaction from Illya. "I think this is doable... It's just about planning and a good set of explosives. You may draw a diagram of the compound and we'll prepare a surprise visit." Napoleon lowered his eyes, searching for the right word. "Look, Illya... I just want you to know that I'm here, you're not alone."

Illya stood up as quickly as he could. He did not have time for mawkishness. His mind was occupied in more urgent things, like not passing out with the next wave of pain. "Napoleon," he whispered, "I don't mean to be rude... it's just that-" He clenched his teeth and held his head in his hands. He had to make a big effort to stay on his feet.

Napoleon came closer. He got Illya's attention by grabbing his arm. "Illya, what is it? Just tell me, I need to know what you feel."

Illya closed his eyes and for two long seconds, he did not talk. He fell on his knees and waited for his voice to come back. "Have you- have you ever had sinusitis?" Napoleon nodded and Illya half smiled. "Think about ten times that pain, drilling mercilessly towards the center of your brain." He sat back on his heels, exhausted all of a sudden. "Do you have a handkerchief? My nose is bleeding again."

Napoleon searched inside his pocket. "Here, you can keep it. Now you know what to give me for Christmas." He sat next to Illya until he regained his composure. Then, he spoke again. "If you need it, I have painkillers in my survival kit."

"Those things will knock me down. You need me in my five senses." He shook his head. "I can't draw the map of this place half asleep, can I?" He coughed.

"You shouldn't have taken that shower, Illya, being so prone to colds."

"My breathing is too shallow because the smell of sulfur irritates my nostrils." He panted for air. "I think I'm coming down with pneumonia."

Napoleon patted Illya's shoulder. "My poor friend, this is going to be one of those missions, eh?"

Illya chuckled. "At least you're here. I won't have to tell you about it."

Napoleon put away his binoculars and took a last glance at the darkness. "It looks like a big emptiness. Nothing moves there."

"You should see it in the daytime; it's an extension of gray sand, just like the beach, only without the ocean. They call it *Playa Hermosa*."

"Beautiful Beach? It looks more like the *Forbidden Planet* to me.*" Napoleon said, standing up to pull Illya to his feet. "Is it safe to go back to the house now?"

Illya shrugged. "I can't tell. Everybody is back from their workplaces, has their TVs, and radios on. I can barely listen to my own thoughts."

"It's okay. If we find uninvited guests, we'll just kick them out." He did not let go Illya's arm until they got in the car. With or without a confrontation with Thrush men, this was going to be a very long night.

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The house was dark and quiet. Napoleon discovered some footprints in the ashes. "At least three men."

"Only one entered the house," Illya confirmed. "They're all gone now." He felt suddenly overwhelmed as the pain began to strike again. He rubbed the back of his neck but it did not help. "Napoleon... things are happening around..." He covered his ears and moaned. He bent over until his knees and hands touched the ground.

Napoleon crouched next to him, and Illya grabbed his arm with so much strength that made him wince. "Illya?"

Illya's eyes were shut while his head moved in different directions. "I hear cars coming and going... people knocking at the door... voices over voices... everybody talking at the same time!" He gasped. "Start packing, we're leaving... who's packing...? who's leaving...? She's not there... the weather man says it's going to rain tomorrow..." He looked at Napoleon with wide eyes. "I can't stand this... Can we turn it off? Please, we've got to turn it off..."

"We'll find the way... I'll find the way," Napoleon said. He supported his friend until he was strong enough to get back on his feet. They walked slowly to the house and straight to the bedroom. Napoleon put Illya to bed and he sat on a chair nearby. Illya tossed and turned with his eyes closed, his fists clenching on the blankets until his knuckles went white. Sometimes, he mumbled in a language that Napoleon identified as Russian. "You're not making any sense, tovarich," he whispered, "not even in your native language." He looked in his first-aid kit for a hypodermic.

Illya opened his eyes. He stared at Napoleon as the needle entered his arm. "I can hear you breathe... I can hear your heartbeat..." He gasped. "I think I can hear you blink..."

"Relax, Illya. It'll take only a couple of seconds."

Illya shook his head violently. "The map... I've got to draw the map..." He tried to sit up but Napoleon stopped him with a gentle hand on his chest.

"There will be time for that, don't worry." Napoleon kept his voice calm and reassuring, although he doubted Illya could understand him. "I'll be in the living room," he said, spreading an extra blanket over his friend. "Try to sleep, now." He closed the door behind him and went to sit on the porch. Despite the clouds of ashes, the day refused to fade away just yet. Napoleon could see hints of light still sneaking through the branches of the trees. He took a deep breath and felt ashes in his throat. He closed his eyes and tried to hear the sounds of the night. Everything was so still that if he strained his ears hard enough, he could listen to the music in the only discotheque in town. He covered his ears and the noise was gone. *It should be as easy as that...* he thought.

The volcano roared a couple of times. Napoleon could not care less. His only concern for the night would be to see Illya back to normal in the morning...

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon did not remember having fallen asleep on the couch or for how long. He just woke up to someone singing outside. He sat up and checked his watch. It was not even six yet. Napoleon rubbed his eyes and frowned. "Illya?" He barely recognized his voice.

"...But it's too late to say you're sorry, how would I know, why should I care ..." Illya was on his knees drawing on the ashes with his fingers. He barely acknowledged Napoleon when he came closer. *"Please don't bother tryin' to find her, she's not there..."**

"Hey," Napoleon said. "You got up early. How do you feel?"

Illya looked up at the sky and squinted. "The weather man was right. It's going to rain early today." He resumed his drawings. "Did you sleep well?"

"Me? Sure. I didn't hear you coming down. How's your headache?" Napoleon tried to get Illya's attention, but his friend kept drawing and humming the song. "Illya?"

"Napoleon?" Illya smiled mischievously. "You want to know something funny about those opiate analgesic drugs you gave me last night? They really stimulate creativity... I feel so light... I could fly... if I had wings, of course."

"Of course," Napoleon frowned. "Why don't we go back in the house? Before it rains." He pulled Illya up, without paying much attention to the whimsical drawings on the ground.

"Oops!" Illya said pushing Napoleon away. He staggered as a drunk as he went forward and tilted his head. "S-someone is coming up the hill."

"A car?" Napoleon looked at the horizon.

"Of course not. No motor car. Can't you hear it flapping?"

"Flapping?"

"Yes, flapping. It's a bike... flap, flap, flap..." He chuckled. "You can't hear it yet... The bike is too big and his legs are too short... It'll take him half an hour to get here, I reckon."

"He? Who?"

"Marcos, I suppose," Illya shrugged. "Mayela's brother." He rubbed his neck and sighed. "It's hot isn't it?" He entered the house and went straight to the shower. Before Napoleon could stop him, he was fully clothed under the icy water. He let out one loud scream and then, he leaned exhausted against the wall. He turned off the shower and looked at Napoleon, who was staring at him with curiosity and concern.

"Feeling any better?" Napoleon handed him a towel.

"Fab," Illya smiled, stepping out. He was soaked wet, and a little shaky, but his eyes had recovered their usual glow. "I guess I have to change my clothes, again."

"Take your time," Napoleon sighed. He followed Illya with his eyes until he disappeared in the second level. "Two weeks in La Riviera, Mr. Waverly, you owe me that much." He entered the shower and closed the door.

(o)(O)(o)

Illya rubbed his hair vigorously with the towel. He sat on the bed trying to put his thoughts in order. He hated painkillers because they always left him with a monster headache and a cloudy mind. Had he been dreaming all the time? Voices, noise, screaming and music... It was hard to concentrate on just one thing at the time. On top of it, someone was humming.

He came downstairs to find Napoleon combing his hair in front of a very tiny mirror hanging by the stove. Illya did not know how he managed, but with his black satin bathrobe, expensive cologne and aftershave lotion, Napoleon always looked as if he had spent the night in a five-star hotel.

"You must be in a good mood, humming and everything," Illya said sitting at the table. "Were did you get that song?"

"What?" Napoleon shrugged. "I heard it somewhere... I think I heard it from you." He failed to see why Illya gave it so much importance. He went into the bathroom to get dressed. "Catchy, isn't it?"

Illya closed his eyes, humming the melody. He shook his head. "*She's not there...* It reminds me of Mayela... she was playing it on her radio when we first met. I probably dreamed of her last night..."

Napoleon buttoned his shirt and looked around for his shoes. He smiled. "That's nice. Now you have a crush on the girl. Maybe you're not that hopeless after all."

"What are you talking about?" Illya looked at him. "I just..." An alarming thought crossed his mind. "Napoleon, I didn't dream of her. I heard her. She was screaming last night." He sprung up. "She might be in trouble!" He ran toward the door.

"Hey! Wait up!" Napoleon followed him with his shoes in his hands.

Before Illya got in the car, the bicycle finally arrived. He and Napoleon waited as the boy ran toward them.

"Marcos! ¿Qué pasa?" Illya asked.

"Se llevaron a Mayela," The boy gasped.

"¿Quiénes se la llevaron?"

"Tres hombres vestidos de negro."

"Three men in black took Mayela," Illya translated.

"Thrush, no doubt," Napoleon said, hopping while putting on his shoes. "What about his family? Are they okay?"

Illya translated the question and listened to the answer. "He doesn't know, they sent him to us with a message."

Napoleon took out his pen. "Open channel B. This is Napoleon Solo speaking. We need a *survey-and-protect* for the family... ¿Cuál es tu apellido?" *What's your last name?* He asked Marcos in slow Spanish.

"Gonzalez López," he said.

"Gonzalez López, in San Juan de Aquinas."

"*Understood, this is Agent Fonseca, Puntarenas division. I'm sending a local patrol; they'll be there in ten minutes.*"

"Thank you, keep me post, Solo out." He clicked twice. "Relay channel F to New York, with Dr. Tower, please." He looked at Illya glaring at him. "Sorry, but I promised to keep him posted," he told him, walking away while Illya reassured the boy that everything would be all right.

"*Napoleon? Any changes?*"

"He's getting really cranky." Napoleon whispered. Keeping the conversation away from Illya was rather useless but he trusted his friend's discretion. Of course, that would have been too much to ask for.

"He sedated me last night against my will." Illya stood in front of Napoleon, in a defiant position, arms crossed over his chest.

"He was in terrible pain and talking nonsense."

"I asked him not to do it!"

"*Guys, please. I have two ears, but I can only listen to one of you at a time,*" the doctor said. "*Illya, I need to know what kind of symptoms you are experiencing so far.*"

"He's having difficulty breathing and he's coughing like crazy."

"Napoleon!" Illya snatched the pen from his hand and turned his back on him. "I've been having..." he cleared his throat and sighed, "difficulty breathing." He warned Napoleon with a glare. "...and coughing."

"He thinks he has pneumonia," Napoleon said behind Illya.

"*And he's probably right. If he's not breathing properly, he might have developed an infection in his lungs,*" Tower sighed. "*Do you have a fever, Illya?*"

Illya slapped Napoleon's hand when he touched his forehead. "No, I don't."

"Oh, yes, he does."

Doctor Tower took a deep breath. "*I'm sorry, Illya, I have to believe Napoleon. I'm telling Mr. Waverly to remove you from the mission. You need medical attention.*"

"George, please, I can't leave now." Illya rubbed the back of his neck. "Besides, I may have an inner ear infection which disables me for flying, right?"

"*Illya, you must stop reading medical magazines... but you're right.*" There was a pause. "*You also know you could cause yourself permanent damage, don't you?*"

"I'll be careful," Illya smiled and returned the pen to Napoleon. "Mr. Solo will take care of me."

Napoleon rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'll keep him on a leash."

"Be careful, guys. I don't want the old man giving me any grief on account of any of you. So, if anyone asks, these are my recommendations; eat well, have some fluids, and plenty of rest. Don't go climbing up hills, scuba diving, or fighting... Oh, yes, don't stand on your head."

Illya and Napoleon stared at each other. "At least, I can avoid the last thing," Illya shrugged. "What are the odds of all that happening at once?"

"Don't worry, George. I'll bring him back in one piece. Solo out." He turned to Illya and pointed at him with his pen. "Stop jumping into my conferences, Kuryakin."

"Get over it, we have more important things to discuss." Illya went back to Mayela's brother, who had been sitting on the porch all that time. "He says that the men in black will release his sister when I return the reagent." He shook his head. "Napoleon, it was my fault. I shouldn't have come this way."

"They probably saw her getting in my car."

Napoleon's pen beeped again. *"Fonseca here. My men are at the Gonzalez' house. They have secured the perimeter, and they'll remain there until further instructions. I'll personally supervise the operations as soon as I get to San Juan de Aquinas."*

"Thank you, Fonseca. That will be all for now. Be alert, Solo out." He tucked his pen in his pocket as the boy pedaled away.

"I sent him home. There is nothing else for him to do here." Illya sounded down and lost. He sat on the porch steps with his face in his hands. He shuddered and shook his head. "I heard the men at the laboratory... They're leaving. As soon as they get the reagent back, they're going to blow out that volcano for good..." He sighed painfully, and quoted: *"I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."**

Napoleon paced around, trying not to think of Illya's peculiar behavior. It had to be the painkillers talking... He refused to believe that his friend was losing the battle against insanity. He stared at the ashes, while his mind was looking for something encouraging to say. Knowing Illya for some time, he knew how hard it was trying to lift his spirits. The Russian was rarely down for the count, but once he got there... Napoleon stopped in front of the doodles on the ground.

"I should've make that diagram of the compound last night before you got me drugged... If I could only remember how many corridors... I know there were five... or six..." Illya sighed.

"Six," said Napoleon.

"Yes, and the levels... How many levels are there?" Illya shut his eyes, trying to remember.

"Two levels and a subterranean floor..."

Illya looked at Napoleon warily. "How do you know that?"

"I'm a psychic," he crouched down, pointing at the ground. "This is what you were drawing this morning; the floor plan of the infamous compound."

Illya got closer. The drawing could not be more perfect if it had been made on paper. Illya snorted. "I told you about those opiate analgesic drugs..."

"Normal people just sleep them off." Napoleon smiled. "So, before the rain actually comes and washes off your masterpiece, could you tell me where the air ducts are?"

"Here, here and here," Illya pointed at the map. "The reagent is here, underwater. There are only two ways to reach it, through the main entrance, or through this lake."

"Thermal waters?"

"Most of the day," Illya said. "Temperatures change every eight or ten hours. The lake can get very hot then, but I have figured out the cycles." He looked at Napoleon with hopeful eyes. "Can we do it? Can we at least rescue Mayela; she's innocent in all of this. I couldn't forgive myself if she's hurt-"

"Calm down, Illya." Napoleon stood up and scratched his head. "I might have a plan. I'll tell you about it over breakfast." He saw Illya grimace at the mention of food. "I'm in charge, all right? We'll take Tower's list of recommendations, I think we can follow at least two without much trouble, you need to eat and drink. If we're lucky, you won't have to fight, or climb heights... we'll have to discuss the scuba diving, though."

"Don't forget standing on my head. I don't want to do that either." Illya accepted Napoleon's hand over his shoulder as they both walked into the house.

**Doctor George Tower, The Brain-Killer Affair, season 1, episode 24: *Doctor George Tower, The Brain-Killer Affair, season 1, episode 24: This was the doctor Napoleon called to watch over Mr. Waverly when he was poisoned at the beginning of the episode.*

A/N: He seemed to have a good rapport with Napoleon and be well informed about Uncle's activities. Although he wasn't in The Minus-X Affair, Dr Tower could perfectly well have seen Louis' case. That spared me from coming up with yet another OC.

**Forbidden Planet (1956), science-fiction film*

**She's not there, by The Zombies, 1964*

**Quoting Roderick Usher in The Fall of the House of Usher, by Edgar Allan Poe. He suffered from "a morbid acuteness of his senses," that tortured him till the verge of insanity.*

thank you for reading. Please, drop me a few lines before you leave ;)

ACT V: *In the line of duty...*

Doctor Spencer entered the small room that served as office next to his laboratory. He was pleased to see the young lady sitting comfortably in the only couch. Two guards watched her from the door. "Miss Gonzalez, I presume. Have these gentlemen treated you right?"

Mayela's initial shock was slowly fading; now, she was rather angry. She did not want to talk with that or any other man in that place. Nonetheless, keeping quiet would not give her any answers either. "My father delivers your milk, my mother and I make tortillas for you," she narrowed her eyes.

"I apologize for the inconvenience but in this business, we can't help making use of the resources we can get." Spencer leaned forward. "Tell me, did Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin say anything about our operations?"

"Solo? Ku-rya-kin?" She chuckled. "What crazy names."

Spencer straightened up and shook his head. "You look like a smart lady. But definitely, you can't lie." He signed for take one of the men to get her away. "Stay put, I want her near to welcome the Uncle agents when they arrive."

Laslo waited until Spencer was alone to come closer. "The boy delivered the message. But our men were attacked and defeated by local police and Uncle agents. The Gonzalez are out of reach now."

"It doesn't matter anymore; we have the girl and soon, we'll have the two agents." Spencer began to gather his things to put them in a cardboard box. "I'm looking forward to see Kuryakin again. I'm curious about how he's handling his new acquired abilities."

"With the dose you gave him, he should be dead by now."

"Don't enjoy the idea so much. If he dies, I'll personally put your head on a silver plate for Thrush." Spencer pointed at him with his letter opener. "Kuryakin still has to give us something back, remember? Something that he stole under your watch."

"You gave him the drug. He was not going anywhere until the drug kicked in and he found the way out." Laslo stopped. Spencer's killer glare was the warning; one more word and he would be in serious trouble.

Surprisingly enough, the doctor softened his expression at the last minute and even dared to smile. "Never mind, Kuryakin is on his way back here and you'll have your chance to rectify your mistakes."

"Doctor Spencer," one of the white-gowned scientists called him from the control panel. "We're ready to test the motor again."

"Good, let's keep our fingers crossed." He came closer and pushed a button. The machine began to hum.

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Napoleon made his last calculations. On paper, everything seemed simple and easy. He was not too confident, though. He looked at Illya, working on his own calculations, and hesitated before asking him a question. The Russian did not even bother lifting his head from his writing as he sighed. "Go ahead, ask."

Napoleon stared at him, amused by his friend's perception. "Are you sure you can go on with this?"

Illya shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "First of all, we have to put an end to that device. Second, we can't leave Mayela there, and third, if we don't do the first, we won't live enough to regret not having done the second. If Doctor Spencer doesn't get the reagent back, he will aim all he's got against the volcano, and it is too close to the main cities." He rubbed his temple and shut his eyes. "Oh, and fourth, lower down your voice, please. Between you and the cacophony outside, I don't know how much more I can take."

"I keep forgetting, I'm sorry," Napoleon whispered, going back to his notes. "So, how many air ducts does this place have? I counted three," he whispered.

"Six, but you only need those three. The detonators must go on these points, precisely."

"Precisely?" asked Napoleon with a hint of enjoyment. He did not have any doubt about Illya's accuracy in any way but he could not help toying with his mind once in a while.

Illya ignored him, while showing him his notes. "These are the coordinates, I think I remembered them... precisely," he grinned.

"Precisely." Napoleon folded the piece of paper and put it in the heel of his shoe. "All right, I take the high road and you take the low road. We meet half way and rescue Mayela? Any ideas about where she might be?"

"The place is too small. If she's not in the lab, Spencer must have her in his office, near the main door."

"I hope so. That would spare us a lot of time," said Napoleon. "It looks simple."

"It is, if we don't forget the little details such as opening locks, engaging the enemy, fighting here and there..." He stared seriously at Napoleon. "Do you think you will manage all that on your own? That's the hardest part of the plan."

"Don't sell yourself short, Illya. What about you scuba diving without an oxygen tank?" Napoleon gave him a wary look. He pushed a glass of water towards Illya, the only liquid that he seemed to tolerate for the moment. "You're exposing your ears and your lungs. Doctor Tower will not like this. Maybe we should switch assignments."

"He doesn't have to know. We discussed this already. You don't know what the reagent looks like or where to look for it. It's faster this way." Illya stared at the glass as if it were arsenic instead of water. He took a sip and winced.

"That lake is a little deep-"

"I can hold my breath up to four minutes."

"With pneumonia? You'll be lucky if you don't choke after thirty seconds." Napoleon's expression was now deadly serious. "Not to mention your sore eyes and ears. Illya-"

"Napoleon, if you don't trust me to do my part of the plan just say it. I was doing it exceptionally well before I was betrayed." He drank almost half a glass of water. He felt nauseous but did not show it.

"I trust you with my life, that hasn't changed." Napoleon leaned forward. "But you're sick and getting sicker. I don't know if you're prepared for an early retirement but I'm not prepared for getting another partner just yet."

Illya smiled a knowing grin. "You have no idea how much I've waited to hear you say that."

Napoleon laughed but did not have time to reply with a joke. Suddenly, Illya flinched. Pain was coming stronger; he had to apply himself to control it. He groaned and shuddered. Napoleon stood next to him, pressing a wet cloth over Illya's forehead. He did not say anything, waiting uneasily for the pain to subside. As soon as he felt Illya taking the cloth in his hands, he sat down next to him.

"The buzzing... that blasted machine makes a lot of buzzing..." The cloth on his face muffled his trembling voice. He glanced at Napoleon, who was staring at him seriously. Illya sighed with resignation. "All right, let me have it."

"We passed that point of discussion already," Napoleon whispered. "I just want you to be very careful, Illya. Mr. Waverly would never forgive me if something happened to his golden boy."

Illya looked at him with a slow smile. His gaze was heavy but eager to go on. "I don't care what's on my way... as long as we get this job done," he shrugged.

"Oh, that is a given," Napoleon patted him on the back. "Now, go to bed and try to sleep, I've got the feeling that this is going to be a very long night."

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The daylight was fading. Napoleon glanced at his watch. Soon, it would be their time to leave. He looked upstairs, hesitating to wake up Illya. He would have wanted to watch over his sleep, but Illya's senses were getting so sensitive that the slightest movement or noise was disturbingly painful. Napoleon heard him moaning several times and he doubted that Illya was getting any rest at all.

He entered the room, knowing that Illya had already heard him coming. The Russian was sitting in the bed, with his arms around his knees, struggling with the tremors. His face was covered in sweat and his eyes were red and glassy. There was blood on the pillowcase but Illya shrugged before Napoleon could say anything.

"My nose bled a little, but I'm all right now," he mumbled. "Are you ready?"

"I was going to ask you the same question." Napoleon took a cloth from the table and dried Illya's forehead. "I can call for reinforcements. You don't have to come along."

"Do we have to discuss this again? There is no time for bringing more people. I know it looks bad, but I'm fine... I promise you, I can do this."

"Very well, then." He helped Illya to stand up. "Let's do this."

They took the road up the hill. Although it seemed enemy free, Napoleon preferred driving in the dark. Illya knew that it was up to him to detect any danger ahead. It was hard though, his hearing was so acute that not a single noise escaped him. He could hardly tell them apart from each other, much less identify whether any of them represented a risky situation.

They parked near the lake, at the top of the mountain. Many thoughts came to Napoleon's mind, but he would not want to overwhelm Illya with his concerns. They had come that far and there was no time for second thoughts.

Illya sat on the edge and prepared to jump. "If I don't make it," he said with his eyes fixed on the water.

"I'll make sure that they don't make it either."

Napoleon did not move until Illya disappeared in the darkened waters. He could not help but to wonder if this would be the last time they would see each other alive. Such a grim thought hovered in his mind every single mission and this one could not be the exception. He returned to his car and took the road to the laboratory in the old crater. Before he got to a more open space, Napoleon decided to throw one last safety line. He stopped to make a phone call. "Open channel B, Agent Fonseca, please."

"Mr. Solo? Fonseca here."

"Me and my partner are following a lead to the laboratory in the volcano. I need you to stand by in San Juan de Aquinas in case that something goes wrong."

"Will you need reinforcements?"

"No reinforcements. If something goes wrong, there is a strong possibility that we'll need to evacuate the town." The silence on the other side of the communicator was eloquent. Napoleon sighed. "It's just a very remote possibility, okay? We'll do our best job here."

"I know. My men we'll be ready to evacuate San Juan de Aquinas... Just in case."

"Oh, yes, I might need a helicopter, in case things go well. Could you give me a landing zone near the top of the mountain?"

"With pleasure. There is a clear space next to the TV and radio towers. You just give us a call and we'll pick you up right away."

"Thank you, Fonseca. Solo out."

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"Doctor Spencer, the sentry camera has detected a vehicle approaching the perimeter," the guard in the main entrance said.

"Excellent, just in time for dinner. I'm on my way." Spencer left his office.

Napoleon walked to the entrance. He chose the sector where the light was poorer. The wind shuffled ashes around, forming little tornadoes. After several showers, the ground was muddy, which was an advantage for Napoleon to walk without being heard. He stayed close to the walls, attentive to any shadow moving towards him. The echoes of the wind contrasted with the volcano snoring and that made it almost impossible to detect footsteps or any other kind of noise. Lately, Napoleon had developed some respect for his five senses. If he could not trust them, he would be simply lost. A brief thought of Illya interrupted his concentration. He shook his head and kept walking. There would be time later to take good care of his friend.

A shadow moved right in front of him. It was a man with a machine gun. There was still some distance between him and Napoleon. Fortunately, the annoying noise was now working in Napoleon's favor. It made it easy to prepare a surprise attack from the back. Napoleon held a grip on the guard until he fainted due to the lack of air. He changed clothes with the guard and prepared to follow the next step of the plan.

Illya had plunged in the pool confident of finding his way back to the subterranean cave. There was no light to guide him, but he kept his hands on the mossy walls as he went down deep into nothingness. He could not concentrate enough to calculate the time he had been down and how much longer it would be. He felt his throat tightening and the blood pulsing in his temples. The pain in his ears irradiated from inside out and every single movement of his head and neck was excruciating. Little by little, the curves on the rocks and the change of direction indicated to him that he had finally reached the other side.

Dimmed lights shone on his eyes, as he could see the clarity through the water. His head broke of the water and he breathed. That instinctive reflex cost him a violent cough that threatened him with unconsciousness. With the last drop of adrenaline, Illya pushed his hands on the porous rocks and lifted himself off the rippling water. He felt the warmth of the water running down his back. His body was heavy as he laid his back on the rocks, his chest heaving in a quiet fight to get some air into his lungs. Suddenly, a buzzing in his head made him writhe in pain as he covered his ears with both hands. Struggling with dizziness, Illya was able to sit up. He clenched his teeth and waited for the pain to subside without screaming.

He was lightheaded and for a second, his sight went blurred. Nonetheless, there was no time to regroup. He put his physical pain aside and looked around for any familiar landscape that helped him to remember his last time in that cave. He recognized the entrance and recalled his frantic run searching for a good place to put the infamous *macguffin*. A couple of rocks placed strategically between a fissure in the wall caught his attention immediately. Illya crawled toward that point; he did not trust his legs to carry him just yet.

The reagent was a small capsule, not much bigger than a matchbox. Illya put it inside his shoe and attempted to get on his feet. He was happy just to be able to walk leaning on the walls. By when he reached the exit into the tunnels, his strength was almost back. At least, this part of the plan was completed.

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Napoleon sneaked into the compound without much trouble. The two guards at the door were taken by surprise when Napoleon walked towards them and said hello. He was already too close when they realized that he was not one of them. Napoleon punched one on the stomach with his weapon and the other received a blow on the chin. The retaliation forced Napoleon to plunge down and roll over. He found a desk that served him as a shield. He opened fired and hit one of the guards.

The doors behind Napoleon began to close and he had to run. He barely made it to the other side before the doors slid together. It seemed Solo had scored another point, until the doors ahead of him and that led to the corridor, closed too. He tried to go back to the main entrance but those doors were closed as well. Napoleon knew what would come next. A bluish steam sneaked in and, although he held his breath as much as he could, it was not enough to avoid inhaling.

Napoleon felt his legs and arms getting heavier and he could not keep himself on his feet. He fell down on his knees, putting his hands on the floor as a way of maintaining control. But his strength abandoned him. He did not feel his eyes closing down, one second later; he was unconscious.

Illya reached the second tunnel without more problems than the ones he already had. He staggered like a drunk but stopping now would be suicidal. There were no options. Everything should go according to plan; many lives depended on that. His memories of that place were coming back at each turn. He had had the chance to walk up and down the compound for a while before Laslo betrayed him. That had been these people's first mistake; the second had been giving him the drug. It would have been easier for them to kill him right away. They should have known they could not break him. Torture only made him mad.

He reckoned that the effects of the drug were reaching their highest point. Louis' ghost kept coming to his mind... Illya felt trapped in a box, a very noisy box from which there was no escape. Every second was excruciating torture, but it would not change anything. He was not yielding just because of that. He intended to make the best out of the situation, as long as his brain still worked. He knew it would not last, but if he was going down, he would take these goons with him.

He heard voices. He stopped.

"He put down Harris and Ortega, but didn't go too far after that."

"These Uncle agents have more reputation than brains. He should've known that this place was booby trapped."

The laughs were still at a distance. They were talking about Napoleon. *One down, one to go...* he thought. Now, everything depended on him.

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The corridor extended for other ten feet before ending on a wall. Illya could hear steps surrounding him. He turned to his left, then to his right, uncertain of which way to choose. Any place he went, someone would be waiting. If they caught him with the reagent, all the mission would be lost... The claustrophobic sensation of being in a box was overwhelming his senses. This had to end soon, before it drove him crazy. He looked around at the doors, air duct grills... he had arrived exactly to one of the places where Napoleon was supposed to put some explosives, how convenient... He reached the reagent inside his shoe. Things should go according to plan from now on.

Illya listened attentively to the steps and whispers. They had found him. This was it. He turned exactly in the direction his captors would appear. He straightened up, glared at them, and raised his hands.

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Illya did not pass out when the men grabbed him and tied him up. He allowed them to half drag him into the laboratory. Dr. Spencer greeted him with a smile. Illya replied with a smirk. His eyes set immediately on Napoleon and Mayela. They both were chained against the wall. Besides being unconscious on his feet, Napoleon looked unharmed.

Illya was so concerned for his friends that he did not pay much attention to the men tying his feet together and lifting him off the floor. He was in an awkward position that would not do any good to his already deteriorated condition. Dr. Spencer came closer to examine his pupils.

"Your eyes are really sore. Has this affected your vision in any ways?"

Illya could not believe that kind of question in a moment like this. Or maybe, he did. This was a mad doctor, after all.

"How about your hearing and sense of smell? Any problems?"

"I take it that you're not asking that because you're concerned about my health." Illya found it difficult to coordinate talking and breathing. His lungs were crashing under pressure.

"Come on, my friend. It's pure scientific curiosity. You must understand the concept. I think you have a very inquisitive mind yourself, don't you? Using this drug as a weapon against the enemy could be a breakthrough for the industry, don't you think so?"

"I'm not in a mood for chatting, as you should understand." Illya kept a neutral tone despite the tremor in his voice. "Could we expedite things a bit I'm not feeling too well in this position."

"Certainly," Spencer smiled again. "Tell me, Mr. Kuryakin, are you going to talk voluntarily or do I have to get a little rough on you."

"Actually," Illya grinned, "I don't think I will talk at all, so..."

Napoleon took a deep breath and waited with his eyes closed until his mind caught up with reality. When he was ready, he looked around. As he had predicted before passing out, he was a prisoner now. He saw Mayela staring at him and then Illya in front of them. Napoleon's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Illya!"

"Mr. Solo, care to join us?" Spencer said kindly.

"Illya," Napoleon saw his friend turning precariously to look at him. "You're... standing on your head."

"Yes, I realized that already..." Illya panted. "On a bright note, I think my sinusitis is clearing out."

"Oh, Dr. Tower is going to be so happy to hear that." Napoleon sighed, unable to hid his concern. Trust Illya to get into the most uncomfortable situations. "How are you ears?"

"Hurting awfully, thank you for reminding me of." Illya looked at the girl and tried to smile. "Estás bien?" *Are you all right?*

"Bien, gracias," she smiled in a sad way.

"Enough of silly conversation," Spencer said. "I need answers now."

"Please, lower down your voice," Illya said.

Spencer glared at him. He bent over to see Illya eye to eye. "Where is my VIRGIN?"

Illya twitched in pain. "Ouch!"

"Sorry, the what?" Napoleon frowned.

"The VIRGIN," Laslo stepped forward. "We've been looking everywhere, he must have taken it with him!"

"Illya, you ran away with a VIRGIN? You didn't mention that before," Napoleon smiled.

"Have you looked in the sink?" Illya asked.

"We looked! There aren't any VIRGINS here!" Laslo replied.

Mayela felt several stares on her. "Hey! Don't look at me!"

"I'm completely sure they're talking about a very different kind of VIRGIN," Napoleon told her.

"Would you be so kind as to lower down your voices, all of you! No more yelling, please." Illya managed to swing and turn to Dr Spencer. "I couldn't take it with me because I had to swim, all right? Someone else must have it. Maybe one of your men is a traitor." He glared at Laslo.

"Laslo Dorian, I presume," Napoleon said. "I knew something smelled like a rat in this place... and my senses have not been heightened."

Laslo rushed towards Napoleon and slapped his face. There was no response. Napoleon lifted his chin and grinned. "Certainly, this makes you feel better; hitting a man in chains."

Laslo took his keys to open the shackles but Spencer stopped him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? This is not the place to pick up stupid fights!" He looked at Napoleon. "Nice try, by the way."

"Can't blame me," he shrugged.

"Now, let's go back to business. Mr. Kuryakin, you have something that's mine."

"Don't blame it on me; it's not my fault that you couldn't keep an eye on your VIRGIN."

Napoleon noticed Illya's voice dimming in energy. Time was pressing. "Well, it's hard to find one nowadays and harder to keep a track on all of them," he smiled and turned to Mayela, who frowned at him. "Sorry, bad joke," he said. He went back to Spencer. "Forgive my ignorance but, what does VIRGIN stand for, in this case?"

"Volcanic Ionic Reagent for Geothermal Isolated Nucleosynthesis," the doctor said proudly.

"H-he came up with that name all by himself, can you believe it?" Illya grinned.

"And I'm not surprised." Napoleon glanced at Illya. The Russian did not move and had his eyes closed.

Mayela looked in the same direction. "Illya?"

"Illya!" Napoleon called him with enough authority to make Illya open his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Aren't I always?" He answered without opening his eyes. "I was thinking of my uncle Boris..."

"Your uncle Boris?" Napoleon asked warily. He could not tell if this was some kind of clue or Illya was hallucinating.

"Yes, Boris Macguffin... He loved fireworks... H-he got lost once and they found him asleep next to his fireworks... It was two o'clock... east from the storeroom..."

Napoleon made a mental note on that. He winked at Mayela in a reassuring manner. "Illya, you're talking nonsense."

"I don't know if I can do this anymore, Napoleon..." he sighed. "It's just too much..."

Napoleon looked anxious as he shook his chains. "Take it easy, my friend, don't let them break you."

Illya exhaled, frustrated. "I'm sorry... I really am... but I can't take more of this..." He turned to Spencer. "Please..."

"Finally!" Dr. Spencer came closer. "Are you going to tell me where the VIRGIN is?"

"Better yet..."

"Illya, don't," Napoleon insisted.

"Sorry, Napoleon, I suppose you would have been better than me in such a predicament, but-"

"You may write him a letter after you tell me where the VIRGIN is," Spencer said.

"I can't tell you... but I can show you..."

Spencer narrowed his eyes. Could it be a trap? He signed for Laslo to free Illya. "Be careful; unconscious, he would be useless."

"Very much appreciated." Illya reached the floor with his hands and then, his feet and knees. Laslo pulled him up but Illya was too dizzy to keep balance for long. He tumbled and landed on the table where Spencer kept his notes and papers on the weapon. In his fall, Illya pushed several test tubes that went to break on the papers. "I'm terribly sorry," he said, grinning.

"He did it in purpose!" Laslo was about to slap him when Spencer stopped him.

"Never mind. Once we have the VIRGIN, nothing else matters. Just bring him here."

Illya rejected Laslo's reluctant helping hand. He walked straight, then staggered, then, he straightened up again. He pointed at Napoleon and Mayela. "Let them go. You don't need them anymore."

"Nice try, but no," Spencer said. "However, there is no need to keep them here. Laslo, take them to my office and put one guard at the door." Before the man protested about leaving Solo under someone else's supervision, Spencer added, "you have to keep an eye on our working team, remember?"

Laslo grunted but he and another guard opened the shackles. As soon as Mayela was free, Illya rushed toward them. He put his arms around her neck and laid his forehead against hers. His voice was soft but loud enough for anyone to hear.

"Mayela, love, I'm so sorry for what you've been through. I didn't mean to cause you so much trouble..."

She looked puzzled but smiled all the same. "It's okay, I guess. Are you all right?"

Napoleon kept quiet, watching the guards surrounding Illya. At this point, anything could happen and he was not sure how much Illya could take.

"It's not all right. I put you in danger, I'll never forgive myself." Illya panted. His eyes smiled right before he pulled Mayela towards him. Without any more words, he kissed her.

Napoleon had to bit his inner lip to avoid bursting into laughter. He turned to Laslo and Spencer, both surprised and annoyed. Laslo glanced at his watch as though waiting for the doctor to intervene.

"Such a waste of time!" He protested.

"Mr. Dorian, you're not a romantic." Spencer signed the guard to break up the embrace.

Illya felt a pull and a push before ending up on the floor. He met Napoleon's disapproving glance.

"Oh, Illya, of all the places and times, you had to choose this one?"

Illya shrugged and stood up by his own means. He was surprised at how much energy he had lost in so little time. He turned slowly to Spencer and sighed. "Shall we?"

Napoleon put himself between the girl and the guards before they got rough and pushed her to move. She looked at him with inquisitive eyes but he only smiled. "Not a word. We'll talk later."

They walked to Spencer's office. Napoleon waited for the doors to be locked before beginning a quick scanning for mics. There was no time for a thorough sweep but he was satisfied. He came to the girl, who was staring at him. "Do you have it?" he asked, pointing at her mouth.

She nodded. She felt the foreign object between her teeth and her inner cheek. She reached and took out a very small pick. She almost laughed at her own silliness. "I almost gave him away when Illya put that inside my mouth."

Napoleon went back to the door. "You must excuse Illya. His manners get lost in translation when he's under pressure. But he only does these things in the line of duty." He unlocked the door and turned to her. "He didn't mean to-"

Mayela was sitting at the desk, swivelling absently on the chair. She looked disappointed, as she played with the ring in her chain. Napoleon crouched in front of her with a kind smile. She corresponded with a shrug. "Boy, this is so awkward," she said.

"Of course not. It would've been if he had kissed me." He chuckled. "Then, they would have noticed that something was wrong." Her laugh was a relief. "And talking for experience, there is nothing more encouraging than kissing a beautiful girl before going into battle."

She felt blushing. Then, her expression changed. "Is there going to be a battle?" She was alarmed.

"Not before you leave." Napoleon took her by the hand. "I have a couple of errands to do, and then, you go away. You know the drill. Stay behind me all the time."

Mayela did not dare to ask any more questions. She squeezed Napoleon's hand as he walked towards the door.

ACT VI: You should not leave without saying goodbye.

"Mayela, I need you to scream," Napoleon said, tossing a chair against the wall. The girl did not understand what was going on at first but she obeyed all the same.

The guard knocked on the door. "Cut it out in there!"

"Go to hell," Napoleon replied.

"I know all those tricks, Mr. Solo. You won't make me open this door," the guard grinned wittily.

"What did you say? I can't hear you," Napoleon said, placing himself behind the door.

The guard leaned his face closer. "I said-"

Before he finished, Napoleon opened the door and pulled him inside by the collar of his overall. He took advantage of the surprise and punched him on the face. The guard fell unconscious. Napoleon grabbed Mayela and rushed out.

The first corridor took them to the air duct grill. Napoleon looked around to make sure no one was coming. "Keep an eye on that corner, please," he told Mayela. Then, he took out his shoe and proceeded to disassemble the sole and the heel.

Mayela raised her eyebrows at the wires and plasticine. "I think I saw this in one of my brother's comics."

"The aisle, dear. Mind the aisle." Napoleon grinned, looking for something else in his other shoe. He connected the wires and nodded, satisfied. "Next stop, on the right, that way."

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Illya sought for support on the wall. The echoes of distant voices hit him in waves and made it very hard to breathe. At times, he doubted of his own perception of reality. He needed to stop and think of his next step before he forgot why he was there in first place. "I'm lost."

Spencer did not seem to mind while he accepted a call on his communicator. "Yes?"

"Laslo here. Solo escaped."

Illya pretended to be busy remembering which way to go. He could see that Spencer was neither surprised nor angry.

"You know what to do. Be careful, don't blow it this time." He listened for a reply but there was only a long silence. The doctor took a deep breath. "What else?"

"The scientists are running away."

"Is that it? I couldn't care less for those little rats abandoning the ship at the first sign of trouble. I don't need them for the rest of my plan. Stick with Solo."

"How did you know Mr. Solo would escape?" Illya asked out of curiosity.

"I'm a great judge of characters. I supposed that two Uncle agents working in the same mission would divide their tasks. One of you must be the decoy to the other one; he shrugged, putting his communicator away. He pointed lazily at Illya. "I don't have your time. We're moving out. If there is no VIRGIN to activate the volcano device, I'll have to turn on the self-destruction mechanism and blow out the mountain altogether."

Illya turned to look at him. "You'll kill hundreds of innocent people just because your precious machine doesn't work properly?"

"We can't leave witnesses."

"Witnesses to what? What's the point?"

Spencer took a deep breath. "We came here because this volcano offered the best conditions to test our newly improved device. The natural eruption was about to finish a

couple of months ago, I succeeded in prolonging it indefinitely. Just imagine the bids on the device with such a new feature. Unfortunately, we didn't take you into account. If the reagent isn't replaced, the device is useless. Hence, there is nothing else for us to do here but-

"Destroy the lives of hundreds of innocents..." Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is so wrong."

"Well, your stealing the VIRGIN makes you an accomplice in our crimes, think about it." Spencer smiled mischievously.

Ilya had to make an effort to ignore Spencer's observation. Deep inside, he knew the doctor was right. "What about the activator? It will be destroyed too."

"It doesn't matter. I have it all here," Spencer tapped his temple with his finger. "I can build those little buggers with my eyes closed; as many as I want."

"If you can do that, what's the point of causing so much chaos? Why don't you take your machine and leave quietly?"

"Give me my VIRGIN and I might do that."

"Do you promise?" Ilya narrowed his eyes on the doctor. He concentrated on Spencer's heartbeat. It accelerated at some points, and slowed down at others. Suddenly, it was very easy to tell when he was lying.

"I only want to see my device working properly. I can spare the lives of these people if you show me where the reagent is." He smiled.

Miserable sneaky rat, Ilya thought. *You're lying through your teeth*. He straightened up and took a weakened purposeful breath. "All right, give me your word. I think I'm remembering where I put the VIRGIN."

"Oh, please, you have my word, by all means."

With Spencer's phony smile, Ilya had no need to rely on his heartbeat.

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"I don't understand." Mayela sat down on the aisle while Napoleon worked on the second air duct grill. "May I ask you something?"

"Ask away," Napoleon said without stopping in his task.

"If you blow out this place, wouldn't you blow out the volcano too?"

"With these explosives, we'll only shake the foundations. It'll cause a small avalanche that will bury this place altogether. The volcano won't feel a thing." He finished and offered her a hand. "Now, we need to find the storehouse."

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"... and the ionic reaction will enchain a domino effect that will cause destruction and chaos," Spencer said. "Impressive, isn't it?"

"Eh, what? I'm sorry. I lost track of your jabbering due to lack of interest." Illya shrugged. "Did you notice that you didn't breathe once while you were talking?" A wave of pain took him by surprise. He leaned a hand on the wall and waited in silence for the dizziness to pass. The worst part was having Doctor Spencer stare at him with quizzical eyes.

"Your ears can't take any more noise, your lungs are about to collapse for lack of fresh air and your eyes are losing the sense of perspective," he grinned. "Oh I wish I'd have time to stay and witness your downfall. Alas, there are more urgent things." He came close as though to whisper in Illya's ear. "Get me my VIRGIN now!"

Illya suppressed a scream. He just covered his ear with one hand and even managed to smile. "Please, stop calling the reagent your VIRGIN, it's rather disturbing." Illya stretched his neck and shoulders. Being hung by his feet only for several minutes was as uncomfortable as it was painful. He stopped at one corner where the aisle split in two opposite directions.

"Now what?"

"I'm lost," he said. "And don't protest about that, that freaking Plus-X drug doesn't heighten the sense of direction."

Spencer put the muzzle of his pistol at Illya's eye level. "Does this heighten your memory by any chance?"

Illya squinted. He raised his arm and pointed to his right. "Maybe that way..."

"I've got the feeling that instead of getting closer, you're taking me away from the VIRG-, the reagent," he corrected. "If you say we go right, we should go left. Right?"

Illya frowned. "Left, you said."

"Right," Spencer confirmed.

"Oh, I get it," Illya chuckled. "Yes, right... left, I mean."

Spencer turned him towards the left aisle and rolled his eyes. "It's a pity that the drug doesn't do anything for the sense of humor, either."

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"Two o'clock east..." Napoleon said, placing himself in front of the storeroom and turned to his right.

Mayela shook her head. She was completely clueless, watching him circling and measuring his steps. "Anything wrong?"

"On the contrary," Napoleon said with a smile. He took a grill out and introduced his hand in the opening. "Le voilà, mademoiselle."

She came closer. The object in Napoleon's hand was rather small and insignificant, nothing that should cause so much fuzz at all. "Is that a VIRGIN?"

Napoleon nodded. "I knew I'd recognize it when I saw it."

"You don't look too surprised." She looked at Napoleon's cunning grin. "You knew Illya would put that thing there?"

"I knew that he couldn't keep the reagent with him," he said. "He just told me where it was back in the laboratory." He came closer and put it in Mayela's jeans front pocket. "It was all part of the plan."

"Getting caught too?"

"Well, that was the only way to find you." Napoleon put another set of explosives in the air duct. "Illya's getting caught was not in the plan but, in his present condition, I didn't expect much more from him. I suppose he didn't either, since he managed to hid this thing here before they found him." He chuckled.

"But he said he would show the doctor..." Mayela exhaled with concern as she realized the last part of the plan. "He's distracting the doctor, right? They will never get to the VIRGIN."

"The kiss was the master's touch," Napoleon nodded. "I thought I'd have to spend some explosives on that door."

"But you can't leave Illya. They'll kill him when they find out-"

"The rest of the plan is getting you out of here," Napoleon said, feeling angry all of a sudden. How could he explain the dynamics of his profession to a civilian? Sometimes, even Uncle agents were not sure about them. "This is the highlight of our job, Mayela. The mission is what matters... at any cost. We're expendable, you're not," he shrugged painfully.

Before she could protest, Laslo appeared around the corner, aiming at them with his pistol. "You should not leave without saying goodbye, Mr. Solo."

"Laslo, I was wondering if we had lost you after the last turn."

"I knew you would guide me to the VIRGIN." He grinned at Mayela. "She has it in her pocket, I saw you putting it there."

Mayela stepped back. Napoleon took her hand and nodded. "It's all right," he told her. "Laslo, you still can change your mind. I'll speak in your favor if you help us to get out of here."

"No dice, Solo. Thrush was my first choice," he chuckled. "You think I changed sides just because they have better dental health plans? I never had to. I've been undercover, working for Thrush."

"That makes it easier, I think," Napoleon nodded. Then, he frowned. "They have better dental health plans?"

Laslo almost answered the question. It took him a second to realize that Napoleon was just making time. "Stop distracting me! Miss, you have the VIRGIN, give it to me please."

"Don't come any closer," Napoleon walked forward.

"I'm the one with the pistol." Laslo looked over Napoleon's shoulder at the guard coming behind Mayela. "Give me the VIRGIN and I'll go easy on you two."

Napoleon was about to give up. He would not put the girl in danger. There would be plenty of opportunities to escape... He raised his hands, but before he said *I surrender*, a noisy group of people turned around the corner right behind Laslo.

The scientists came up, running and arguing at the same time.

"I told you it is this way," one of them said. His voice was weakened from having run all the way. He was talking to the rest of his colleagues without paying much attention to what was ahead of them. "I remember very well-

Laslo felt the man just when he stumbled against him. Laslo fell forward and the gun went off several times. Napoleon had barely time to duck, pull Mayela down and cover her with his own body. The bullets impacted on the wall and on the guard behind Napoleon and Mayela. Napoleon jumped over Laslo before he could get up. One punch to the jaw and Laslo was unconscious.

The four scientists stopped on their spot and raised their hands at once. "We surrender!" they screamed, their eyes fixed on the pistol that Napoleon was holding in his hand. He grinned.

"Of course you do," he said. "You are-?"

"Innocent scientists. Dr. Spencer brought us here to work on his volcanic device," said one of them.

"There was a malfunction and we couldn't get the machine started. We were about to abandon the project but Spencer suggested that before doing so we should blow out the mountain and the surroundings."

"We couldn't do that..."

Napoleon listened to them until the four men began to speak all at the same time. "Gentlemen, you'll have enough time to write down your memories and complaints later, all right? We have to get out of here right now." He signed for them to follow him and Mayela.

The way to the main entrance was chaotic with people running around, carrying boxes and weapons. Napoleon read a sign on a door. COMMUNICATIONS. He opened it and pushed his reluctant group inside. He found the radio console.

"That's only for internal communication," one of the scientists said.

Napoleon studied the mechanism and opened one channel. "Attention all shoppers!"

The staff members of all departments stopped in the aisles.

"This place has been wired. You have exactly ten minutes to abandon the compound! You've been warned."

Spencer and Ilya were one story below. They heard Napoleon's announcement and the doctor growled. Ilya could see the veins in the doctor's temples dilated. He grinned. "More rats abandoning the ship?" That cost him a punch in his guts. The pain did not matter anymore; his team was winning.

"You'll laugh when I finish with the entire mountain and your precious *Hallmark card* town." He pushed Ilya against the wall. "For the last time, where is the VIRGIN? Give me the wrong answer and we'll end here and now."

Ilya felt all his body shivering at the edge of collapse. Passing out right there would be such a relief, and yet, that would not help anyone. He had to go on, until his last drop of energy and beyond.

"A-all right... I'll show you..." His voice sounded small and defeated. He closed his eyes for a second, and Spencer pushed him harder.

"Where?"

"D-down stairs... in the cave..."

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Napoleon guided his flock to the exit. Guards and other staff were already running away in their cars and on foot. Napoleon got to the extinct crater they called *Playa Hermosa*, where he had left the jeep. He took out rope and other climbing gear.

"Get in, everybody," he said. He grabbed Mayela's hand. "Can you drive?"

"Sure but-" She felt the keys in the palm of her hand. "But, how about you? The place is going to explode in ten minutes!"

"Twenty," he whispered. "I just gave me a head start."

"You're going back for Illya!" She smiled.

"You must take these men to town." Napoleon made sure the scientists were all there. "Don't stop until you get your house. You'll find some nice men that work for the same uncle as me. Ask for Fonseca and give him the VIRGIN. Only to him. Then, tell him that Napoleon says that he will need the whirlybird after all."

"Whir-ly-bird?" Mayela shook her head. "You guys come up with the most peculiar words."

"It's because we're peculiar men," he said, kissing her hand. "Now, go and don't stop for anything."

He glanced at the vehicle one last time and went back to the compound.

The aisles were almost empty. The last living souls were already running for the exit. Napoleon turned around, suddenly overwhelmed by time. He realized that Illya and he had overlooked the most important detail in their plan: their escape. He had no idea where to look for Illya. Moreover, in the state the Russian was in, survival must be the last thing that would cross his mind anyway. Napoleon was alone in the rescue operation.

He ran aisle after aisle until he arrived to the stairs. He stopped to catch his breath and think. Illya could not be nearby but he was still in the compound. Napoleon turned around and mumbled, "Illya, where are you? Illya?"

(o)(O)(o)

Illya was two stories below, still wondering what else to do to distract the doctor from the real action. He was not even trying to understand the cacophony surrounding him. The men above, were yelling on their way out. The subterranean lake bubbled as temperatures began to rise. The gases from the water were making Illya sick and he did not care if it showed. He crawled into a corner, with his eyes shut and his ears covered. At least, he would spare himself the search for something that was not there to start with. Spencer's patience was running out as he looked frantically for his precious reagent in the cave.

Suddenly, above the yelling and cursing from the staff fleeing away, Illya heard his name coming in the air. *Illya?* It was Napoleon, looking for him. Something must have happened. Their training was clear about the degree of importance during a mission. Unless the mission depended on their survival, their own lives were completely expendable. Illya figured out that Napoleon had not been able to retrieve the reagent and now, he needed his help. *Damn it!* He must drag his friend's attention to this place.

"Oh, God!" Illya said unexpectedly. He screamed and stood up. "Stop it! I can't take it anymore!"

"I beg you pardon," Spencer turned with his hand on his heart. "You gave me a start, what's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong? Can't you smell the sulfur in that lake? The noise upstairs, the humming of your blasting machine, the steps, the yelling... I can feel... I can see, I can smell... I can..." Illya saw the doctor coming toward him. Spencer looked genuinely concerned. Illya crawled away. He tumbled intentionally over the noisiest objects in the cave. The place was a mess by itself. It seemed that all these people had done since they arrived was to store their own junk down there. Illya clung to a rusty metal desk full of bottles and books, and turned it over with a strength he did not know was still in him. He screamed with the hullabaloo he had just caused and rolled on the ground, covering his ears.

"Stop it!" Spencer yelled. He grabbed Illya's shoulders and pulled him back on his feet. "What the blazes are you trying to do? Have you gone mad?"

"Mad? Oh, yes," Illya managed to laugh through the pain. "I'm mad, MAD!" He screamed again.

"Illya!" Napoleon's voice was barely audible over the noise around. "Spencer! Stay away from him."

Illya did not have to see his friend behind him. Spencer's expression of surprise and frustration was enough. Illya fell on his knees, exhausted. Whatever happened next, Napoleon was in charge.

"Mr. Solo, I knew you would not abandon your friend. All that rubbish about the Uncle agents being expendable is just a cover, isn't it? Deep inside, you're soft and weak."

"But we're still cleverer than you," Napoleon said. He had to make a great effort to keep his eyes on the doctor instead of checking on Illya.

"You found the VIRGIN?"

"Yes, I found it."

Spencer aimed at Illya's head and cocked the pistol. "Very well, then. Give it to me." He waited but Napoleon did not move. "Oh, come on, you didn't come all the way down here just to rub the VIRGIN on my nose. You came to save your friend. I give him to you for a price."

Napoleon looked into his pocket. "I don't know..."

"Napoleon," Illya sat on his heels and turned to him. "Please, don't-"

"The VIRGIN! Give it to me! Now!"

Napoleon took out something and shrugged. "All right. Catch!" He tossed it over Spencer's head. The doctor did not notice the lake behind him when he jumped to reach the object. He missed and lost his balance. He fell into the water.

There was not much of a scream. The bubbles did not last long as the darkened waters covered the doctor. Illya could not take his eyes from the water. He listened to Spencer's

heartbeat as it decreased. The echo remained in his ears for a little while. Then, he sat back and rubbed his forehead. "He's dead," Illya said finally.

Napoleon pulled him up gently and supported most of his weight. "Are you all right?"

"Tell me you didn't throw the VIRGIN in the water," Illya gasped, his eyes were still fixed on the subterranean lake.

"Of course not, it's safe now." Napoleon said. "You owe me a pen."

"Where is Mayela?"

"I sent her away in the jeep... with the VIRGIN."

Illya turned to him. "You should have gone with her, that was the plan!"

"We met some funny characters on the road and there was no room for me in the jeep," he shrugged. "Come, let's get out of here."

(o)(O)(o)

The chaos outside was not as bad as Illya had imagined. The noise was deafening, though, and he could barely listen to Napoleon. He kept very close to him, hoping for Napoleon to know where to go.

The last of the people in the compound were coming out, but no one seemed to pay attention to Illya and Napoleon. They were much less interested in seeing what Napoleon was looking for in one of the corners of the building.

"Climbing gear?" Illya whined. "That was not a part of the plan."

"The original plan is over, I'm playing by ear now." Napoleon made an effort to keep his casual tone. Illya was not the whining type. If he did not feel like climbing, it was because he was actually in no shape for it and he must think that he would only slow Napoleon down. "But it will be safer for us to be up there than down here." He smiled at his friend's weariness. He spoke softly and reassuringly. "I'll do all the work, all right. You just have to hang in there."

"Isn't that what I have been doing so far?" Illya gasped. He was not joking when he stared at his friend. "Just one thing, Napoleon. If I can't go on at any time, you have got to promise to leave me and save yourself."

Napoleon straightened up and saluted. "Boy Scout's honor, I promise." Then, he gave him a belt and fastened the rope to the rings. "How's your sight?"

"Quite acute, why?"

"I can't climb and hold a flashlight at the same time."

Illya rolled his eyes and smirked. "The best point to start climbing is over there," he pointed at the darkness. "There are little landslides here and there, but they're harmless. We can go through them without much trouble."

"Good, that's what I'm talking about."

(o)(O)(o)

The first feet were not bad at all. With Illya's senses, it was easy for them to avoid the most dangerous zones. The ground was mostly ashes and it was loose, but those conditions meant nothing for two experts like Illya and Napoleon. All things considered, they looked in great shape. Napoleon reckoned they were already half the way up and everything was well. He did not expect any trouble, or at least, not until they reached the top.

Suddenly, the volcano roared. For Napoleon, it was just a little rumor, but for Illya, it sounded like a plane taking off right in front of him. He screamed at the same time that he let go the rope. Napoleon felt as though he was being dragged down and he had to cling with all he got. He looked down at Illya, nearly passed out, hanging on the air.

"Illya!" Napoleon yelled with all his might. He stretched his hand toward him. "Hold my hand. Come on, Illya!"

ACT VII: *On a clear day*

Napoleon waited one long second but there was no answer. He panicked, Illya was about to give up, if he had not already. *No, no. No!* "Give me your hand, you, little Russian annoyance!" He was yelling but he did not care about Illya's ears any more. "You're dead wrong if you think I'm going to let you fall! We're just there, Illya! But if you fall, I'll fall too!" He waited again, his eyes fixed on Illya's blond hair, the only thing he could actually see in the dark. If Illya did not move in the next few seconds... Oh, well, there was no plan B if Illya did not move in the next few seconds.

The wind whistled along the rocks, making the robes vibrate. Just a couple of minutes more and the laboratory would blow up. It was still too dark for Napoleon to reckon if they were safe from the blast. He would not stay there to find out. He wanted to be at the top of the mountain when that happened. He looked down at Illya, so close and yet, so far. *Come on, little friend, don't give up...* he mumbled.

Illya raised his hand with a last surge of strength and grabbed the rope. "Who's giving up?" His voice was hoarse with the simple effort of talking. "Are you going to pull me up or what?"

Napoleon laughed. "That's the spirit," he said.

"Please," Illya whined as he reached for Napoleon's hand, "lower your voice..."

Napoleon pulled him over his head and did not breathe until Illya was safe on the top of the mountain. Illya was able to crawl a few meters before giving up. Napoleon felt the dirt getting deep in his nails as he clung the ground with all his might. He too, reached the top and stood on his feet for an entire minute before falling on his knees.

The blast from the laboratory was fast and sudden. It thundered inside Illya's head, causing excruciating spasms. Napoleon rolled over to protect him with his body while Illya clenched his head in his hands and screamed. Ashes rained over them and the earth moved for several seconds.

The silence after the chaos was so deep that Napoleon would have sworn he had gone deaf. Illya had stopped convulsing, and now he was lying on his back, apparently unconscious. Napoleon rose to his knees to check on him but exhaustion overcame him.

"Can't breathe..." Illya gasped with his eyes closed.

"We're too high... climbed too fast..." Napoleon panted. "Calm down, exhaled slowly... breathe in, breathe out... you know how it goes..." He found it difficult to form any more words. He barely had time to make sure that his friend was still breathing before he passed out next to him.

The day was beginning to break when Napoleon opened his eyes. The sky was light blue, no more gray clouds to dim its light. He turned to see Illya, still unconscious. He decided to let him be for some more minutes. He got up and looked around. He recognized the place from the pictures in his booklet. The path for tourists was on his left and the path to the TV tower, the landing zone for their helicopter, was on his right.

Illya woke up and had to turn his head to one side. The sky was getting too bright for his sensitive eyes. He rubbed his face and the first thing he noticed was that the sulfur was not that heavy in the air anymore. He still could not breathe normally but at least, his nostrils did not hurt.

"Illya?" Napoleon's voice echoed in Illya's eardrums. He moaned. "Sorry," Napoleon whispered. "How are you doing?"

"I can't see..." Illya gasped. He blinked, as he tried to focus his eyes on his friend.

"Your eyes hurt? Put this on," said Napoleon, giving him his sunglasses. "Don't panic, it'll pass soon. Can you sit up?"

Illya supported himself on Napoleon's arm and let him to prop him to a sitting position. His head spun for several seconds and his ears began to ring. Napoleon noticed that Illya had been bleeding from his right ear. He cleaned it up a little with his handkerchief and Illya winced.

"Can you hear me all right?"

Illya nodded painfully. "With my left ear... Along with nine drummers drumming in my head." He still could sketch a smile. "The explosion perforated my right eardrum."

"I'm sorry about that," Napoleon whispered. "Help is on its way."

"I know," Illya panted. "I can hear a helicopter coming." He rubbed his temple and groaned.

Napoleon looked around for some distraction from the pain. He grinned at the sight of the observatory. "Illya, can you walk?"

"Like a drunken man in New Year's Day," he joked.

"Come, I want to show you something." He helped him to get up and led him to the observatory post for tourists. "Look over there."

Illya followed Napoleon's eyes and squinted. "That's the Pacific ocean," he said.

"Right," Napoleon smiled. Carefully he helped him to turn to the opposite side. "Now, look that other way."

Illya was so interested in the view that he did not mind the dizziness and the void inside his head. He smiled faintly. "The Atlantic ocean... I read about this but they say it happens rarely..."

"On a clear day you can see both oceans. How do you like it?"

"Breathtaking," Illya agreed. His voice was weak and he staggered a little. He grabbed Napoleon's arm.

Napoleon tightened his grip around Illya's waist. "You'd better sit down, before the wind blows you away."

"Napoleon?"

"Yes?"

"It occurs to me that there is nothing in your files that says that you were in the Boys Scouts..." Illya gasped.

"And your point will be?" Napoleon took his safari jacket and wrapped it around Illya's shoulders.

"I almost fell... you didn't let me go..."

"Don't you do that for me once in a while too?" He grabbed his canteen and helped Illya to take a sip.

Illya coughed a little and cleared his throat. "What happens to being expendable?" Illya grinned.

"Oh, Illya," Napoleon patted him on the shoulder. "We haven't got there yet."

Illya shook his head. He frowned painfully as he covered his ear. "The helicopter is getting closer."

Napoleon looked warily at Illya. The noise of the blades was already crawling in Illya's tortured ears. The Russian endured it stoically but cold sweat began to bead his forehead. "It'll be here in a minute... The noise, Illya... your ears..." Napoleon mumbled. His concern grew as he thought desperately of some way to spare Illya from additional pain.

"I'll be all right," he shuddered. The pain began to intensify. He covered his ears and winced, "It's all right!" He felt the engine vibrating inside his head. "It's getting closer."

Napoleon held Illya close to him. He could see a small black dot on the horizon. *If you're hearing nine drummers drumming now, wait for the ten pipers piping*, Napoleon thought. "Illya?" He got his attention with a pat on his shoulder. "I know we'll talk about this later but--"

Illya looked up at Napoleon. Before he could realize what was going on, his friend's fist connected with Illya's jaw. The Russian fell heavily in Napoleon's arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Napoleon whispered as he knelt down with Illya against his chest. He stroked his friend's hair, protecting his ears from the whirlwind while the helicopter landed. "It's all right, Illya. It's all over..."

The pilot came out and ran towards them. Napoleon laid Illya on the ground and stood up to shake the pilot's hand. The man was not much younger than they, with dark hair and a big smile. Somehow, Napoleon recognized him immediately.

"Agent Fonseca, I presume."

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon paced around the waiting room a couple of times before he stationed himself in front of the window. The private clinic offered a beautiful view of the city of San José, and a clear sight of the Irazú volcano. The clouds had lifted and the mountain looked impassive against the blue skies. For the first time since Napoleon had arrived, there were no ashes or gray shades. The news announced positive changes in the weather and the possible ending of the volcano eruptions.

"How elegant!" Mayela took him by surprise. "What's the occasion?"

Napoleon glanced at his tie and suit and shrugged. "I usually dress like this." He looked at her from head to toe and smiled. "Same to you," he said. "Nice dress."

"Thank you, I was dying to wear this dress, but the ashes would have ruined it." She smiled shyly. "Does Illya wear suits too?"

"He prefers turtleneck sweaters." Napoleon saw a light on the girl's face, as she probably pictured Illya in such an outfit.

She stood next to him and looked through the window. "Wow, I've never been in such a high building. I think I can see my town from here."

Napoleon put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her against him. "I thought I wouldn't see you before we leave."

"Your boss, Mr. Waverly, gave me a ride to the capital. He thought that we should say goodbye in a proper manner."

"Mr. Waverly is here?" Napoleon frowned. Sometimes, the old man seemed to move faster than light.

"He went to visit my parents; to make sure we were all right after all that happened. So nice of him, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's much like him, all right." Napoleon smiled and took one last look at the volcano.

Doctor Tower came in with a long face. "Napoleon?"

"Look, George, I was unconscious when they hung him by his heels," Napoleon said. "The diving was unavoidable and the fighting-" He looked at the doctor's shocked expression and stopped. "You haven't talked to Illya yet, have you?" Doctor Tower shook his head. "Never mind then," Napoleon smiled. "Forget about that."

"Gladly," Tower cleared his throat. "We're controlling the pneumonia with antibiotics. His right eardrum is going to bug him for several weeks, but it's very likely to heal without surgery. If he keeps his feet on solid ground for a while, that is." He glared at Napoleon. "I'm writing down a list of recommendations."

"And I'll see he follows them to the letter," Napoleon smiled again. "Is he awake yet?"

"Yes, he is and asking for you." He pointed at Mayela. "He heard you when you arrived."

"So, he's still suffering the effects of Plus-X?" Napoleon asked.

"Actually, the few hours he was unconscious helped his body to recover a little. I think that he'll be able to sleep off the rest of the drug with some more hours of total rest." He turned to Mayela. "Now, mind his ears and speak in whispers, okay? If you will follow me, please. You can come too, Napoleon."

(o)(O)(o)

Napoleon noticed that the room had been adapted to Illya's immediate needs. The curtains were closed, the lights were out and the room temperature was above normal.

The silence was almost palpable, as well as Illya's usual *I-hate-hospitals* attitude. He was wearing sunglasses and a long face that melted somehow when Mayela entered.

"Mayela," he whispered, stretching his hand towards her. "How are you?"

She took his hand and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm fine, thanks to you and Napoleon."

Illya shook his head. "I haven't told you how sorry I am for everything you went through."

"But it's okay," she smiled.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I had to kiss you..." He saw eyes grow big and stammered. "I mean, I shouldn't have kissed you, it was not right-"

Napoleon read the disappointment in Mayela's face. He grinned and sighed. "Illya, you're sinking faster than the Titanic, my friend." He turned to Mayela. "What my articulate partner is trying to say is that he would have enjoyed the kiss more under other circumstances."

Mayela blushed and nodded. "Me too," she whispered to Illya. Then, she looked into her purse for Illya's ring. "I suppose you want this back now."

Illya took it in his shaky hand. Although the temperature in the room was rather warm, he could not help shivering. He stared at his ring for a long minute before giving it back with a smile. "You keep it, as a souvenir."

Despite the dim light, Napoleon could see the girl's eyes glowing. Undoubtedly, she would treasure this present for a long time.

"I-I've got to go now," she stammered, getting up. "I have to go back to San Juan... summer school starts in a week and I need to prepare my classes..." She tried a smile to disguise her sadness. Slowly, she bent forward and kissed Illya on the cheek.. "Take care, Illya and come back soon."

"I will... Mayela?" He stared intensely at her.

"Yes, Illya?" She asked, mesmerized by his blue eyes.

"Gracias por la ropa de tu hermano." *Thank you for your brother's clothes* He held her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips.

Illya's soft accent impressed Dr. Tower. Although he did not understand Spanish, the words seemed to work well with the girl. After a second of awkward silence, the doctor shrugged. "You've got to admit that he has something that women like." he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I guess," Napoleon tilted his head and squinted. "But I still don't see what."

Mayela sighed when Illya freed her. She smiled dreamily and said, "De nada." *You're welcome.* Then, she walked towards Napoleon and kissed him on the cheek. "It's a Costa Rican custom," she said bashfully. "You too must come back soon, okay?"

"I'll put it on my list of pleasant things to do," Napoleon told her.

Illya's expression hardened as soon as Mayela was gone. He stared at Dr. Tower and Napoleon warily. Napoleon frowned. If he believed in the sixth sense, he would have thought that Illya's had been heightened too.

"So," the doctor said, "they hung you by your heels?"

Illya looked at Napoleon and shrugged. "Only for a couple of minutes," he said.

"And the diving?"

"Only for a couple of minutes," Illya insisted.

"Ah, but I shielded his ears from the loud noise of a helicopter." Napoleon smiled triumphantly.

"What a relief," Tower snorted, as he got an injection ready.

Illya winced. "Must we go on with this? I think I can go to sleep without any help."

"He has something against *opiate analgesic drugs*," Napoleon grinned. "Do you want me to knock you out again, Illya?"

"Hilarious, Napoleon, but this is not a joke," Illya glared.

"I need to give your brain time to rest too, Illya," the doctor injected the serum in the IV with the antibiotics. "The sooner you fall asleep, the better you'll feel when you wake up."

Mr. Waverly entered the room unexpectedly. He took off his hat and came to the bed. He put his hand on Illya's and smiled when the Russian looked at him. "You've been a brave young man, Mr. Kuryakin," he whispered.

Illya's jaw tightened. He nodded but did not say a word. He was not used to praising words, especially coming from Mr. Waverly. It was not that the old man did not appreciate their sacrifice and commitment, but those things were taken for granted as agents from Uncle.

Napoleon cleared his throat, as a way to get the attention away from Illya. "When did you arrive in Costa Rica, sir?"

"Oh, I decided to come shortly after we talked. I had to come and visit our facilities sometime, anyway." He turned to the doctor. "Is he going to sleep now?"

"In several minutes," he took his flashlight and came to Illya's bedside. "Take off your glasses, please." Illya obeyed reluctantly. He knew that the light was going to hurt his eyes, even for two seconds. Tower nodded with satisfaction. "Pupils are dilating already. Lie down and go to sleep."

Illya put on his glasses again. "Right now? We still have time for debriefing, haven't we?" he said apprehensively. "Did you receive the reagent, sir? Is it in a safe place? And the laboratory? Did you make sure that nothing is left to be used again?"

Doctor Tower rolled his eyes and Napoleon almost said something, but it was up to Mr. Waverly stopped them with a sign of his hand. He looked at Illya indulgently. He smiled like a father, and patted Illya's hand. "Everything is being taken care of, Mr. Kuryakin, including you. There will be plenty of time to discuss the outcome of this assignment on Monday when we all are back at the office in New York."

"This Monday?" Napoleon said.

"Why, yes, Mr. Solo. You don't think this is a good time for going on vacation, do you?" Mr. Waverly frowned. "There is still work to do. We can't take more than a break while Thrush keeps conspiring against the free world on our free time." He turned back to Illya. "Of course, Mr. Kuryakin will be assigned to mild work for a while." He did not notice Illya's frustration at the perspective of hours of tedious office work, signing papers and writing reports.

"So, I take it that you're going back to HQ today?" Napoleon asked.

"Of course not. There is a blizzard over New York as we speak. I'll spend the upcoming weekend monitoring our activities from our offices in Puntarenas." His features relaxed at the thought of his plans. "Would you want to come with me, Mr. Solo? Two days of sun by the seaside might count perfectly as a holiday."

Illya sighed, rubbing his forehead. His eyelids were getting heavier, but he did not want to miss this conversation. Napoleon looked like a mouse cornered by the big cat.

"Well, sir," Napoleon began to talk very slowly as though looking for the right words to say, "I met this girl in the Rent-A-Car agency and she offered to be my tour guide for the weekend." He ended with a nice smile.

"Oh, well. It's your weekend. You're entitled to use it at your convenience. Doctor Tower, take good care of Mr. Kuryakin. And you, Mr. Kuryakin, quit being so difficult and do your best to get better."

"Yes, sir," Illya said lowering his eyes. His respect for his elders always went beyond his own stubbornness.

Mr. Waverly put on his hat and headed for the door. "I'll see you on Monday, gentlemen."

The three men remained silent for a minute, as though waiting for Mr. Waverly to be out of earshot.

"Two days of site seeing?" Illya smirked to Napoleon. "Some of us do all the work while others have all the fun."

"Don't complain. After forty-eight hours of good sleep, you'll be as good as new to go back to work on Monday." Napoleon straightened his tie and smiled. He turned to the doctor, who glared at him with wild eyes as if he had said something wrong.

"Forty-eight hours? Forty-eight hours?" Illya yelled despite his sore ears. "That's two days! I haven't got time to sleep for two whole days!"

Dr. Tower had barely time to grab Illya before he sprung out of bed. "Calm down, you'll wear off the sedative before it kicks in." He kept his voice down but his tone was intense when he turned around. "Napoleon is just kidding. It's only twelve hours, as I told you. Right, Napoleon?"

"Oh, yes," he smiled, still a little surprised. "My mistake. Twelve hours of good sleep..."

Illya looked at him and the doctor. He narrowed his eyes warily. "Twelve hours," he said, more like an order than a question. The nods were not too convincing but he did not offer resistance when Dr. Tower pushed him gently down on his back. "Just twelve hours... that's all I need... all right...?" he dragged his words lazily. "P-promise..." He grabbed Tower's arm.

"S-sure... I promise... twelve hours," he said, looking at Napoleon. He spread the blanket over Illya and checked his pulse.

Napoleon waited without moving from his place, as if by his remaining still, Illya would fall asleep faster. After a moment, he dared to step forward. "Is he-?"

"Dead to the world? Yes," Dr. Tower said, tucking Illya's arm under the blanket. "You almost ruined everything."

"I said I'm sorry. I forgot," he came closer. He removed the sunglasses carefully from his friend's eyes and examined his features. For the first time since Napoleon had found him in the mountain, Illya looked at peace. "Are you sure he will be all right?"

"I'm sure. If he follows my orders and takes it easy for a while, he'll be back to normal..." Dr Tower looked at Napoleon, who seemed immersed in deep thoughts. "It's been a couple of rough days, Napoleon. It must have been very hard on you seeing your best friend going through this."

"You can say that again," Napoleon exhaled without taking his eyes off his partner. "He couldn't be closer to me if he were my brother." He turned to the doctor almost immediately. "I never said that, Tower."

"My lips are sealed, Solo," the doctor nodded. He connected several electrodes to Illya's chest and

turned on a monitor. He regulated the volume so the beeping would not disturb the quietness in the room. Dr. Tower made sure that Illya was still asleep before turning to Napoleon again. "The worst is over. He just needs to rest, I mean serious rest."

"I'll work on that as soon as we get back to New York." He glanced at the doctor. "Now what?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "Just checking those dark circles under your eyes. You need to rest too, Napoleon. Let's get out of here." He looked for his coat and hat. "So, you have a date for the weekend?"

Napoleon shook his head and snorted. "I just said that to get off the hook with Mr. Waverly. An imaginary date is better than a weekend with your boss."

"I'd say," Tower chuckled. "He asked me the same thing. I put him as an excuse," he pointed at Illya with his thumb. "But, what are you going to do for two days, then?"

"Oh, well, I thought of staying close, just in case Illya wakes up."

"He'll sleep for forty-eight hours," the doctor shrugged.

"You'll need me to deal with Illya when he wakes up and finds out that you lied to him," Napoleon grinned.

"Me? You were here too!"

Napoleon put his arm around the doctor's shoulder and led him to the door. "Never mind that. We have two whole days to prepare ourselves... First, we'll keep him away from the news papers, the TV and the radio..." he took one last look at his sleeping friend and closed the door behind him.

Illya wrinkled his nose and could finally sneeze without giving himself away. He sniffed and turned to look at the door. He still could hear Napoleon in the hallway.

"Illya will never find out..."

"Hmm, that's what you think," said Illya, twisting his mouth. He sighed and went back to sleep.

FIN
