

PARALLAX
BY **WENDIEZ**

The same scene, the same circumstances: A “Chinese fire drill” for the characters and a study on how Napoleon and Illya might react when roles are reversed.

The mission had been simple and straight-forward: infiltrate the THRUSH satrapy in upstate Vermont, find the prototype of a new hand weapon, and deliver it into the capable hands of UNCLE’s Section Eight for analysis. Solo and Kuryakin, however, had been on enough missions just like this one to know that nothing was ever straight-forward or simple—

Part 1:

Hurt: Illya

Comfort: Napoleon

Antagonist: Angelique

The situation culminated in a stand-off between Illya and LaCroix, the gun’s inventor, each pointing their lethal weapon at the other. Napoleon arrived after putting the finishing touches on the incendiary charges that would level the building, and peeked in the doorway just behind his partner’s adversary.

Illya caught his partner’s signal, “There’s nowhere to go, LaCroix,” he informed the inventor. “Are you so willing to die for that metal toy?”

“Are you, Mr. Kuryakin? If the bullet from this gun hits you, your body will explode into so many pieces, there won’t be enough left of you to bury.”

Illya did not change expression, except for a slight widening of his blue eyes. Then he smiled. “And you will never know if it does, because you’ll already be dead.” A flash of movement behind Solo caught the Russian’s attention. “Napoleon!” he called out, “behind you!”

Napoleon turned, ready to fire his own gun, but stopped short when he saw who had, very successfully, crept up behind him without a sound. He opened his mouth to acknowledge the presence but the sound of Illya’s Special and the prototype firing nearly simultaneously cut him off. “Illya—” he breathed, and bounded into the room, expecting some kind of calamity.

LaCroix lay spread-eagle on the floor, a bullet hole in his forehead like a bloody third eye between the other two, which stared vacantly at the ceiling. Solo gave him a cursory glance as he rushed to where his partner lay, gasping in pain. The whole left shoulder of Kuryakin’s black turtleneck shirt reflected the overhead light in the blood that covered it.

Napoleon pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and after laying it in his partner’s right hand, guided it to the shoulder. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but why aren’t you in tiny pieces all over the room?”

Illya grimaced. “Don’t ask me—I’m rather happy with the outcome, more or less.”

The intruder and catalyst for the situation approached the two UNCLE agents. Solo looked up. “Got any ideas?” he asked the woman sporting an expensive black mink coat.

The platinum blonde shrugged. "How would I know? I just came up here for the skiing."

Kuryakin growled, partly from the pain, but mostly because of the identity of the intruder.

Angelique LaChemin smiled smugly down at the fallen Russian. "Feeling a little under the weather, Illya, dear?"

Napoleon glanced at his watch. "You know, sweet, I'd love to sit and chat, but in about ten minutes, this building is going to become rather unstable. You think you can walk, Illya?"

"Considering the alternatives, I'm quite ambulatory." He rolled over onto his good shoulder and grabbing his gun, he struggled to his knees. "Get the prototype, would you, Napoleon? It would be a shame to have shed all this blood and have nothing to show for it."

"You two are being terribly cavalier about the fact that one of you has an *armed* explosive round buried in his shoulder!" Angelique pointed out tersely.

Solo picked up the prototype gun. "Yeah, well, we like to deal with one explosion at a time. Are you coming, or are you staying for the fireworks?"

"Do you realize it's the middle of winter and we're in Vermont?"

"I think she means she's staying," Illya said with a small moan. "At least I hope that's what she means. I could use a little help here."

Napoleon went to his friend and bolstered him from the right side. "Let's go." To Angelique, he smiled. "You coming? The more the merrier."

"Speak for yourself, Napoleon," Illya grumbled.

"She could be useful," Napoleon replied *sotto voce*.

"As what? A pain in the ass?"

"Watch your tongue, Illya dear," Angelique warned. "I didn't get where I am on my good looks."

Illya would have laughed out loud at her remark if he didn't hurt so much. Instead, he grasped at the fabric of Solo's jacket as the pair hurried to where they had deposited their winter gear. Kuryakin let Solo pull the good arm through the sleeve and bundle the rest of his body snugly in the wool coat, but it was obvious that the Russian was unable to carry any gear.

Solo tossed Illya's pack at Angelique. "Here."

She glared back at Solo. "Don't be ridiculous."

"It's your fault my partner's in this condition. Put on the backpack or I'll shoot you in the knee and leave you here to welcome the holocaust."

With a huff of disgust, she bent down and picked up the backpack.

"See, Illya? I told you she'd be useful."

"Reserving judgment," the blond agent murmured.

Napoleon looked down at his friend with concern. "Come on, Illya, let's see if we can find that guard house. It'll be a good place to wait for the bus." He hoisted the leaning body a little higher and pulled Kuryakin with him down the road. Disgruntled, the blonde THRUSH followed.

The guard house was a two storey bunker with one level above ground and one below. The underground level was twice the square footage of the above ground level implying that the structure was designed to be somewhat independent of the facility with the off-duty shifts living below, similar to professional firehouses. Napoleon helped his wounded partner down the stairs and to the nearest cot, easing him down as gently as he could.

Kuryakin laid back on the mattress, eyes closed; his hand on his shoulder, his forehead furrowed against the pain. "I'm going to check out our accommodations and find out when we can expect a pick up," Solo said quietly.

Angelique threw the backpack she carried on a nearby cot. "What am I supposed to do?"

Napoleon looked up and smiled charmingly. "I could use some coffee, if you don't mind." When she curled her lip in distaste, he added, "Just keep an eye on Illya."

"I'd rather keep an eye on you," she countered seductively.

"I don't think my chaperone would approve."

"I vote you handcuff her to a cot," Illya suggested.

"We'll compromise. Angelique, sit down on a cot and think about the secrets you'll be able to share with me later. I can guarantee you an attentive audience." He headed for the stairs. "Be back in a jiffy. Try not to kill each other."

As Napoleon moved out of earshot, the platinum blonde looked over at the nearly inanimate figure of Kuryakin on the cot. "In any other instance, being stuck in a remote outpost with two delicious men for an indefinite period would be quite exciting. You certainly know how to ruin a good opportunity, Illya dear."

"Glad to be of service," the Russian countered, the pain evident in his voice. He hated being in this vulnerable state with an agent of Angelique's caliber nearby. Fortunately, Napoleon returned quickly as if anticipating his partner's discomfiture.

"Well, it looks like we have provisions for a lengthy stay, if necessary."

"Define lengthy," Illya managed.

"On that point, I've got good news and bad news."

This time the answer was more of a growl. "Napoleon, I'm not in the mood!"

Solo looked up at Angelique, who crossed her arms belligerently. "Don't look at me, darling. I keep trying to tell you your friend's much too gloomy."

Napoleon looked down at his friend and smiled. "She has you there. But, in your defense, you aren't at your lovable best right now. So I'll overlook the surliness."

"Napoleon—" Illya said, his voice threatening.

"Relax. The good news is I contacted Boston and they're sending out a chopper for us."

"And the bad news—?"

"There's a cold front moving in and they're expecting it to bring in a major snowstorm. They gave me an ETA of at least 48 hours."

"In that case, Napoleon, I've got some good news and bad news for you as well."

Solo looked at him with concern. "Illya?"

"The good news is I think the bleeding has either stopped or abated significantly."

"And the bad news—?"

Kuryakin shifted his weight slightly, grimacing as he did. "I can't move my arm."

Napoleon sat down on the edge of the cot. "Not at all?" He began to pull fabric away from the wound to examine it. "Do you have any feeling in it?"

Illya moaned from the jostling. "Yes, I've got feeling—radiating down the whole blasted arm! The round must be pressing against a nerve." He looked intently at the man sitting beside him. "Do you feel confident enough to try and remove it? Forty-eight hours and I'll be working on a well-established infection."

"Not to mention possible nerve damage," Solo mused.

Angelique got up from her cot and walked over to the pair. "Are you crazy? That's a live explosive in his shoulder! All you're going to manage to do is give me the chance to tell Central that I witnessed both Solo's and Kuryakin's demise! While that would put me in an enviable as well as desirable position, I'm not sure I'm ready to watch you blow yourselves up, at least, not you, Napoleon."

"Your concern is touching, sweetheart," Napoleon answered as he continued to access his friend's wound. "But I'll base my decision on what's best for my partner *and* the mission." He looked down at Illya and their eyes met. "I'm on the fence about this," the dark-haired agent said quietly. "And I think you know why."

"Aside from the fact that if this thing blows up when you try to remove it, the mission's a failure, our careers are at a glorious end, and Angelique gets to keep the weapon, what could be holding you back?"

"That's a pretty big *if*, my friend. Friendship aside, I'd like to keep on living a while longer."

"If you don't want to chance it, I understand. I might feel the same way if the roles were reversed. I'm just wondering why the round didn't detonate, at all."

"Are you thinking that the gun doesn't work?"

"Well, the gun obviously does work, but perhaps the explosive rounds are the problem."

"You may be right, but I'd rather not risk both our lives on that assumption. We don't have any proof."

"I said, I understand. If we're going to go with that option, I would greatly appreciate it if you checked the provisions for some first aid supplies, namely antibiotics and some morphine. I don't mind admitting that I'm in a considerable amount of pain."

Napoleon smiled. "Thanks for understanding."

"My understanding comes at a price. A request; actually several."

"Name them."

"If I am destined to die because of this, I want to die as a whole man and wide awake. If the infection goes to gangrene, I do not want to live as a useless, dissected being. When the bullet comes out, I want a local. I don't want to wake up from the anesthesia and find out I died from the explosion."

"Don't you think you're being just a little melodramatic about this?"

The Russian smiled weakly. "Noble tragedy always is, my friend."

Across the room, Angelique called to them. "Are the two of you finished with the last wills and testaments? I'm getting hungry."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged amused and exasperated expressions. "Let me," Illya said quietly, then raised his voice as much as the pain would allow. "Go spin a web somewhere; I'm sure you'll catch something."

"The pantry is full of cans, my dear. I'll be up in a little while." Napoleon waited until her footsteps disappeared and then gave his partner a pair of raised eyebrows. "Must you always antagonize her like that? Someday you may need her help and it would pay to keep her at least a little willing." He pulled a blanket up to Kuryakin's chest. "Do you think you could eat something?"

"Soup, maybe. Definitely water. I probably won't feel like eating tomorrow."

Solo stood. "I'll see what I can do."

While a can of stew for Angelique and himself heated on the hotplate in the tiny kitchen upstairs, Napoleon carried a tray for his partner down the stairs. "Which do you want first, food or drugs?"

"Drugs," the blond Russian replied throatily.

"Thought so. They had a small stock of morphine and antibiotics, both in powder form. I didn't see any syringes, so I'm assuming they're for topical use. I found something else that might be useful."

“What’s that?”

“Honey. I thought I’d mix the powder into the honey and drizzle it into the shaft of the wound.”

“When did you learn about folk remedies? That was one of my grandmother’s favorite ointments.”

Napoleon smiled. “Smart American. I’ll have to see if I can pull out some of the clot first. This is going to hurt.”

“It already hurts. Just get on with it.”

Illya grasped the blanket with his right hand while Napoleon peeled away the blood-soaked handkerchief and cut away the shirt. “It’s still bleeding a little,” he reported.

“That’s probably not a bad thing. The blood cleanses the wound somewhat. Clean out as much of the clotted blood as you can.”

Napoleon carefully cleaned the dried blood from the wound site. To his surprise, the wound was not in the shoulder as he thought, but closer to the neck, just above the collarbone. The blood had formed a shallow pool in the indentation. “I can see why the round is pressing on the nerve. I thought it was closer to your shoulder. You’re lucky it wasn’t a couple of inches to the right; he would have gotten you in the carotid or the jugular.”

“Only you could see the luck in getting shot,” Kuryakin half-moaned and his face contorted. “Do you think you could proceed with a little more alacrity? I’m getting very close to verbalizing some very crude remarks.”

“Do you think I care if you cry out in pain? Don’t be such a stoic.”

“I wasn’t thinking of you.”

“You think she’s going to think less of you? Hell, she doesn’t think much of you now.”

Illya groaned. “Your comments are so consoling—” The phrase ended in a genuine cry of pain. “Hurry—please—”

Solo stirred the honey, antibiotic and the morphine together and drizzled it into the wound until no more would go into the shaft. He smeared the remaining mixture across the area and applied a dressing, which he secured with a cloth bandage. “That should help somewhat. I’m going to mix another packet of morphine in some water and have you drink it.”

“Ah,” Illya mumbled. “Sweet narcotic oblivion. I should eat first, however.”

“It’ll be better on your stomach. I put the soup in a mug. Do you think you can handle it if I sit you up?”

“I’ll try. The shoulder feels better, thank you.”

Napoleon gently elevated his partner’s shoulders and stuffed several pillows behind them so Illya was able to sit up. “My pleasure. I’m going to see how the stew is coming along.”

"You mean you left Angelique upstairs alone with food you're planning to eat?"

"Not to worry, my over-solicitous friend. She and I have a truce." When Illya raised his eyebrows in disbelief, he added, "I told her if she co-operates, I would allow her to escape when the chopper comes for us."

"And she bought that?"

"I was very sincere and I will keep my word. She knows that."

"You didn't promise that I would let her escape though, did you?"

"We're going to let her go, Illya."

"Napoleon—"

"She's not important. The gun and you are. Besides, she'll owe me one and you know I always collect." Solo ended the discussion with one of his winning smiles. "Eat your soup. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Napoleon left his friend to his soup and went back upstairs to eat whatever stew Angelique had decided to leave for him. "I didn't hear any shrieks of agony," the blonde said from the small round table in the corner.

Solo spooned the rest of the stew into a bowl. "Were you expecting any?"

"That has to be a painful wound."

"He's in a lot of pain, yes. Is there a point you're trying to make?" When the THRUSH beauty said nothing, Napoleon added: "For some reason he thinks he needs to demonstrate his stoicism to you."

"Whatever on earth for?"

"I told him you don't think much of him, but I think he still feels he needs to win some kind of respect from you."

"Well, he already does have some kind of respect from me."

"Oh, really?" Napoleon said, as he lowered his bowl and spoon in genuine interest. "To tell you the truth, I thought you hated him."

"Darling, there's certainly no love lost between us, but that doesn't mean I can't admire certain traits."

"Such as?"

"His single-minded devotion to his cause, pitiful as it may be. He really buys into that protecting the innocent nonsense."

"But so do I, my dear Angelique."

"I'm doing my best to change your mind about that."

"What else about my friend do you admire?"

"His loyalty to you. I've seen dogs with less."

"We're brothers-in-arms. That necessitates loyalty."

"He doesn't seem to like women very much though."

Napoleon snorted a chuckle. "Here we go again. I wish I could tell you from how many different quarters I hear that Illya and I are more than just 'brothers-in-arms'. Illya's interest in women is just less—"

"—intense," Angelique finished.

Solo nodded. "Okay, *intense*, than mine is. But he's no monk, and definitely not into men, not by a long shot. He's just," and Napoleon smiled broadly as he said it, "single-mindedly devoted to his cause."

"And as loyal as a St. Bernard."

"Wolfhound," Napoleon corrected, but then thought of a better analogy. "Correction: a Siberian wolf—and just as deadly. But don't tell him I ever compared him to a canine."

"I would think he'd be flattered."

"It implies ownership. Illya loathes the concept."

"I've seen Siberian wolves in the wild, Napoleon. Nobody owns them, no one would dare. The analogy is appropriate."

"It sounds like another trait you admire."

Angelique stood up and laid her bowl in the sink. "Perhaps I do. But, please darling, *don't* go and ruin it all by telling him."

Solo added his bowl to hers. "Your secret's safe with me. I'm going to go and see how he's doing."

With the aid of the ingested morphine powder, Illya was able to sleep for several hours. He awoke in the middle of the night with a more pressing need. After calling Napoleon's name and getting no response, he tried to sit up on the cot. The movement only accentuated the pain in his shoulder; that and the blood loss set his equilibrium in a full tilt. With a half groan/half cry of alarm, he flipped over the edge of the mattress onto the floor.

Almost immediately, Solo was beside him with Angelique not far behind. "Illya, what happened—?"

Kuryakin began to explain somewhat breathlessly until he saw Angelique within hearing distance. "Send her away—" he said severely.

“What is it?”

“Now!” the word came out like a cough. Napoleon looked up at the THRUSH.

“Fine,” she said abruptly and went upstairs.

“She’s gone. What’s the matter?”

“I called you—”

“I’m sorry, I was upstairs.”

“With *her*.”

“Yes, with her.” Despite his friend’s pain and distress, he was slightly miffed. “Look, Illya, we weren’t doing anything. We were just talking. What do you need and why did she have to leave?”

“I—have to relieve myself and I didn’t want—”

“Understood, my friend. Let’s get you back on the bed and I’ll find you a bottle. You’re not strong enough for the trek to the bathroom.”

When Illya had finished, Napoleon sat down on the edge of the cot again. “The storm is moving more slowly than anticipated. They don’t know when they’ll be able to get to us. If it doesn’t stop snowing by morning, I’ll see if I can get the bullet out of your shoulder.”

“No, it’s not worth the risk. Make some ice packs with snow and pack them around my shoulder. It’ll help with the pain and might slow down the infection.”

“All right. Do you need some more morphine to hold you over?”

The Russian smiled weakly. “Yes, but will you still respect me in the morning?”

By the time the helicopter arrived the morning of the third day, Illya had a substantial fever, and the wound was generating its own warmth despite the application of the ice packs. He was, however, still alert and conscious, a good sign. He was unable to walk to the chopper, even when aided; evidenced when he took two steps while leaning heavily on Solo and passed out. Napoleon lifted his friend and hosted him into a fireman’s carry, carefully maneuvering both himself and his burden up the stairs to the waiting transport.

The prototype gun was carefully placed in a metal lock box for transport. Solo climbed into the helicopter beside his unconscious partner and pulled the limp body sideways so the head and shoulders ended up cradled in his arms. After the chopper lifted off, Napoleon looked down and saw a black-mink-coated figure emerge from the structure. He smiled.

Napoleon stuck his head into his partner’s hospital room. “So, you were right,” he said to the occupant of the bed resting comfortably courtesy of a post-operative dose of pain-killers. “The rounds weren’t explosive, after all.”

“And that makes the prototype just another gun.”

"Well, not exactly. Research thinks the inventor fully intended to make the explosive rounds, but hadn't been able to produce a reliably workable version."

"It still doesn't explain why Angelique was there."

Napoleon chuckled. "It turns out she was telling the truth; she was in Vermont to go skiing, but had orders to check on the progress of the gun before taking her vacation."

"So, where is she now?"

"All of a sudden you're interested in the lady's whereabouts? To what do we owe this little change in attitude?"

"I just want to know where I need to stay away from. I will never understand your interest in her, Napoleon."

"That's quite all right, Illya. It's one of the qualities I admire most in you."

Illya looked at his partner incredulously. "I have absolutely no idea what you mean by that."

"Well, you just sleep on that little puzzle for a while, okay? I've got a plane to catch, so I'll see you in a few days."

"Another assignment already?"

Napoleon smiled. "No, actually, I hear the skiing in Vermont is incredible this year. I thought I'd check it out." He lifted his hand in a wave and each finger curled under in succession. "Have a good rest, *tovarichsch*."

He was gone before the pillow had sailed across the room and slapped against the door jamb.

Part 2:

Hurt: Napoleon

Comfort: Illya

Antagonist: Angelique

The situation culminated in a stand-off between Napoleon and LaCroix, the gun's inventor, each pointing their lethal weapon at the other. Illya arrived after putting the finishing touches on the incendiary charges that would level the building, and peeked in the doorway just behind his partner's adversary.

Solo caught the Russian's signal and raised his gun. "Put down your weapon, LaCroix. The game's over."

"No, Mr. Solo, it's you who will be surrendering your weapon. For if I fire this gun at you, whatever the round hits, will explode. And my aim is very good. There won't be enough left of you for UNCLE to bury."

Napoleon caught a flash of movement behind Illya. "Illya! Look out behind you!"

Kuryakin turned quickly, saw the intruder who had managed to catch him unawares, and realized Solo was now in immediate danger with the breach of his own anonymity. He flung himself at LaCroix, hitting him in a rough tackle causing the inventor's gun to discharge. LaCroix grunted in pain as he hit the floor, but made no sound after Illya rendered him unconscious with a single, well-placed punch.

Illya looked up from the body he was astride and saw Napoleon on the floor, and the intruder, Angelique LaChen, kneeling down beside him. "No—" he breathed, jumping to his feet. "Get away from him—" he growled and pushed her roughly to one side. Then he also knelt down. "Napoleon, are you all right?"

Angelique kicked at the Russian. "I was trying to help, *bête!*"¹

In obvious pain, Solo still had to smile at the two adversaries. "Now, now, children, let's not fight over the toys."

"Very funny, Napoleon." Illya lifted the hand covering an ever-widening red stain on the left shoulder and quickly examined what he could of the wound. "The round didn't detonate," he reported, half with relief, half with confusion.

"My Aunt Amy always told me to 'never look a gift horse in the mouth'," Napoleon said with a grimace.

"And my experience has taught me that things are not always what they seem to be." Kuryakin pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, pressed onto the wound and laid his friend's hand over it again. He turned to Angelique, who was standing slowly. "What do you know about this weapon?" he demanded, standing to look her in the face.

"Nothing," she replied curtly, "so you can stop glaring at me."

"Odd that you should decide to come to a remote THRUSH satrapy in Vermont in the middle of winter."

"People do take vacations, Illya, dear, even if you don't, and Vermont has some excellent ski resorts."

"You came here to go skiing?" Kuryakin asked incredulously.

Angelique looked down at Solo on the floor. "Napoleon darling, you really need to find yourself a new partner. This one is such a 'dull boy'."

Illya gave her a sour look and then ignored her. "We have to get out of here, Napoleon. The charges I set have a ten minute fuse and we've wasted half that dealing with spider-lady here." He allowed himself a smug little smile when Angelique sputtered "spider-lady" back at him followed by an oath in French. "Do you think you can walk?"

"I will certainly give it my full attention." Napoleon rolled over onto his good shoulder and got to his knees. "Be sure to get the gun. I'd hate to waste all this blood and have nothing to show for it."

¹ beast

"What do you think we should do about LaCroix and our little THRUSH snowbunny?"

"If we bring in the inventor, Mr. Waverly might see fit to give us some extra time off. You know, to keep you from becoming too dull a boy? I'm sure for the proper consideration we could get the lovely Angelique to guard him for us. What do you say, my sweet?"

"I might," the platinum blonde said, "if you have your peasant friend here look for his manners."

Napoleon saw Kuryakin roll his eyes in disgust. "I think that's a fair exchange. What do you say, Illya?"

"Since we don't have time to argue, I agree for the short term. I can always kill her later. LaCroix is still unconscious, so I'll carry him. Miss LaChein, if you would be so kind to help Mr. Solo. There's a guardhouse about a half mile from this facility. We can wait for pick up in relative comfort there."

The guard house was a two storey bunker with one level above ground and one below. The underground level was twice the square footage of the above ground level implying that the structure was designed to be somewhat independent of the facility with the off-duty shifts living below, similar to professional firehouses. Illya dumped LaCroix onto a cot, took over Napoleon's support from Angelique and helped his wounded partner down the stairs and to the nearest cot, easing him down as gently as he could.

Napoleon lay back on the cot with a heavy sigh; the half mile trek had just about sapped all of his strength. Kuryakin eased the bulky coat from the wounded shoulder and peeled back the shirt fabric, sticky with blood.

"It's still bleeding, but not as bad as before," Illya said, as if talking aloud to himself.

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be much help here."

The Russian smiled playfully. "When have you ever been much help?"

"I can't move my arm."

The smile disappeared and Illya leaned forward, concern evident on his face. "Not at all? Do you have any feeling in it?"

"Oh, yeah, that I have in spades; radiating down my arm like a pulse."

"The bullet must be pressing on a nerve."

"It shouldn't be a problem if they can get us out of here in the near future."

Illya got up suddenly. "There's a lot that needs to be done," he announced, looking at Angelique. "Do you wish to be helpful, by checking for provisions? We need to know what we have and how much, especially if we're going to be here a while. I am particularly interested in medical supplies."

To both Illya's and Solo's surprise, Angelique smiled and set herself to the task. "Now, that scares me," the blond agent murmured. "She didn't even put up a fuss."

"What are you going to do about our other guest?" Solo queried.

Illya turned in the direction of the other occupied cot. "That's right, I almost forgot about him. He walked over and found LaCroix was regaining consciousness. Quickly, he got a length of rope from one of the backpacks and secured the inventor to the top rail of the cot. "That should hold him until I'm able to deal more at length with him." He looked over at Napoleon.

"Now would be a good time to find out when our ride will be here." He pulled his silver communicator from a pocket. "I'll be right back." He headed up the stairs and a moment later Solo could hear a faint, "Open Channel D".

Kuryakin was back within minutes. "We have a bit of a problem," he reported soberly.

"Let me guess," Solo answered, "They're not coming."

"Oh, they're coming, but there's a storm heading our way and they're expecting it to drop as much as two feet over most of New England. It could be forty-eight hours or more until the snow lets up enough for them to put a helicopter in the air."

From the cot where Illya had deposited LaCroix came a vocalization of distress. "What do you want?" Illya called over.

"Untie me! I have to use the john!"

"You really should let the man relieve himself," Napoleon said.

"I'd rather see to your shoulder. Speaking of which, what's keeping Miss LaChein from her appointed rounds?" He went to the foot of the stairs and listened. Frowning slightly he went up the steps in search of the blonde THRUSH. "What devilry are you up to, Angelique?"

"I was going to open a can of stew, the only thing that looks remotely edible, but I can't find a can opener."

"Did you find any medical supplies?"

"There's some sulfa and morphine powder, bandages and the like. Not much more than that. Oh, and some aspirin."

"Good. I may need the whole bottle before this camping trip is over." He collected several packs of drugs, some bandages and a bottle of alcohol. "Save the stew for later," he told the platinum blonde. "Our friend LaCroix is awake and needs to use the facilities. I'd appreciate if you would keep an eye on him while I try to get that round out of Napoleon's shoulder."

"Are you crazy? That's an unexploded round in his shoulder! Do you want to blow us all to high heaven?"

"Something is puzzling about LaCroix's so-called explosive ammunition. And I'm not quite satisfied with your explanation about your timely arrival. A little too coincidental for my tastes. Would you care to enlighten me?"

Angelique scrutinized the blond Russian and the enigmatic smile on his face. "If I do explain the coincidence to your satisfaction, what can you offer me in return?"

“Safe passage, perhaps, but I’d like to keep the inventor, if you don’t mind.”

A smile crept across the full lips of the THRUSH. “You can keep him.”

“He must not be of much value. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be nearly so agreeable.”

“I want a promise of safe passage. I don’t want a contingent of UNCLE agents scouring the building for me.”

“I can arrange it; as a matter of fact, Napoleon would have my hide if I didn’t allow you to just fly away unnoticed.” He presented the stairway to the basement level. “If you would allow Mr. LaCroix some relief, I will find your can opener for you and meet you downstairs.”

He watched Angelique descend the stairs, and then pulled the prototype gun from his waistband. He opened the door and stood in the doorway, taking aim at a large tree fifty yards away. The gun discharged its round and imbedded itself in the trunk of the tree with a smattering of wood and bark: and no explosion.

Kuryakin looked down at the weapon and allowed himself a small chuckle. “It’s a fake, she knows it, and THRUSH suspected it,” he said quietly. He looked about the kitchen, laid the discovered can opener beside the can of stew, gathered up his first aid supplies and went downstairs.

Illya stepped off the bottom step and was nearly run over by a freed LaCroix racing across the room to the bathroom. He laid the first aid materials on the cot beside Solo and sat down. “Guess LaCroix wasn’t kidding about the bathroom. How do you feel?”

“A little left out, truth be told. What were you and Angelique talking about?”

“Something very interesting,” Illya replied, and pulled the gun from the back of his waistband. “This may very well be a prototype hand weapon, but the ammunition is bogus. I shot at a tree and there was no explosion, just a very nice hole.”

“So, there’s no reason to leave it in there.”

“Not unless you’re beginning to enjoy the paralysis and the shooting pains.”

“What did Angelique want for the information?”

“Anonymity. We get the scientist. We should make it a point to remind him that we saved his life in this deal. THRUSH most certainly suspected they weren’t getting what he promised.”

“Maybe with a little of UNCLE’s TLC, he might have better luck.”

Illya sighed. “I’m not sure I like the idea of being able to take tall buildings in a single round.”

Napoleon smiled at his partner’s play on words. “Goes against the artist in you, eh?”

“Something like that.” Kuryakin bared Napoleon’s shoulder and cleaned the blood away to reveal the wound just above the collarbone, about a third of the distance from the neck to the shoulder. “Do I have to tell you that this is probably going to hurt somewhat?”

“No, because I know you’re lying and it’s going to hurt a helluva lot.”

“Well, if you cry out, I’m sure Angelique will come to minister to you.”

“Illya, I’m in no condition to have Angelique minister to me.”

Kuryakin smiled. “Frustrating, isn’t it?” He picked up a pair of tweezers and poured alcohol over them.

“Where did you get *them*?” Solo wanted to know.

“I always carry tweezers. One never knows when they might come in handy.” He looked at Napoleon. “What? Did you think I lifted them from Angelique?”

Napoleon looked back.

“Napoleon, that would have been very ungentlemanly.” He smiled slyly. “Shall we begin?”

Solo took a deep breath, albeit painful and nodded. He grasped the side of the cot with his right hand.

While each had performed this procedure on the other, it was usually reserved for times when proper medical care was sometime in the unforeseeable future. Infection was always a worry, despite the fact that the projectile entering the body was fairly clean, having just been disinfected by an exploding charge of gunpowder. Bleeding also helped cleanse a wound, but as the world was a dirty place, sooner or later an unattended wound was ripe for infection.

Kuryakin worked carefully and as quickly as possible, as he tried to ignore the vocalizations of pain his ministering was causing. “Try to hold still,” he urged softly, but he knew Napoleon was helping him as much as was possible while his body rebelled.

After Solo could contain the moans and groans no longer, allowing a half-strangled cry to escape, they were joined by Angelique.

“So you know,” she said evenly.

Illya did not look up. “About the ammunition? Yes. But you more or less confirmed my suspicions when you were willing to let us have the scientist.”

She bent over the area where Illya was fervently trying to ease the bullet back out the shaft it had made when it entered Solo. “Is that my tweezers?”

Despite his concentration, Illya smiled. “I didn’t think you’d mind. You may have them back later.”

She straightened with a sigh. “Never mind. Keep them.”

“What did you—sorry, Napoleon—do with LaCroix? Angelique, could you hold him?”

The platinum blonde smiled. “I’d love to, Illya dear. LaCroix is locked in the bathroom. I’ll let him out in a little while.” She sat on the other side of the cot and laid her arm across Solo’s chest. “I’ll help you deal with the pain, Napoleon,” she said softly and bent forward to touch her lips to his.

Napoleon moaned but it was difficult to determine if it was from pain or from Angelique's skillful seductive skill. When his free arm found its way around the blonde seductress, Illya just shook his head and sighed. *How very like his partner...*

The removal of the bullet stimulated an upsurge of bleeding, but it was easily managed. Kuryakin mixed a poultice of morphine and sulfa in a small amount of the honey he had found in the pantry and allowed the mixture to settle into the wound. The fragrance of the honey caught the attention of both Napoleon and his "anesthesiologist".

"What are you putting on his wound?" she said curiously.

"It's honey," Napoleon answered.

"When did you study up on folk medicine, Napoleon?" Illya asked. "Honey was a favorite of my *babka*."

"I must have read it someplace for research on a mission. The high sugar content inhibits bacterial growth."

"It also makes kisses sweeter," Angelique purred.

"Your kisses are already sweet, my sweet."

Illya put the finishing touches on Solo's bandages and stood up with a disgusted grunt. "I'll leave you two to explore the intricacies of nectar concentrate." He walked away from the pair and went back upstairs to return his leftovers to the pantry.

Knowing that Napoleon was in good hands, *literally*, Illya pulled another can of beef stew from the shelf, emptied the contents of it and the one already on the counter in a saucepan. He turned the hotplate on and placed the saucepan in the center of it. While it heated, he decided to free LaCroix from the bathroom and explain the situation to the scientist.

It took little convincing. Once LaCroix realized his chances were much more attractive with UNCLE, he was willing to offer help and co-operation. "Good," Illya said thankfully. "You can go upstairs and finish heating the stew on the hot plate. Napoleon will tell you that cooking is not one of my fortes and he's somewhat occupied at the moment."

"But they are enemies!" LaCroix exclaimed when he saw the couple engaged in some very sensual kissing.

"I don't understand it either. Napoleon says it adds spice to the romance. What it adds for her is anybody's guess. All I know is they manage to juggle the lover/enemy paradox rather well." LaCroix started towards the stairway and Illya followed. "While you're not burning our supper, I'd like to discuss the principles of your prototype, and also why you chose to take your idea to THRUSH instead of UNCLE."

Over the next forty-eight hours the storm did its best to set a record for snowfall and then was carried out to sea. The occupants inside the bunker were comfortably bored as they waited out the storm.

Illya fashioned a makeshift chessboard to pass the time, but after being thoroughly trounced by his partner in two consecutive games, he yielded the board to the others. He was surprised when Angelique beat Solo, but wondered if the handsome dark-haired agent might have cleverly thrown the game to keep Angelique happy.

Napoleon then faced-off against LaCroix, a worthy opponent, who kept Solo occupied for most of the second afternoon. Illya went upstairs to check in with Boston and hopefully get an ETA. He was closing up his communicator when Angelique ascended the stairs. "The weather experts expect the storm to move off to sea later tonight. Our transport should be here sometime tomorrow morning."

The blonde smiled. "Finally," she said with a sigh. "I don't think I'd be able to stand another day of canned entrees. And no wine, utterly barbaric."

Kuryakin made a small sound of acknowledgement, but said nothing more.

"And you'll have your precious Napoleon all to yourself again."

The Russian looked up with a raised eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, I know it's been torturous for you to be stuck in close quarters with Napoleon and me."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Darling, it's obvious you have an intense dislike for me, that you much prefer Napoleon's company to mine."

"You are the enemy; so of course your statement has a ring of truth."

"And you don't find me the least bit attractive?"

Kuryakin smiled. "Let's say on a very superficial level, you have certain attributes I find pleasing. Not unlike," he added, his smile broadening, "the ladies that might be found on any street corner, in any city. However partaking of those attributes has its price, and yours, I'm afraid, is beyond my willingness to pay." He turned to go down the stairs.

"So, you think I'm merely a whore," she replied.

Illya faced her again, his face bland. "We are what we are, *mademoiselle*. We both do what we must to further our cause. If it was necessary, I would take you in a way Napoleon has never done. However, given the choice, I will say I am not attracted to you in the least, nor do I comprehend his attraction to you. But let's not take offense because someone might label what we'll do for a price." He continued downstairs, a satisfied little smile touching his lips.

Napoleon looked up from his seat on the cot. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. What affront is Angelique going to complain to me about later?"

"Just calling it as I see it," Illya replied. "How's the shoulder?"

"Well, considering who the surgeon was, remarkably well. I don't even feel like there's any kind of infection in it."

"I called Boston. They should have someone out for us tomorrow morning."

"So all you have to do is make sure Angelique doesn't kill you while you sleep tonight."

"I don't think she was particularly happy with me, but I didn't see murder in her eyes."

At that moment, the lady in question joined the two UNCLE agents. "Your friend has quite a way with words, Napoleon."

"Did he lapse from his promised gentlemanliness?"

The beautiful THRUSH smiled. "Actually, no. He was quite eloquent."

"He has his moments. Are you up for a game of chess, my sweet?"

"I am, but what I would really like to do is challenge Mr. Kuryakin here to a game."

Illya looked up. "Me?"

Angelique picked up the make-shift board and laid it on the cot next to Solo's. "Of course, darling. We are, after all, enemies."

The next morning, Napoleon was ambulatory enough to get to the helicopter under his own power. Illya and LaCroix carried the gear and climbed in after Solo. As the helicopter lifted off, Illya looked down and saw a black mink-coated figure emerge from the bunker.

Napoleon stuck his head in the doorway of his partner's lab. "Hey there."

Illya, LaCroix and two other weapons technicians looked up. "Why aren't you in Medical?" Illya asked.

"The doc cleared me for light duty. Said the person who worked on my shoulder did a good job. You know, if the secret agent job doesn't work out for you, you might have a career in medicine."

"I'll give it all the consideration it's due. We've got the prototype apart. A very nice piece of hardware. Care to take a look?"

"No, I'm going to take a couple of days off."

Illya followed Solo into the hall. "I'm sure you have a bevy of young ladies all waiting to minister to you in your weakened condition."

Napoleon smiled at the prospect. "No, actually I was going to take the time to see a friend."

Illya looked at him curiously; then when realization hit him, he frowned slightly. "Oh, Napoleon, how could you?"

"Well, she did say she was in Vermont for the skiing and we didn't have a whole lot of privacy in that bunker."

“I might just take you back to Medical and see if you’re suffering from delirium.”

“C’mon, Illya. You have more than enough to do with LaCroix’s prototype and I could use a few days off to recuperate.”

“You mean you want to be unavailable so I have to write the report.”

Napoleon lifted his arm nestled comfortably in a sling. “But Illya, I’m incapacitated.” He flashed his famous charming smile.

Kuryakin sighed heavily, resigned. “Oh, all right. But do be careful. I trust Angelique about as far as I can throw her.”

“You’re still smarting over the way she slaughtered you in that chess game.”

“Don’t remind me. I guess I’ll see you in a few days.”

“That’s right,” Napoleon said. “Unless I get snowed in.” He turned from his partner, leaving the blond Russian staring after him, pondering all the ramifications.

—THE END—