The
Lizard's Log
and
Owlet's Wing
Affair

by C.W. Walker
with thanks to DiT and N.L. Hayes

## Act I

"Fillet of fenny snake, In the cauldron boil and bake;"

1.

"I SEE LOVE in your future, Napoleon."

Mandy Stevenson turned the card over with a snap.

"So what else is new?" Illya Kuryakin mumbled to himself, as he sat beside his partner in the busy U.N.C.L.E. commissary and finished his lunch. He could have made the same prediction and he didn't need tarot cards to do it. Napoleon Solo went through women nearly as often as most men changed razor blades. Solo ignored the Russian's mutterings and focused his attention on Mandy. He didn't really care about the cards or having his fortune told. But he had the upcoming weekend free and the use of a beach house, and he knew Mandy loved the ocean, so he humored her.

The pretty Portuguese translator continued to flip over a row of cards. "Ah, this is interesting..."

"Not too interesting, I hope," Solo said over the din of the lunch hour crowd. Lately, life had been interesting enough.

During the past several months, he'd been involved in a plane crash, two fires — one aboard ship, the other in a barn, — four high-speed car chases, six running gun battles and at least a dozen brawls of varying duration and intensity. He'd been pummeled, knifed, sideswiped, and singed. He'd been knocked out, tied up, shot down and pushed off the roof of a three-story building. Fortunately, in the last case, there'd been an awning to catch him, though his left knee still required therapy.



An eventful season, to say the least. Now it was the end of April. The annual twin Section Two conferences, attended by virtually all U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agents in the world, were scheduled for the first week of May. Solo was slated to deliver the keynote speech at the Western Hemisphere conference, to be held in Paris. Kuryakin would perform the same chore at the Eastern gathering in Calcutta.

Although all the arrangements had been made for both meetings, there were still some last minute details to iron out. The Brazilian agents, for example, had been unable to secure decent hotel accommodations yet, while the Canadians needed air transportation to and from the Arctic Circle. Solo planned to spend the next ten days hanging around the office, composing his speech and attending to the administrative matters he so often neglected.

"... But I see complications," Mandy was saying as Solo drifted back to the reality of the noisy commissary. "I'm sorry — ?"

"Complications. Oh Napoleon, I don't think you've been listening to any of this." Mandy's lips puckered into a disappointed pout.

Uh-oh, Solo thought and moved quickly to repair the damage. He reached for her hand that held the deck of cards and patted it. "Of course I'm listening, dear. I'm just a little preoccupied, that's all. But please, go on. It's, ah, fascinating."

At his elbow, Kuryakin gave a scornful snort, but Mandy was concentrating too hard on interpreting the tarot layout to notice. She pointed to another card depicting a knight on a horse.

"See here? This means that you're going to have a rival. He'll have blond hair and blue eyes."

"Don't look at me," Kuryakin growled as Solo turned automatically to him. "I shall be too busy preparing for my conference to pose a significant threat to your love life."

He wouldn't be a likely candidate anyway, Illya told himself, even if he had the time. To say that he and Napoleon didn't always see eye to eye, was something of an understatement. They were U.N.C.L.E.'s odd couple, an introverted, introspective pragmatist paired with an outgoing, romantic idealist, and they differed in almost everything, from politics to personal temperaments to their overall orientations toward life.

Considering the situation, disagreements were inevitable. Indeed, it was a wonder the agents were able to function together as well as they did. Yet, they

seldom quarreled over the hordes of eligible women who naturally came their way. The two men had a simple, unspoken understanding. Every once in a while, Kuryakin would pick out a woman for himself — usually one skilled in art or music, who was less seasoned, more traditional and a little shy — and Solo took all the rest.

Mandy Stevenson fell into the latter category. She was a nice girl, enjoyable and pleasant enough, but a little too flighty and foolish for Kuryakin's taste. Napoleon was welcome to his weekend at the beach. Right now, the Russian felt more ardent about dessert.

"Did you try the Boston cream pie?" he asked aloud, digging into the generous slice on his plate. "It's especially good today."

Without taking his eyes from Mandy's cards, Solo made a face. He was currently counting calories in an effort to shed some winter weight. Lunch had consisted of coffee and a salad plate. Unlike the wiry Russian, Solo did not have a digestive tract as seemingly bottomless as Del Floria's bomb disposal tank

Once more, Solo disregarded his partner's unsolicited comments and renewed his efforts with Mandy. He'd have to endure a few more minutes of this before she'd be complaisant enough to guarantee that his proposal, when he made it, would meet with reasonable success.

"What do these cards mean?" he asked, feigning more enthusiasm than he actually felt.

"That one is called the Sun. The other's the Moon."
"And the one in-between them?"

"The Enchantress."

Solo studied the arrangement. "Is that good? I mean, to have those particular cards fall together like that?"

Mandy chewed the nail of her index finger pensively. "Gee, I don't really know. Give me a second. I'll have to look it up."

Solo waited as she thumbed through a tattered reference book. Although he still didn't believe that cards could forecast the future, his curiosity had been piqued by the elaborate illustrations.

Just then, George Dennel appeared with his lunch in hand. Solo noted with some disgust that the bespectacled security chief also had a slice of the pie on his tray.

"So this is where you guys have been all afternoon. What've you been doing down here anyway?"

"Hiding in plain sight," Kuryakin responded petulantly, declining to offer a more direct answer, though he thought of one. He was also tempted to point out that eighty minutes was hardly all afternoon, but he let it pass. George was a friend, even if he always managed to grate on Kuryakin's nerves.

"Something's up," Dennel said, keeping his voice low. "The Old Man wants to see you two right away."

"I told you we should've gone out for lunch," Kuryakin reminded his partner.

Solo heaved a weary sigh. There goes the weekend...He gathered up their plates and silverware while Kuryakin wolfed down the last of his pie. Mandy was still rifling through her reference guide as they rose to leave.

"I'll have it in another minute," she assured Solo, but he shook his head.

"Sorry, gotta go. You can tell me next time."

If there was a next time. Waverly's little emergencies had an irritating habit of inflating into full-blown, life-and-death affairs.

"Okay," Mandy agreed, still searching through the book, "next time. Maybe then I'll read your cards too, huh, Illya?"

"No, thank you," Kuryakin replied politely. "There are some things that man was not meant to know."

As they walked away, toward the ground level elevator, Solo asked, "Is that another one of those sayings from your grandmother?"

"No." Kuryakin allowed himself a small grin. "Universal Pictures."

2.

A soon as the door opened to admit the agents to the outer office of the executive suite, they knew that Dennel had been correct. Lisa Rogers looked up from her intercom and her face said it all. The Old Man was indeed waiting for them, and he was not accustomed to waiting. When Waverly wanted to see his subordinates, he wanted to see them immediately, in that very instant, now.

"He's been searching high and low for you," the secretary informed Solo as he breezed on past her desk, his partner trailing close behind.

"So we heard," Solo replied. "How long?"

"Fifteen minutes at least."

Fifteen minutes! Christ. To Alexander Waverly, that was practically an eternity.

Solo combed his fingers through his hair and quickened his stride, heading for the opposite door that led to the inner sanctum. Kuryakin trotted double time in an effort to keep up.

"Where've you two been all afternoon, anyway?"

Lisa Roger's question floated unanswered in their wake, but Kuryakin heard it and it made him angry. He felt like a wayward schoolboy caught playing hooky from school.

Since when is eating lunch a crime? the Russian thought indignantly. Sometimes, it seemed that Waverly was embarrassed by the fact that his enforcement agents needed to eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom from time to time. The Old Man expected them to act like avenging angels in the fullest sense of the term: indomitable, indestructible, preternatural. Always poised to be summoned, magically, like spirits from thin air, by a single word.

"Ah, gentlemen. So here you are," Waverly said as the steel panel slid aside and on cue, the two agents appeared. The boss was not alone and true to form, it was Solo who matched a name to the visitor's handsome, chiseled face.

"How do you do, Mr. McLeod? I'm Napoleon Solo." The agent extended his hand and smiled as he mentally abstracted from the U.N.C.L.E. dossier:

Peter McLeod. Thirty-eight years old. Unmarried. Only son of the late Scottish entrepreneur, Bruce McLeod. Born a penniless baronet, the father had also been a shrewd if unscrupulous businessman, who built himself a lucrative, far-flung and commercially diverse empire. He and his wife, Moira, had been killed in a freak boating accident four years ago, leaving the son chairman of the board of McLeod Industries and, according to a recent issue of Forbes magazine, one of the ten richest men in the world.

"A pleasure," McLeod said without meaning it. He grasped Solo's proffered hand brusquely, indifferently, as if there just wasn't enough time to shake it properly. Solo made a note of this, appended it to his mental file, and withdrew to his usual seat beside Waverly.

Kuryakin made a similar stab at courtesy and was similarly dismissed. He hardly noticed. The Russian was more interested in the little glob of chalky paste smeared on a thin pane of glass currently displayed on the other side of the conference table. He revolved the table to take a closer look at it.

"Hydro-styrene nitrate isn't it?" Kuryakin asked aloud, identifying the substance.

"Very good Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly complimented the Russian as the latter dropped into his own customary seat, to the left of his partner. Solo offered him a sidelong glance but Kuryakin's answering wink was barely perceptible. You stay abreast of the social register, my friend, it said, and leave the technical details to me.



"We prefer to use the trade name, actually. We call it 'Aqualite'," MacLeod said. "Sounds somewhat less nasty, don't you agree?"

Kuryakin tipped his chin, conceding the point. Solo frowned. Was he missing something here? The stuff in front of him looked like ordinary toothpaste.

"Aqualite?" he repeated hazily. Kuryakin leaned forward, eager to brief him. In the course of their ongoing friendly rivalry, opportunities to best Solo were few and far between. Kuryakin never passed one up.

"Yes, Napoleon. Mr. McLeod, if you'll permit me—

McLeod waved his hand and Kuryakin continued. "HSN, Hydro-styrene nitrate — or Aqualite — is a nitrate compound in an emulsion of low density polystyrene that ..."

"In layman's terms, if you please, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly cut in, and Solo murmured under his breath, "Speak English."

Kuryakin turned pointedly toward his partner and began again. "In plain, simple, layman's English, Aqualite is a new, revolutionary type of explosive."

"Explosive?" Now, Solo was interested.

"That's right. In its present physical state, it's conveniently pliable and portable and incidentally, also quite stable. However, when water is added and heat applied, it becomes as volatile as nitroglycerine."

"Oh, even more so, I daresay," Waverly corrected him. "A quarter cup of water combined with a mere three ounces of Aqualite could destroy this entire complex."

Solo studied the homely sample with new respect, although it still looked like just so much Pepsodent to him. He inclined his head toward Kuryakin and whispered, "A little dab of that and it's, 'Look Ma, no cavities.'

"More likely, 'Look Ma, no head'," Kuryakin shot back. Waverly cleared his throat to reclaim their attention.

"Gentlemen, Aqualite is currently in its final stage of development and one of Mr. McLeod's subsidiaries is scheduled to begin production at the end of the summer. In the meantime, however, Mr. McLeod has graciously selected U.N.C.L.E. to perform the field tests."

"So what's the problem?" Solo asked, anxious to get to the heart of the matter. The senior agent knew there must be a problem or he and Illya would not be sitting there. Section Two operatives were too busy and their time too valuable, to conduct routine field tests.

"It's my sister —," McLeod declared abruptly.

"I beg your pardon?"

" — My sister, Rhianna."

As Solo rapidly scanned his memory for the name, McLeod sighed dramatically and folded his smooth, well-manicured hands. "My father raised me to take my proper place in the world. I spent my youth traveling, meeting the right people, attending school in London and on the continent..."

That explains the absence of a brogue, Solo told himself. Since the beginning of their conference, he'd been bothered by McLeod's dry, clipped, upper-crust British accent without consciously knowing why.

"... On the other hand, Rhianna — well, she's a dear, sweet, lovely girl, but she's always been rather reclusive. We sent her to a public school in Edinburgh — high school, I believe you call it here — and for a time, she seemed to be coming out of her shell. But you know, our parents died so tragically and being the sensitive soul that she is, Rhianna was very cut up about it. She retreated back to Duncreagan. That's a small island off the northwest coast of Scotland. My family's ancestral home. She's been living there with just a few servants ever since."

"Excuse me, Mr. McLeod," Solo said politely, "but I still don't understand the problem."

The industrialist took a long, exaggerated breath and his shoulders sagged slightly under his expensively tailored Saville Row suit. "Ah yes, the problem. Well. About a month ago, I began receiving threats concerning my sister..."

"What sort of threats?" Kuryakin asked.

"Letters. Strange, peculiar letters. I have one here." He reached into his pocket, produced a wrinkled piece of paper and passed it to Kuryakin. The stationery looked like brittle, aged onionskin and the script was elaborate and flowing, like calligraphy.

"Quite a muddle as you can see," McLeod added.

Kuryakin put on his reading glasses and squinted hard in an effort to decipher the difficult handwriting. He could translate a few words: soror, mortuus, malleus, maledictum. The rest was in an unfamiliar language. While the message seemed vague, the general intent was perfectly clear: to scare the hell out of the reader.

"It appears to be in Latin," the Russian agent remarked with mild surprise as he handed it to Napoleon.

"— And Gaelic, or so my advisors tell me," McLeod said. He smiled tightly. "Dead languages were never my best subjects."

"Gaelic is hardly dead, Mr. McLeod," Kuryakin corrected him.

"In any event, a man in my position is often a target for lunatics and charlatans. I might have dismissed these straight away, if it were not for the fact that my late father once dabbled in the occult."

Waverly harrumphed from his seat at the head of the table. "That's putting it rather charitably, wouldn't you say, Mr. McLeod? Your father did more than dabble. His keen interest in witchcraft and the so-called Black Arts was well known. He belonged to the notorious Silver Crescent Society — a charter member, as I recall."

Chastened, the industrialist shrugged. "A bunch of dotty old flakers in robes. I never paid much attention to that mob."

"Maybe it's time that you did," Solo observed wisely. "Indeed, Mr. Solo, indeed. Last Sunday, my sister's favorite pet cat was found on the front steps of Duncreagan Hall, beheaded, disemboweled and impaled on an heirloom dagger."

McLeod leveled his gaze at the agents. "Rhianna will be twenty-one on the first of May, and despite the considerable disparity in our ages, we're very close. I don't have to say it gentlemen, do I? This whole business is extremely troubling for me, and your assistance will be greatly appreciated."

Before either Solo or Kuryakin could ask what, specifically, that assistance might entail, McLeod checked his watch and stood up. "Well, then, there you

have it. I must be running. A company plane is at your disposal. Alex, here, will fill you in on the details. I thank you for your trouble, gentlemen."

And then, he was gone. As the door swished shut behind him, the agents turned to their superior. Waverly was reaching for his pipe and humidor.

"I assume this means that we will be leaving for the northwest coast of Scotland momentarily," Kuryakin said.

"You assume correctly, Mr. Kuryakin," the old man replied without looking up. He was already intent on stuffing the tobacco properly into the bowl of his pipe.

"But surely you don't believe in this witchcraft nonsense, sir," Solo chimed in.

"No, but I do believe that there are evil forces at work in the world."

"Thrush," Kuryakin muttered and their superior nodded.

"With Aqualite at this precarious stage of development, we cannot afford to have Mr. McLeod in a such an extremely vulnerable position. Obviously, the man could send in his own bodyguards, but everyone around him is suspect. We must find out who is doing this and why — and quickly."

"A beautiful girl, alone and in danger, living in a castle on a gloomy, windswept isle," Solo said aloud. He sat back and smiled as he conjured up the vision.

"It does sound like a situation worthy of the Brontë sisters," Waverly agreed. "However, our task is not to bring romance into this young woman's life, but only to insure that her life continues. Please bear that in mind."

"I will, sir."

"Arrangements have been made to deliver you to Duncreagan," Waverly went on as he rooted through his pockets for a match. "Both of you are booked on this evening's flight to Heathrow, where you'll make connections to Glasgow, and then to Inverness, and then travel on to the Island of Skye." When Kuryakin's eyebrow arched in surprise, Waverly shrugged apologetically. "Mr. McLeod did offer us the resources of his corporation, but I thought it might be more prudent to keep to public transport." He changed the subject. "You'll work in twelve-hour shifts. I want a round-the-clock guard put on that young woman. One of you must be at her side at all times."

"Yes, sir," the agents answered in chorus and rose to leave. Waverly found his match and set it to his pipe.

"Oh, and Mr. Solo?" he called out, between puffs. Solo had nearly reached the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"You'll take the day shift."

Solo glanced at Kuryakin, who stifled a laugh. "Yes, sir," he said again.

3.

A LTHOUGH THE AGENTS LEFT for the airport with time to spare, a tractor-trailer had overturned on the Van Wyck Expressway, effectively bottling up the rush hour traffic for miles. Behind the wheel of a car-pool Chrysler, Kuryakin tried every alternate route he knew — and some he didn't. He even slipped down a one-way street in Queens the wrong way, but for all his efforts, they still missed their seven o' clock flight.

And that was just the beginning of their troubles. The next plane at ten was completely booked, prompting Solo to attempt some creative maneuvering of his own. With Illya perched gloomily on their suitcases behind him, Napoleon sweet-talked two clerks and bribed a third to secure two seats in the already crowded coach section.

The plane took off forty minutes late and developed an unspecified problem at Heathrow, which kept it on the ground an extra hour. When they finally landed at Prestwick, the agents were running four hours behind schedule, forcing them to race through the terminal to meet their connection to Inverness. It was an eightseater shuttle that flew only once a day, and they barely made it.

From Inverness, they took the train and then a ferry to Skye, and eventually found themselves in Broadford, the largest village on the southern end of the island. The town was a homely collection of modernized hotels and tourist shops, a rather disappointing introduction to one of the loveliest corners of Scotland. The guidebooks called Skye the "winged" island, because of its unusual shape, and Eilean á Cheò, the Isle of Mists.

Fortunately, the agents managed to locate a local car rental agency, which offered them an ancient Bently to drive to their final destination, on the other side of the island. Not so fortunately, the old car gave up the ghost, about halfway there.

Solo and Kuryakin ended up hauling their suitcases several miles along the road, before a sympathetic farmer in a passing horse-drawn haywagon, offered them a lift. By the time the wagon lumbered within sight of the fishing village of Geilt, Solo was convinced that evil forces were involved, after all.

"The only diabolical power at work here, my friend, is the inscrutable mind of a stubborn old man," Kuryakin said as he huddled against a pile of rainsoaked hay. "It would have been so much simpler to take McLeod's plane."

Sitting on the other end of the wagon, his legs dangling over the edge, Solo shrugged carelessly. "You heard Mr. Waverly. There may be traitors within the company. We couldn't take the chance of tipping them off to our presence."

Solo was right, of course, and Kuryakin knew it, but the Russian agent was too damp, too jet-lagged, and too chilled to the bone to give his partner the satisfaction of saying so.

"Besides," Solo added, "just think of all we would have missed." He gestured toward the gentle, olive green hills dotted with black-faced sheep and whitewashed cottages that surrounded them on either side.

"I am thinking about it," Kuryakin retorted peevishly, but Solo was too entranced by the scenery to care. To call it breathtakingly dramatic would have been an understatement.

Ever since Broadford, they had been traveling through fields and forests, vast tracts of wild, unspoiled land, tempered only by austere little villages and the tenant farms the Scots called, "crofts." Behind them, to the east, lay the sea and the neighboring isles of Scalpay and Raasay. To the north, stretched a rugged highland country of abandoned castles and lonely lochs, while in the south, the jagged granite peaks of the Cuillins range stabbed, black and brittle, at the overcast sky.

"God, I love this part of the world," Solo said aloud. "It's like we've gone back, five, six hundred years."

"And all of it spent in tourist."

Solo merely chuckled. There was no dealing with Illya when he was nursing one of his dark Russian moods.

"I think the Old Man just likes to see us suffer," Kuryakin complained to no one in particular. He picked a piece of straw from his matted hair, sneezed violently, and yanked the collar of his trench coat up. It was beginning to drizzle for about the third time in as many hours.

"He claims it's good for the soul," Solo replied, determined not to allow his partner's sour temper or the unreliable weather to compromise his good humor.

"But hell on the sinuses," Kuryakin added, and sneezed again.

Geilt — or Geylt, as the Gaelic-speaking natives pronounced it — was an unremarkable collection of

shabby, weather-beaten houses, clinging to the shore, wedged between a wall of tiered cliffs and a stony bay. A ramshackle quay provided sheltered anchorage for the poor fishing fleet and easy access to the deeper waters of Loch Bracadale.

As the agents made their way to the dock, in search of the boatman who was supposed to meet them, splintered beams from the setting sun suddenly pierced through the clouds. They penetrated the mist and burnished it with a golden glow, illuminating it from within, like a lamp. Solo looked out toward the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of Duncreagan, but all he could see was a muddy brown shadow, floating far off, in the shimmering mist.

When they found no boat waiting for them, Solo accosted the first fisherman he saw. "Excuse me, sir. I'm looking for a man named Willy McAllister. Do you know him?"

The fisherman, an old salt who tended his nets with great care, seemed friendly enough. "Aye laddie, we've had a fair passin' acquaintance."

"Have you seen him?"

"Och naw, I've no' laid eyes on Wully this day. But ye might hie yerselves to the Burnin' Hare to find him." The old fisherman pointed to a three-story building, the tallest structure among the squat cottages, and winked conspiratorially. "Ol'Auld Wully, ye know, he's gae fond o' the wee dram noo and then."

The agents thanked him and headed off. As it turned

out, the Burning Hare was not only a pub, but the village guesthouse as well. Outside, a wooden sign depicting a rabbit licked by flames, hung over the entrance. Inside, a pleasant, portly, middle-aged matron doubled as bartender and innkeeper. Solo went to her first to inquire about McAllister.

"We were told he comes to the village everyday," Solo explained.

Wiping her hands in her canvas apron, the woman nodded. "Aye, sir, 'tis true. Willy comes in reg'lar, for supplies."

"Aye, puir Willy," the man leaning against the bar next to Solo's elbow, mumbled softly.

"But it's near to suppertime. Willy's long gone by the noo. He'll be back t'morrow."

The agents exchanged glances, and Kuryakin shook his head, annoyed. They couldn't wait until tomorrow. The woman eyed the agents' suitcases. "And what would ye be needin' him for, might I ask?"

"He was supposed to take us to Duncreagan," Solo said.

"Ye mean Creag aig Dubh?" the man beside him, rasped in surprise, pronouncing the last word like "doo".

"Ah, — I don't know." Solo gestured toward the window, which offered a splendid view of the loch. "The island out there."

In response, a low murmur rumbled among the dozen or so locals scattered around the pub. Curious, Kuryakin turned to discover what all the whispered



conversation was about, but the two fishermen sitting at a nearby table, merely stopped talking and avoided his gaze.

"Creag aig Dubh, Duncreagan — 'tis the same," said the woman innkeeper.

Solo checked his watch. It was nearly six.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to find someone else to take us," the agent declared aloud. He locked eyes with the innkeeper, gave her the warmest smile he could muster and asked, "Do you think you could help us?"

Predictably, the woman blushed, but before she could answer, the man at the bar growled, "No' much ye can do for a man who doesnae know where he's goin'."

"Ooh, be still, Shooey," the innkeeper scolded, snapping her dishcloth against the edge of the bar. She turned back to Solo with an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid he's right, mind. Even without the night comin' on, there's no one in the village likely to take ye."

"We'd pay him well."

The woman shook her head sadly, as the man called Huey observed with a chuckle, "Ye dinna have pockets muckle enough to hold sae many coins."

"Then, could you tell us, please, where we might rent a boat?" Kuryakin chimed in. The innkeeper shrugged her plump shoulders helplessly, prompting the Russian agent to exclaim in disgust, "Oh, this is ridiculous. Come on, Napoleon. We're wasting time."

He hefted both suitcases and without waiting for his partner to follow, marched from the pub. Solo turned back to the innkeeper who told him, "Ye can have a room here, for the night. Ye bound to see Willy in the mornin'."

"Thanks anyway, but we have very urgent business on Duncreagan."

"What sort o' urgent business?" Shooey called out as Solo opened the door.

The agent hesitated before answering, "Family business."

"Ye see, Katie?" Huey chided the innkeeper after Solo was gone. "An' ye askin' him to stay!"

"Och now, Shooey, away wi' ye. Any fool can see they're ordin'ry God-fearin' men — Americans, from the look of it."

"Maybe," the man said, unconvinced. "An' then again, maybe not. Maybe ye were just taken in by his charmin' eye and flatterin' ways."

The woman laughed and poured him another shot of whisky, but when she peered out the window to look for the agents, her smile faded.

4.

HE DISCOURAGING PREDICTIONS proved to be accurate. No one would take them to Duncreagan. No one would even lease them a boat at any price — which was par for the course on this trip, as far as Kuryakin was concerned.

With night falling fast, the agents gave up and trudged back to the Burning Hare. The reception they received was far chillier this time around. In fact, it was only after Solo gently reminded the innkeeper of her earlier offer that she grudgingly rented them a room.

They went outside, to another entrance located at the rear of the inn, and climbed the stairs to a second-story hallway, flanked by six rooms with a shared bath at either end. The agents' room was modest but clean, with twin featherbeds. Although it was pointless to unpack, they both washed up with the brown-tinged water and changed into fresh clothing.

Later, as they crossed the yard of the inn, on their way down to the pub for a late supper, the agents met the man called Shooey. He and another local were coaxing a small bonfire to life.

Shooey's companion was large and ruddy-faced. He was dressed in a heavy wool jacket, with a string of dead rabbits slung over one brawny arm.

"Good hunting, I see," Kuryakin observed, in an effort to make polite conversation. With a shower and dry clothing, he was feeling a tad more sociable.

"Ye fancy the hare now, d'ye?" the big man responded. Kuryakin shrugged.

"I can take them or leave them." The agent had eaten rabbit before, which he considered close enough, and it was far from his favorite dish.

"Best to leave them, then. There's bu' one use for those hereabouts."

And with that, the big hunter cut through the rope that bound the carcasses together and tossed them into the fire. He sprinkled some water from a palm-sized bottle over the blaze, and watched as the flames sputtered and spit bluish sparks. Satisfied, he turned to the agents and said, "The same end awaits those who run wi' the hares — if ye catch my meanin'."

Kuryakin glanced at Solo, but the latter said nothing. He wasn't yet ready to put into words what he was thinking.

Dinner was a plate of stringy beef, served with turnips and potatoes boiled in their skins. The agents ate in silence, acutely aware of the stares and mutterings that surrounded them in the crowded pub. Kuryakin ended the meal with a hot apple tart, but Solo skipped dessert in favor of a much-needed "half-and-half" — a dram of whisky with a half-pint of beer for a chaser.

Thoroughly exhausted and reluctant to linger any longer than necessary, Kuryakin retreated to their room early, while Solo lagged behind to pay the bill. He also left a generous tip, though he didn't suppose it would do much to win over the suspicious locals.

On the way back, Solo was relieved to find the bonfire smoldering and nearly burnt out. Huey and his friend were gone.

But inside the inn, Kuryakin was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. The expression on the Russian's face told Solo that his sense of relief was premature.

"What now?" the dark-haired agent asked, afraid to hear the answer. Kuryakin pointed to the door of their room. The mutilated, disembodied head of a hare was nailed to it, with the word, geasadair scrawled in blood, below it.

"They have some rather unusual taste in interior decorating here," Solo cracked, but he wasn't laughing.

"I feel as if we're in the middle of a bad horror movie," Kuryakin said, angrily. He ripped the head from the nail, tearing one slender ear in half, and flung it down, to the bottom of the stairwell. The head landed with a gruesome splat.

Wincing, Solo was not about to disagree. They both slept that night, not only with their guns tucked under their goose down pillows, but with their hands wrapped tightly around the butts of their guns, as well.

5.

HERE SHE IS, GENTLEMEN," Willy McAllister said, from where he sat at the back of the skiff, one hand clutching the throttle arm of the outboard motor. The old man pointed and added, "Duncreagan!"

The announcement was less for information than for dramatic effect. The agents could see the isle for themselves, slowly materializing before them, as the late-morning sun burned away the mist.

Duncreagan was much larger than the neighboring isles, and irregularly shaped. From the sea wall back at Geilt, Solo thought the isle looked like a mermaid, reclining languorously on her rock. Now, two miles and fifty minutes closer, he could see that the illusion was created by the unusual architecture of Duncreagan Hall.

Rising above granite cliffs that were as dark and

formidable as the Cuillins range, the hall was actually a proper British manor house mated to a primitive stone keep. The house boasted the usual parapets and turrets and looked about two centuries old. The keep, a stark, nearly windowless tower, was considerably older.

"We'll take her round to the north'rn side," McAllister shouted over the whine of the outboard and the violent bouncing of the skiff. Although the day was clear, the deep blue waters of the loch were rough and choppy. Overhead, the skies were filled with the screeching cries of gannets and circling flocks of black and white gulls.

" 'Spect it'll be a wee bit smoother there."

Solo fervently hoped so. He could feel the oatmeal porridge congealing into a solid lump in his stomach. "I don't think we should've stopped for breakfast," the agent said, leaning close to Kuryakin. The Russian nodded.

"Particularly since Willy drank his."

McAllister steered the little boat to the right, around the tip of Duncreagan, navigating through the treacherous, rock-studded shoals. Eventually, they floated into a cove, sheltered from the prevailing winds. As the old man tied the skiff to a rickety dock, the agents hopped out. The dock was badly in need of repair, and groaned loudly underfoot.

"Mind yer step there, laddies," the old man warned, offering the agents a gap-toothed grin. He pulled a flask from his back pocket, took a healthy swig, and squinted up, to the top of the cliffs. There was no one in sight.

"Och, I see that Winnie, dear lass, couldna spare the time to meet us wi' the carriage," the old man observed. "Reckon you'll have to walk all the way." He rubbed his grizzled cheek, thoughtfully. "'Course, that shouldna be a problem for two strong, young lads like yerselves."

The hike wasn't far, but most of it was nearly straight up.

"Next time, remind me to pack a lighter suitcase," Solo said, as they lugged their bags up the steep path.

"Forget the suitcase," Kuyrakin grunted, between breaths. "Next mission, I'm going to pack a knapsack."

McAllister followed them to Duncreagan Hall, and then with a few mumbled apologies, deserted them at the front door. Solo's knock was answered by a tall, raven-haired chambermaid with rosy cheeks and a flirty eye. She offered them a quick once-over and said, grinning, "This way, sirs. The mistress is waitin'on ye."

She led them down a long, portrait-lined gallery,

then through a maze of high-ceilinged rooms, sprawling, and cluttered and comfortably furnished. They ended the tour in a music room, located at the rear of the manor house. The maid left them alone and withdrew. Solo expected to meet Rhianna McLeod momentarily, but instead, a rasping voice said, "Good day to ye, gentlemen. Ye must be the men sent by U.N.C.L.E."

The agent twisted on his heel and found a tiny wizened old woman standing behind him. One moment, the room had been empty. The next moment, she was there.

Startled, Solo shot a quick glance at Kuryakin. On the other side of a massive, overstuffed sofa, the Russian raised an eyebrow in response. Apparently, he hadn't heard her footsteps, either.

"Welcome to Duncreagan. I'm Isobel Black, the housekeeper."

"Napoleon Solo — and this is my partner, Illya Kuryakin."

Isobel was fragile and birdlike. She had a pale, narrow face and snow-white hair, as fine as spun sugar that contrasted sharply with

her floor-length black widow's dress. When she held out a thin, bony hand to him, Solo kissed it lightly. The housekeeper smiled.

She had feared that the visitors would be inappropriate or unequal to the task, either small-minded bureaucrats or blunt and coarse, like the provincial constables.

But these two were perfect — with an aggressive masculinity distilled through intelligence and charm, as smooth and easy to take as good whisky. She pressed each agent's hand in turn, sensing the strength in them. These were hands that could kill, and probably had. Both men smelled of blood and death.

And yet, they had manners, too. She noted the weapons hidden under their expensively cut suits and thought that ages ago, they might have come here, with sabers worn buckled to their belts. Rhianna, who loved her ballads of knights and ladies, would be pleased.

Although she was careful to conceal her own excitement, Isobel was enormously pleased, herself. She felt confident now. Unwittingly, Peter had sent her exactly the sort of men she required. Things would go her way, after all.

"An' ye say that Willy made ye climb the braes draggin' yer baggage?" the housekeeper asked with genuine concern, when the introductions were over.

"We didn't mind the exercise," Solo replied with a good-natured shrug. He decided it was best not to mention their overnight stay at Geilt. Isobel shook her head, annoyed.

"'Tis a poor greetin' for such distinguished guests as yerselves. Och, bu' ye see, the man is worthless! A caretaker who cares only for himself. I don' know why I allow him to work here."

She paused to consider the matter briefly, then dismissed it. She'd deal with Willy, later.

"Well, ye both must be weary from yer long journey. Fiona will show ye to yer rooms." The tall, pretty maid, who conducted them earlier, suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"We were hoping to discuss the problems you've been experiencing here recently —," Solo began, but Isobel politely cut him off.

"Plenty o' time for that. We'll speak of it later, o'er supper. Here on Duncreagan, supper is always served at eight o'clock."

"And Rhianna?"

"Ye'll meet her then, too. Remember now: eight sharp."

"We shall, Madam," Kuryakin assured her, relieved that the interview was over. He hadn't slept much the night before, and since he'd be serving the first watch tonight, he desperately needed a nap. Solo, who was less eager to be dismissed so soon, retreated reluctantly.

"Have a good rest, gentlemen," Isobel called after them. When the door closed, she added, "Nae doubt, ye'll need it."



## Act II

"Eye of newt, and toe of frog, Wool of bat and tongue of dog;"

1.

HE AGENTS WERE INSTALLED in separate rooms, on different floors, in opposite wings of the manor house. The maid, Fiona, claimed that these were the only two guest suites equipped with private baths, but Solo wasn't quite sure he believed her.

The agent's own room was large and pleasant, situated at the rear of the first floor, overlooking the gardens. It was a beautiful afternoon and warm sunlight streamed in through the double French windows.

With his suitcase unpacked and Kuryakin sleeping somewhere upstairs, Solo decided to go exploring on his own. It was too nice a day to stay indoors. He would spend the next few hours scouting the grounds.

The stone keep of Duncreagan Hall stood watch over the northern bluffs, while the manor house faced east, toward the Island of Skye. Behind it, to the south and west, sprawled several acres of walled gardens and beyond that, lay the stables and carriage houses. The rest of the isle, another square mile or more, remained rocky scrubland, wild and undeveloped. Through his binoculars, Solo couldn't find the trace of a village, or even a croft. Except for the seabirds, some small game and an occasional red deer, no one lived here but the inhabitants of Duncreagan Hall.

Solo lowered the binoculars for a moment, and allowed the stiff breeze to wash over his face. It was so peaceful here, so quiet, so utterly removed from the so-called civilized world. For someone in his profession, in which the pressures of commitment and survival often bordered on insanity, places like this held an especially seductive allure.

No wonder some agents retire to monasteries, Solo thought. Obedience was already a reflex and poverty, probably a relief. He might have considered it, himself, if it were not for the vow of chastity...

A sound suddenly intruded and broke his train of thought. It was a new sound, the sound of a woman singing.

Solo twisted to listen, searching for the source. The words were muffled and indistinct but the sweet, lovely soprano floated on the breeze, weaving in and out,



among the screeching cries of the gulls.

The agent followed it to the garden, and pushed open the ornamental, wrought iron gate. He could hear the words clearly now:

O my Love's like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in June; O my Love's like the melody That's sweetly play'd in tune.

The voice teased him, drew him along, through the rows of indifferently clipped hedges and clumps of budding flowers, a voice as clean and pure as the Highland air.

As fair art thou, my bonny lass, Sae deep in love am I ...

The song tapered off to a lilting hum. As Solo rounded the corner of a hedge, near the rear of the garden, he saw a young woman in a long, printed dress, bending over a bed of violets. Her back was to him and she wore a wide-brimmed straw bonnet that obscured her face.

... An' I will love thee still, my dear, 'Til all the seas gae —.

Solo wasn't sure who she was, and he was reluctant to take a guess. Instead, he said, "Ah, excuse me, Miss."

The woman turned. She raised her eyes to him, and it was as if an invisible hand reached into Solo's chest and clutched his heart. A sound, halfway between a whimper and a sigh, escaped from his throat.

She was beautiful. More than beautiful. She was wonderful — the most exquisite creature he'd ever seen. Her hair was reddish gold, flowing tendrils of captured sunlight. Her cheeks were buttery smooth and flawless and her eyes were a deep, sparkling green,

the color of a tropical sea.

Solo stared at her for a moment, transfixed and speechless.

"Ye've been spying, lad, haven't ye now?" she said, her delicately formed lips curling up, into an impish grin.

"For a long time," Solo murmured softly. Then, he jogged himself back to reality. "Ah, no, no. Um, I mean, at least not on you."

Flustered, he groped for the proper words. For some reason, his mind was suddenly a blank. The woman watched him, amused.

"You see, I'm a field agent. My name is, ah... is, ah, Solo...Napoleon Solo."

She eyed him slyly. "Are ye sure o' that?" Solo blinked and she smiled, reciting:

"What is't? A spirit?

How it looks about! It carries a brave form, Bu' 'tis a spirit. I might call him a thing divine For nothin' nat'ral I ev'r saw sae noble..."

The agent returned her smile, and without missing a beat, he replied, "O brave new world that has such people in it."

The young woman laughed, delighted. "Ye know Shakespeare!"

"Some. Miss Rhianna McLeod, I presume."

"Aye, an' ye must be the gallant knight, come from far 'cross the sea, to rescue a fair maiden in distress. An' wi' a bonny name to boot. D'ye know anything by the Bard himself, dear Robert Burns?"

When Solo shook his head, Rhianna lowered her voice to a mock baritone and sang lustily:

I am a son of Mars, who ha'e been in many wars,
An' show my cuts an' scars
Wherever I do come.
This here was for a wench,
an' that other in a trench,
When welcoming the French
At the sound of the drum...

The verse trailed off as she began to laugh again, light and airy as wind chimes, tinkling in the breeze. "Ye must forgive my foolishness, Mr. Solo. 'Tis jus' sae gran' to see another face, an' such a goodly one, at that."

Solo cocked his head at the compliment. Stunned by her beauty at first, he was now thoroughly captivated by her ingenuous good humor. He felt an attraction so strong between them that it was almost palpable.

"It must be very lonely here," he observed sympathetically.

"Ah, now, Mr. Solo, don' you be feelin' sorry for me."
"I'd prefer it, if you called me Napoleon."

"All right, Napoleon, then." She began to drift, back through the garden. Solo walked along with her.

"Truth be known, I love it here. 'Tis the place o' my birth, the home o' my kinfolk."

"But don't you feel isolated?"

"There are the others about. An' I have my wee beasties to sing to."

Reaching deep down, into the pocket of her skirt, Rhianna produced a handful of nuts and seeds, and threw them in a shower, across the stone path. Solo was suddenly aware of a crowd of squirrels and sparrows, chattering and chirping all around them. A large brown hare hopped into view. Rhianna bent down and lifted it into her arms.

"D'ye fancy animals, Napoleon?"

"Yes, and they certainly seem to like you," Solo observed as he watched her gently stroke the hare. The latter sat completely at ease, its head cradled against the bodice of her dress.

"All the wee creatures who live here, they come to

me. They're not sae dumb, ye know. They can sense when they have a reason to fear."

He almost asked her about the incident of the impaled pet cat, then thought better of it. Such unpleasantness could wait until after dinner.

"I was told there'd be two o' ye," Rhianna said, changing the subject.

"My partner is still back at the house," he replied, as they reached the entrance to the garden.

"American, like yerself?"

"Ah, no. As a matter of fact, he's Russian."

"Russian, ye say?" Rhianna answered, surprised. "My goodness, well. I hope he's half as nice as you."

"Oh don't worry," the agent reassured her as he pushed open the iron gate. "I'm sure you'll like him."



"D'YE

**FANCY** 

ANIMALS,

Napoleon?"

2.

AS IT TURNED OUT, SHE LIKED HIM A LOT, much to Solo's dismay.

"An' ye were raised yer whole childhood in Russia?" Rhianna asked Illya Kuryakin.

"I was, indeed."

She shook her head, apparently amazed. "Bu' it's such a fierce an' brutal place for sae young a lad!"

"Oh, it's not so bad," Kuryakin replied, grinning, "once you get used to the marauding wolves and polar bears."

Rhianna laughed and Solo rolled his eyes heaven-

#### SITTING NEXT TO SOLO'S ELBOW,

RHIANNA LEANED FORWARD

TOWARD THE BLOND AGENT

WITH RAPT ATTENTION.

ward. He was sorely tempted to point out that the eminently civilized city of Kiev, situated smack in the middle of the Soviet breadbasket, was a far cry from the frozen wastes of Siberia, but he let it pass.

Although Kuryakin was volunteering nothing more than the usual vague answers about his past, he was also making an exceptional effort to be sociable this evening. Sitting next to Solo's elbow, Rhianna leaned forward toward the blond agent with rapt attention.

Solo sighed and half-heartedly returned to his supper. The food offered poor consolation. The main course was a Scottish delicacy called haggis: oatmeal, onions, savory seasonings, and all the parts of a sheep that the cook normally throws away, sewn up in the boiled stomach bag of the same said animal. Fortunately, it tasted better than it looked. Solo washed it down with several shots of Scotch whisky, while thinking that he'd drunk more hard liquor in the last two days than he had all year.

When Meg, the serving maid, appeared to clear away the dishes, Solo took the opportunity to ask, "So, what's been happening around here, anyway?"

It was a rather clumsy way of changing the subject, but then, the time had come to move from esoteric Slavic customs to the real business at hand. Besides, Solo told himself, he was probably doing his usually reticent partner a favor.

"There's no' sae much to tell, really," Isobel said from across the table.

"Oh, Muime," Rhianna exclaimed, "I don' agree. Fresh milk gone sour for no good reason. Willy's boat springin' a leak three times in one week. An' now the generator is down."

That explained all the oil lamps and lighted candles throughout the house, Solo thought. Interesting.

"Coincidences," the old woman said, with a non-committal shrug.

"A mutilated cat is not a coincidence, Madam," Kuryakin reminded her. "Considering your isolation and inaccessibility, someone on the staff must be responsible."

"No' necessar'ly. Ye lads are here, after all. The island is guarded solely by the wind and tide. An outsider might o' slipped in an' out, under cover o' darkness."

"The villagers don' seem to like us verra much," Rhianna admitted sadly and Solo nodded.

"So we noticed." He turned to Isobel again and asked, "Why is that?"



The housekeeper folded her hands as Meg appeared again with a pot of tea and a tray piled high with cakes and shortbreads. "This is no' America, Mr. Solo. E'vr since the Clearances, when sae many Highland crofters were driven off the land by their wealthy landlords,

there's been a tension 'tween the classes."

"Mr. McLeod showed us a strange threatening letter," Kuryakin said, undeterred. "It was written in Latin and Gaelic. Who, on your staff, speaks Gaelic?"

"Ever'one does — along wi' half the population of Skye." Isobel shook her head thoughtfully as she sipped her tea. "Nae, Mr. Kuryakin. My girls are good girls. They would ne'er do such a terr'ble thing, an' you'll no' convince me otherwise."

She was silent, as if to indicate the subject was closed. The agents exchanged unsatisfied glances. "How many of you work here?" Kuryakin asked, changing tack.

Isobel touched her thumb to her fingertips, counting off each one. "Let's see: there's Fiona and Meg — they're sisters, y'know. An' Nelly, the cook. Glynnis, Winnie and Jean. An' Willy o' course, whom you've met. There's jus' the eight o' us."

"Well," Solo said, "I'd still like to interview all the members of your staff, as soon as possible."

"Certainly Mr. Solo. 'Tis yer job to do so."

"You might start tonight," Kuryakin suggested help-fully. Solo pointedly ignored him.

"And I'd like to take a look around the grounds, too."
"We can go ridin' t'morrow!" Rhianna cut in. "An' I

can give ye a personal tour o' the island."

When Isobel clucked her tongue reproachfully, Rhianna reacted, all too aware of her gaffe. "That is, if ye can ride," the young woman added. "I'm sorry. I dinna first inquire if ye could."

Solo smiled. "Oh, I can ride all right, but I'm afraid I didn't pack any jodhpurs."

"Och, that's no' a problem a'tall. Yer look about the same size my father was. I'm sure we can find some ridin' clothes for ye. Oh Napoleon, we'll have a gran' day, we will!"

Rhianna clasped her hands together, excitedly, as Solo eyed his partner, enjoying the minor triumph. "It's settled then," she declared. "T'morrow, I'll go a-ridin' wi' ye. An' t'night —."

She reached a hand across the table. "Will ye play chess wi' me, Illya?"

Now it was Kuryakin's turn to smile, and he did. "It will be a pleasure."

"If yer mind's set on talkin' to my girls, Mr. Solo," Isobel said as she rose from her chair, "ye best do it soon. The hour's verra late."

Solo saw that he had no choice. With supper over and Kuryakin now on duty, he had no excuse to stay. Regretfully, he said "good night" and left with Isobel. Rhianna and Kuryakin retired to the library.

They played two long games and Kuryakin won them both. Rhianna's playing was strong but erratic. Shrewd moves were followed by unexpectedly impulsive ones, often at critical moments. Although he couldn't prove it, Kuryakin suspected that she was a better player than she let on.

As the agent arranged the chessmen for a third game, the grandfather clock in the hall struck one. Rhianna yawned.

"No more t'night, Illya, please. I'm afraid I can no' keep my eyes open."

"All right," he agreed. For some reason, despite the afternoon nap, he was feeling rather tired himself. "But you must promise to play tomorrow night, so I can let you beat me."

"I promise," Rhianna said. She grinned knowingly.

They walked back to her bedroom, located on the south end of the third floor, wandering leisurely through the portrait-lined galleries. The house was dark and quiet. Apparently, everyone else had gone to bed.

"Do you know who these people are?" Kuryakin asked, indicating the painted faces that surrounded them.

"Aye. I learned all their names as a wee lass." She held her lamp aloft and pointed to a nearby portrait. "That one there is Ruaraidh Mor, Sir Roderick McLeod, the fifteenth chief of the Clan McLeod."

"A noble looking fellow."

"Aye, a lordly ruler, he was. Have ye no' heard the poem, 'Rory Mor's Lament'?"

Kuryakin shook his head.

"Well, 'twas written for him." She pointed to the picture of another man. This one was not as handsome.

"An' that's Alasdair Crotach, Humpback Alexander, they called him the eighth chief o' the clan. He dearly loved the pipin', he did."

Kuryakin pointed to a portrait of a couple, hanging at the end of the hallway, near Rhianna's bedroom. The man was tall and muscular, but the woman beside him was fine-boned and delicate, with feline eyes and an ethereal, almost unearthly beauty.

"And who are they?"

"Ah now, 'tis the fourth chief an' his wife," Rhianna said, studying the picture. Obviously, it was one of her favorites.

"She was a very attractive woman."

"Aye, she was a fairy, y'see. She loved him verra much, they say bore him a son, she did bu' she couldna stay wi' him forever. Sae one day, after twenty years, she bade him farewell, and left him standin' on a bridge. Ye may have passed o'er it on the way to Geilt. The Fairy Bridge, they call it now. She gave him a partin' gift a wondrous flag wi' magical powers, that could be flown three times to save the clan."

"And was it ever used?" Kuryakin asked, guessing the answer.

"Twice it aided the clan 'gainst the murderin' Macdonalds. Bu' the legends warn that he who waves it a third and final time, will vanish from the face o' the earth."

She turned to Kuryakin. He was smiling.

"Ye don' believe me, do ye? Ye think I'm a silly, hair-brained girl," she exclaimed. "Well, ye can go back to Skye an' see it for yerself! It hangs in Dunvegan Castle, an attraction for the tourists."

"I don't want to go back to Skye," the agent reassured her gently. "I'd much rather stay here, with you. And I don't think you're silly or hair-brained. Just a bit lonely, perhaps."

Rhianna sighed. "That's kind o' you to say. Muime doesn't like to hear about my daydreams o' magic an' fairies. She says they're a waste o' time."

"Sometimes dreams are all we have."

"Aye," Rhianna agreed softly. "It's all I've ev'r had. Besides Muime, that is. My parents were away most of the time, an' Peter was forever at school, somewhere. They tried to send me, too, bu' I was...verra shy. I ne'er quite fit in wi' the other students —."

She gestured to the rows of portraits. "I used to pretend that these were my friends. They dinna mind that I was different. Bu' then, a man o' the world like yerself wouldna ken such a thing."

"You'd be surprised," Kuryakin replied as he held open the door to her suite. There were two rooms: a small sitting room and a large bedroom beyond.

"Good night, Illya," Rhianna said. "Thank ye for a lovely time."

"Good night," the agent echoed. As she closed the inner door behind her, Kuryakin settled down on a nearby loveseat to wait out the night.

What was it about this strange girl that touched him so? He couldn't say exactly. He only knew that he would be counting the hours until he saw her again. One by one by ...

3.

ILLYA KURYAKIN AWOKE WITH A START. He sat straight up, tense and rigid in the loveseat, and checked the

illuminated dial of his watch. It was after three a.m.

Damn, he swore to himself. Must have fallen asleep. He couldn't tell how long he'd been dozing.

And then, he noticed it: a vague, acrid smell, irritating his nostrils and congesting his lungs. Smoke.

Something was burning. Something was on fire. Something close. Something in the next room.

Rhianna!

Kuryakin sprang from the loveseat and headed for the bedroom door. He could see wispy grey tendrils seeping through the crack below it, filling the sitting room with an eye-stinging haze.

"Rhianna!"

He pounded on the heavy oak door, shouting her name, but there was no answer. He yanked the handle and found it locked, then pounded and shouted again, pleading with her, willing her to wake up, to open the door.

No answer. Nothing.

He'd have to break it down.

Kuryakin threw himself at the door, ramming his shoulder hard against it. The polished wood panels creaked faintly, but held firm. He hit it again, with all his strength. And again. And again.

The door wouldn't budge a fraction of an inch.

Kuryakin could almost hear his internal clock, ticking away in his head. Frustrated, he ripped his U.N.C.L.E. Special from its holster. He didn't even bother to unscrew the silencer. He aimed at the lock and fired three shots.

The bullets slammed into the brass plate, splintering the decorative molding and jolting the cylinder. The bolt gave way with a decisive clunk. Instantly, he was through the door and into the room, dreading what he might find.

It was bad, but not quite as bad as he feared. The casement windows were wide open and the billowing draperies around them, ablaze. A stiff night wind blew in, fanning the flames. Ribbons of fire ran along the carpets on the floor, stretching from the window drapes to the curtains and canopy surrounding Rhianna's four-poster bed.

Kuryakin squinted through the clouds of smoke and saw Rhianna, sprawled in the center of her bed, a book cracked open beside her. Evidently, she'd fallen asleep while reading.

"Rhianna! Wake up!" Kuryakin cried.

He spotted a silver pitcher on a nearby dresser, and found it brimming with clean water. Desperately, he used it to douse some of the flames, then raced along

the bed, tearing the smoldering curtains from their rings as he went. Beside him, the girl stirred. She raised her head and shook it groggily.

"Illya?"

"You must get out of here. Now!"

She blinked and rubbed her eyes, seemingly unable to comprehend what he was saying.

"Rhianna! Do you hear me?"

She tried to respond and fell into a fit of coughing, instead. Kuryakin didn't wait for her to catch her breath. There wasn't time. He clutched her tight around the waist and dragged her from the bed. She twisted in his arms, leaning on him for support, and they fled the burning room.

Kuryakin lowered Rhianna to the sitting room loveseat, and found Isobel waiting for them. "What's happenin' here?" the housekeeper demanded.

"The room's on fire," the agent answered. "Get help. Quickly." He turned to Rhianna and said, "Stay here."

Then he returned to the bedroom to do what he could about the fire. He'd hoped to smother the burning carpet with the quilts, but the flames were too advanced and the agent was forced to retreat. As he backed to the door, Isobel appeared behind him, a modern extinguisher cradled in her arms. Kuryakin took it and sprayed the fire. A minute later, it was out.

His suit jacket soaked with sweat, his face blackened with soot, Kuryakin stumbled into the sitting room to find Isobel scolding Rhianna.

"I've warned ye about keepin' the windows shut at night!"

"I know, I know, bu' the wind was sae high and sweet. I dinna 'spect to fall asleep. The sash must've knocked o'er the lamp."

When Rhianna began to sob, Isobel relented and patted her hand. "There, there, girl. No real harm done. All of it can be replaced. Yer safe, that's the important thing."

Kuryakin dropped down heavily on the loveseat, beside Rhianna, and announced simply, "The fire's out."

"Thank ye, Mr. Kuryakin," Isobel said. "Rhianna will sleep in her parent's bedroom, at the other end o' this floor, for the rest o' the night. I'd be grateful if ye said nothin' to the servants about this. I'll tell them myself when the time is right. They're alarmed enough, already. Another accident may send them packin'."

"If it was an accident," the agent retorted. Although she'd stopped crying, Rhianna was still trembling. Kuryakin wrapped an arm around her shoulder to steady her.

"Ye think someone's tryin' to kill me?" she murmured, drawing close to him. Kuryakin nodded.

"But why?"

The agent frowned. "That is the question, isn't it?"

4.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU SLEPT through the entire episode," Kuryakin said, as he rested his chin on the footboard of Solo's bed and watched his partner shave. Standing just inside the adjoining bathroom, the senior agent shrugged.

"Why not? Her bedroom is all the way up on the third floor on the other side of the house. These stone walls are thick. I couldn't hear a thing."

But Kuryakin was unconvinced. "You drank too much at dinner last night," he muttered.

"Oh yeah?" Solo's razor tapped an angry tattoo against the porcelain sink. "Well, you nearly slept through it yourself, and you were in the next room. What's your excuse?"

Kuryakin lowered his eyes and said nothing. He didn't have an excuse. Ever since they arrived on the island the previous afternoon, he'd been feeling tired and off-centered, as if he were coming down with the flu. Considering his luck this trip, he probably was.

"Did the maids have anything interesting to say?" the Russian asked, changing the subject.

"I only had a chance to speak to three of them. It seems they retire rather early here. I called headquarters anyway and gave Sarah all the names. She's running a background check right now. We should hear from her sometime after lunch."

"I suppose I should interview the remaining three maids," Kuryakin said wearily. Not only did his clothes reek of smoke, but he still hadn't been to bed. Solo wiped the soap from his chin and regarded his friend sympathetically.

"Get some sleep. After I take Rhianna riding, I'll talk to the maids. And I'll try to track down Willy, too."

"Thanks."

As Kuryakin climbed off the bed, Solo sat down on the edge to pull on his riding boots. Rhianna had been right: her father's clothes were almost a perfect fit. Behind him, Kuryakin halted at the door. "Napoleon, about what I said before...."

"Skip it."

The Russian managed a smile. It's just this bizarre affair, he thought to himself. We're starting to get on each

other's nerves.He turned and nearly bumped into a petite blonde in a crisp black uniform. "Which one are you?" Kuryakin asked.

"I'm Glynnis, sir, the downstairs maid. I've come to make up the bed."

"I'm almost finished in here," Solo called out. He stood up, stomping the heels of his boots solidly against the floor. Gathering up his hacking jacket, he followed Kuryakin from the room.

Glynnis waited until she was sure that both men were gone. Then she stripped off one of the pillowcases, and proceeded to the bathroom. There, she unfolded a linen handkerchief and carefully emptied the stubble from Solo's razor into it. She'd done exactly the same thing in Kuryakin's room, the day before.

In the large manorhouse kitchen, Isobel and Fiona were waiting for the pillowcase and the handkerchief. "Leave them here, Glynnis, my girl," Isobel said, indicating the wooden worktable.

"Yes m'am. Are ye done yet?"

"Jus' about." Isobel completed the last stitch and held up her handiwork. "There."

Fiona plucked the two miniature rag dolls from the housekeeper's hand and examined them. Fashioned from the cloth of cotton pillowcases, one had hair of yellow yarn, and one had red. They were bound together, face to face, by a scarlet thread, their tiny arms coiled in a permanent embrace.

"One set completed and one to go," Isobel declared.

"I'll take the lad she casts away," said Fiona, as she juggled the dolls thoughtfully. "Then ye can make a pair o' love poppets for me."

"I don' know which one 'twill be."

"Don' matter none. Both the lads are more than passin' fair."

"Ye may be waitin' awhile," the housekeeper laughed as she sketched a pattern on Solo's pillowcase to begin a new doll. Glynnis clucked her tongue and sighed.

"Rhianna always did have trouble a-makin' up her mind."

"An' that's why ye an' Meg were sent to university, and Fiona, here, to law school. Ye'll all be here to advise her, after I'm gone."

"Sometimes I think ye put too much faith in us, Muime," Fiona said, replacing the dolls.

The old woman smiled. "Nonsense, child. It's been my experience that things always have a way of turnin' out for the best."

5.

WILLY MCALLISTER WAS JUST saddling Rhianna's horse when Solo arrived at the stables.

"Good day to ye, Napoleon," the young woman greeted him brightly. "Let me introduce ye to Maise here. That means 'beauty' in Gaelic."

The horse was well-named. She was a graceful blood bay filly with a small muzzle, large eyes and an elegant arching neck, suggesting a strong strain of Arabian blood in her veins. The filly snorted and pranced excitedly, eager to be off.

"Maise's new, here. Peter purchased her in the fall. She's still a wee bit skittish. I'll take her, myself, an' ye can ride my favorite laddie."

Rhianna gestured to the stable where Winnie, the lanky, tomboyish maid, appeared, leading a solid black gelding. In contrast to the delicate Maise, this was a large, powerful horse, well over sixteen hands high. He had the deep girth and prominent withers of a Thoroughbred, but with the strength and cooler temperament found in some of the German cross-breeds.

Solo wondered how Rhianna could master such a formidable animal. Indeed, considering his own limited riding experience, Solo wasn't entirely sure that he could control the massive beast himself.

As the gelding trotted past, the agent stole a peek into the barn. There were three others, two sturdy carriage horses and a blond pony. Solo tried to read aloud the nameplate on one of the empty stalls.

"Gascedach: what does it mean?"

"It's pronounced, gash-e-dock, Napoleon, and it's Gaelic for 'warrior'." Rhianna gave the gelding an affectionate pat on the cheek while McAllister tightened the girth strap. "The name suits him, do ye no'agree?"

"Is that anything like a geasadair?" he asked, recalling the word scrawled in blood on his door, back at the Burning Hare.

"Och, nae, no' a'tall. A geasadair is a sorcerer, someone who has the Droch Shil, the Evil Eye."

"Oh," Solo said, and filed that bit of information away for future reference. As McAllister handed him the reins, the agent remarked, "So you take care of the stables, too, huh, Willy?"

"Winnie, there, she helps me some."

"Still, stable master, caretaker, groundskeeper — you must be quite a busy man."

"No' by choice, sir, that I can assure ye," the old man

replied sullenly. He took a swig from his ever-present flask of whisky and watched Solo swing a leg over Gascedach's broad back, landing gently in the saddle. The gelding snuffled tolerantly, and offered no objection.

"Let's go," Rhianna said, from aboard Maise, and they went.

They rode all morning, crisscrossing the island and Rhianna pointed out her favorite childhood landmarks. A flowering grove of rowan trees. The desolate stony beaches of the southern tip. The crumbling ruins of a tower more ancient than the manorhouse keep. Around noon, they stopped for a picnic, and spread a woolen blanket near the edge of the southwestern cliffs.

As Rhianna unpacked a lunch of cheese and biscuits, sausage and fruit, Solo sat back, propped up by his elbows, his legs comfortably crossed. Behind them, the horses grazed contentedly on the new spring grass. Before them, stretched the open sea with the islands of the Outer Hebrides outlined in the distance.

"Tell me about the others here. You know, Winnie and Fiona and the rest," Solo said as Rhianna passed him a biscuit dripping with strawberry jam.

"What do ye want to know, exactly?"

Solo licked the spicy-sweet jam from his thumb and said, between bites, "Oh, who they are. Where they came from. What they did before they worked at Duncreagan Hall."

"I don' really know." Rhianna knelt down beside him. "Muime takes care o' the hirin'."

"What about McAllister?"

"Y'mean Willy? Ooh, now, he's been 'round as far back as I can remember." She lowered her voice

conspiratorially and added, "I think he and Muime were lovers, once, a long time ago."

"Really?"

"Mmm." Rhianna bit into her own biscuit. "He always says that she put the come-hither on him. Muime was verra beautiful when she was a bonny young lass. She had a grae many suitors."

Barely listening, Solo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Rhianna smelled of lavender and sandalwood, with just a faint hint of vanilla.

Dear God, how he wanted her. It made him ache deep inside to have her so near. Although he'd romanced more than his share of women, rarely had he ever felt an attraction so immediate, so intense.

Sitting here beside her, it took every ounce of his self-control not to reach out and pull her into his arms. He would have given anything, everything, to kiss her, to caress her, to crush her body against his. He allowed his imagination to wander, instead.

"Och, it's a good thing Muime canna hear me," Rhianna said, blushing. "She wouldna care to hear me gossipin' about her."

Solo forced the elaborate erotic fantasies he'd been spinning from his mind and cleared his throat. "Why, ah...why do you call her that?"

"I suppose because she raised me. She nursed me, tutored me. She cared for me like a mother, when my real mother couldna be here. My parents traveled 'round the world, y'see, while I've no' been farther than Edinburgh, myself."

Rhianna cut herself a hunk of cheese. "I'll wager ye've been to more exotic cities," she said, turning the conversation to the agent's own life and travels. She seemed very curious about America in general and New York City in particular, and Solo did his best to answer her questions, while being careful not to betray any classified secrets.

"'Tis a gran' life ye lead," the girl remarked when all the food was gone. "Like a questin' knight. An' jus' think of all the people ye've known. Muime says a soul that never touches another soul, is like a butterfly trapped forever within its cocoon."

"Maybe, but sometimes I wish this soul could stay in one place, just for awhile. Especially a place like this."

Solo stared wistfully out to sea. The sun was lower in the sky. It was late afternoon, now — time to head back to Duncreagan Hall. He hauled himself to his feet and groaned aloud. Unaccustomed to spending most of the day in a saddle, he was already feeling stiff and sore.

"Och, ye can't be knackered yet," Rhianna said, watching him. As Solo folded up the blanket, she fed the last apple to the waiting Maise. "I was hopin' to race ye home."

Solo chuckled. "Ah, now, wait a minute..."

But Rhianna clearly had no intention of doing so. Laughing, she mounted Maise and tugged the filly's reins. "C'mon Napoleon. The last one to the garden gate is —."

Maise gave a sharp whinny and swayed uncertainly from side to side, retreating several steps backward. "Mind yer manners, lass!" Rhianna scolded the horse, lightly swatting her with the reins. Maise ignored her. The horse stamped and whinnied again, becoming increasingly agitated.

She's frightened of something, Solo told himself. Something's wrong. He scanned the ground, but there was nothing there. The back of his neck prickled, a subliminal warning.

Now, Gascedach snorted, disturbed by the commotion. As Rhianna struggled to control Maise, Solo circled around the gelding and reached for the filly's bridle.

He was half a second too late.

Suddenly, Maise reared up. Solo's fingers missed the bridle and closed on empty air. Instinctively, he ducked and fell backwards, to avoid the flashing hooves. He felt one swish by, barely missing his temple.

High atop the wild-eyed Maise, Rhianna dug her heels into the filly's ribcage in an attempt to drive her down and forward. Maise resisted, dancing on her hind legs, terrifying both horse and rider. As she dropped back to the ground, she wrenched aside her elegant head. Rhianna felt the reins slip through her fingertips and whip away, trailing free. Desperately, the girl grabbed two fistfuls of mane and hung on, as the filly bolted and ran.

It took Solo a moment to recover. He rushed to Gascedach, found the stirrup and nearly vaulted into the saddle. The gelding hesitated, but Solo had no time for cajoling. He jerked the reins. Gascedach wheeled and they took off after Rhianna and Maise.

Despite Rhianna's efforts, the filly was still galloping away, out of control, a few hundred yards in the distance. Her delicate hoofs beat furiously against the ground, tearing up a dust cloud of dirt and new grass, as she crossed the field and headed straight for the edge of the cliffs.

Solo leaned forward in the saddle, urging Gascedach to pour on more speed, and once again, the gelding's response was immediate. It was obvious why Rhianna valued the big black so much. Not only was the horse intelligent, but he was fast for his size. Somewhere beneath him, the agent could feel those powerful legs, pumping like pistons, propelling the huge animal forward, like a warm-blooded rocket.

The gap between the pursuers and the pursued began to close. Now it was less than a hundred yards. Now it was ninety. Seventy. Sixty.

And still, Maise continued to rush headlong, as if her equine heart were dead set on suicide. It made no sense to Solo. Animals didn't fling themselves over cliffs, like jilted lovers. The horse wasn't just frightened. She was hysterical.

Standing up in the stirrups, Solo swung Gascedach wide and then inward, hoping to cut Maise off with an end run, before she ran out of ground. He pushed the gelding faster, squeezing out the last bit of speed, and found himself neck and neck with the stampeding filly. Rhianna glanced up at him, still gamely hanging on.

The agent eased Gascedach between the cliffs and the filly, herding her back and away. The gelding's galloping hoofs thundered perilously close to the edge, but Solo was too busy to notice. Reluctantly, Maise turned and her stride slowly deteriorated to a canter, giving Rhianna an opportunity to lean over and retrieve the reins.

She pulled the filly to a trot, then to a walk, and finally to a halt. Exhausted and lathered, Maise still had some fire left in her. She bucked and tried to rear again, but this time, Rhianna released the reins and slid from the saddle. She landed on the grass with a dull thump.

Solo was at her side in the next instant. "Rhianna, dear, are you all right?"

The young woman sat up, shaken but unhurt. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried herself against his chest. "Why are all these terrible things happenin' to me? Why? Can ye tell me that?" she cried.

Solo couldn't answer, because he didn't know himself. Helplessly, he kissed her forehead and held her tight to comfort her, cradling her in a protective embrace. As Rhianna trembled against him, Solo swallowed hard and kept his arms locked solidly together. He tried not to notice that feeling her so close, made him tremble, too.

6.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN all the maids seem to check out?"

Illya Kuryakin sat on the stone steps of Duncreagan Hall and glared at the communicator pen in his hand. The receiver crackled with static, as Sarah's voice returned.

"We've accessed their employee files from McLeod industries. All the women and McAllister are listed on the payroll. We did a routine background check on each of them. McAllister's been picked up a couple of times for being drunk and disorderly, but the charges were always dropped. Other than that, their references seem to be in order. No illegal activity, no political affiliations, no criminal records, not even so much as a parking ticket."

"Did you cross-reference the company files against government records? Have you found their official birth records at least?" Kuryakin asked, still not satisfied. "They might not be who they say they are."

"Negative. You'll have to wait another day for that. It's Sunday. All the Scottish government offices are closed."

Kuryakin cursed softly, under his breath. "What about the housekeeper?"

"We have even less on her. McLeod must be paying her under the table, because she's not on his payroll. In fact, we can't find a trace of her in any record, anywhere. I can't even tell you how old she is."

"That's not good enough," Kuryakin observed sourly. What the hell were those people in Intelligence doing, anyway?

Sarah's voice sounded apologetic. "I know that, Illya, but you have to understand what we're dealing with, here. It's not easy to track down handwritten ledgers kept in little towns that aren't even on the map. It's going to take time."

"Time is a luxury we can't afford," Kuryakin replied impatiently. Last night's fire was still fresh in his memory.

"Well, we're doing the best we can —."

Kuryakin looked up to see Solo coming down the path, toward the manorhouse. The dark-haired agent was dirty and disheveled and he seemed to be limping slightly.

More trouble, the Russian told himself.

"After all, we've looked in all the usual places," Sarah protested.

"Then start looking in some unusual ones!"

Kuryakin snapped off the communicator without bothering to sign off. He regretted being so short with Sarah — he actually liked the Section IV specialist — but he didn't enjoy feeling so helpless. To make matters worse, he had an absolutely abominable headache.

"Rough ride?" Kuryakin asked sympathetically as his partner trudged up to the staircase. Solo pressed a hand against the base of his spine and arched his back, stiffly.



"I guess I wasn't born two hundred years too late, after all. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"I needed the privacy. That was Sarah on the line. Everyone on the staff checks out, but Isobel. We don't have anything on her, not even a birth date."

When Solo registered no surprise, Kuryakin went on. "I interviewed two more of the servants: Nelly, the cook and Jean, who keeps the books. They were both very cordial, very polite, and very unhelpful." He paused. "So, my friend, what happened to you?"

The other agent groaned and rubbed the sore muscles in his shoulder. "Walk me to my room and I'll tell you."

Along the way, Solo told the story of the entire afternoon, leaving out the more intimate details. When they reached the bedroom, Solo poured them both a drink. He really needed one, himself.

"Two close calls in less than twelve hours," the Russian commented softly, as he accepted the glass. He sat down on Solo's bed. "Mr. Waverly is not going to be pleased."

On the other side of the room, Solo kicked off his boots and lowered himself carefully into an upholstered wing chair. He sampled his own drink and muttered to himself, "I can't understand it. That filly just reared up and took off, for no apparent reason. If I hadn't stopped her, she would have run right over the cliffs." He shook his head and took another sip. "Damndest thing I ever saw."

"How is the horse now?"

"None too worse for the wear, considering. We walked her back. She's still a bit jittery, but then, she's normally a high-strung animal."

Kuryakin ran a fingertip around the rim of his glass and studied it thoughtfully. "It sounds as if the horse was hallucinating, although without a veterinarian's examination, we'll never know. Maybe the apple was drugged or poisoned. Maybe it was meant for one of you."

"I thought of that," Solo said irritably. "And if it was drugged, I'll bet I know who did it."

"You mean Isobel." It was a statement, not a question. "Well, let's just say I have a deep-seated prejudice against people who don't have birth dates."

"We have no proof. There's no reason to suspect her more than any of the others," Kuryakin reminded his partner, playing the devil's advocate.

"Why not? She has plenty of opportunities. She runs the whole damn place. She has no history. My God, she even looks like a witch." Solo narrowed his eyes at his partner. "And don't tell me you haven't been thinking the same thing."

Kuryakin shrugged. "It's been a long time since I believed in the tales of Baba Yaga." He drained his glass. "Besides, what's the motive? Isobel seems completely devoted to Rhianna. Why would she want to kill her?"

The Russian set his empty glass on a nearby table and turned to leave. Behind him, Solo poured himself another drink.

"I haven't figured that out yet," Solo admitted. "All the

same, be careful tonight."

"I always am," Kuryakin assured him.

"And if the old girl offers you an apple...."

"Hmmm?"

"Don't take it."

## Act III

"Adder's fork and blindworm's sting, Lizard's leg and owlet's wing;"

1.

### Somewhere in Edinburgh.

"I'LL HAVE THE PHEASANT, ANDRÉ," Peter McLeod said as he handed the waiter his menu. He didn't have to look at it. He knew it by heart, just as he knew most of the waiters here. In a city in which it was hard to find a decent cup of coffee, this little French restaurant was a godsend — an oasis in a culinary wasteland.

"Très bon, Monsieur McLeod." The waiter turned to the stout man in the ill-fitting pinstriped suit on the other side of the table. "Et vous, Monsieur?"

"A steak. Best you have. Burn it."



...A PRECISION-MADE

SWISS MOVEMENT

HOUSED IN A

MICKEY MOUSE

WATCH.

The stranger spoke with a flat mid-western American accent, in a manner so blunt that it bordered on rude. But then, Arthur MacDonald was used to giving orders and when he did, he gave them only once.

"Very good, Monsieur." The waiter offered MacDonald a tight smile and turned back to McLeod with some relief. "Will there be anything else?"

"A bottle of red Bordeaux might be nice." McLeod glanced across the table for confirmation, but MacDonald just shrugged, to indicate he didn't much care one way or the other.

"The Chateau Bouscaut, I should think, André. No, no. Something fuller-bodied, considering the steak. Make it the Chateau Ausone."

The waiter nodded his approval, scribbled down the order and left. Peter McLeod settled back in his seat

and regarded his dinner companion with relaxed amusement. Arthur McDonald had the sort of body that no tailoring, no matter how expensive, could disguise. He was short and thickset, almost dwarfish. His jug ears were bridged by a rapidly receding hairline and his football-shaped head seemed to balance on the lumpy, round shoulders without benefit of a neck.

Yet, inside that head, McLeod reminded himself, ticked a quick, cunning brain...like a precision-made Swiss movement housed in a Mickey Mouse watch.

"Just think," the Scottish industrialist began after a moment, "in 1577, the McLeods of Skye suffocated almost four hundred members of the MacDonald clan by building a brushfire at the mouth of a cave in which the MacDonalds were hiding. A year later, the MacDonalds of Uist barred the door on a congregation of McLeods and set fire to their church. Only one woman survived, but she managed to raise an alarm that alerted the McLeods of Dunvegan. They slaughtered the entire MacDonald raiding party before it could escape."

McLeod steepled his long, uncalloused hands and smiled. "And now here we sit, Arthur, you and I, in friendship, a peaceful alliance between two feuding clans."

"I'd prefer to think of it as a merger between McLeod Industries and Thrush," MacDonald replied.

"That too, of course. I just meant that considering the past, this is rather an historic occasion."

MacDonald was unimpressed. "Look, McLeod," he said, hunching forward, his jaw set, "where I come from, we don't give a rat's ass for history lessons. And you can cut the buddy-buddy crap. My father worked twelve-hour shifts on the assembly line while yours probably owned the plant. We don't have to be friends. We're partners in a mutually beneficial business venture. Let's just leave it at that."

"If you wish," McLeod agreed, unoffended. "But tell me, Arthur, must you cultivate your unpleasantness or do you come by it naturally?"

MacDonald grinned in spite of himself. "Well, I wasn't voted the most popular kid in my high school class, if that's what you mean."

Nor even the most likely to succeed, the Thrush agent added to himself. But he'd showed them. He'd showed them all.

The waiter returned with the bottle of Bordeaux. He offered it to McLeod for approval, then poured each of the men a glass. It was excellent wine, but McDonald wouldn't give McLeod the satisfaction of saying so. He took an indifferent mouthful and asked, "So how's our

little project coming along?"

"Very well, indeed. We're even a bit ahead of schedule. Muime says they'll be ready for us in a day or two."

"She's very efficient, that aunt of yours."

McLeod nodded, obviously pleased. "She's quite devoted to me. She'll do anything I ask."

"I still don't know if I go in for all this hocus-pocus stuff," the Thrush agent said, after a moment.

"Oh, but it's rather more than reciting incantations and waving wands. Aunt Isobel has a knowledge of folk medicine that would put my company's pharmaceutical laboratories to shame."

"And Waverly wasn't suspicious?" MacDonald asked, changing the subject.

"Not at all. But then, why should he be? I merely requested two of his best men, and lo and behold, he offered me Solo and Kuryakin. It was like — magic."

The two men exchanged wicked grins. Of course, any two enforcement agents would have served their purposes, but getting Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin was more than icing on the cake for MacDonald. He'd crossed swords with Solo before and lost miserably, which made the prospect of seeing that slick, smart-ass playboy and his pinko partner crawling on their knees, even more satisfying.

"The field agents are U.N.C.L.E.'s working capital," MacDonald observed. "I guess that penny-pinching old man doesn't like to see them sitting around the office, underutilized."

"He's going to wish he were less parsimonious."

"And less trusting of corporate pirates like yourself."

"Arthur, you wound me," McLeod declared in mock indignation as their dinners arrived. The pheasant looked succulent. The sirloin was burnt to a crisp. "I always hold up my end of a bargain. I promised Waverly that his organization would be the first to field test my new product, and it shall."

MacDonald laughed out loud, exploding into a harsh, hacking bray. "You know, McLeod, maybe I'm gonna like you after all."

"You see?"

"Yeah. Now, do they have ketchup here?" the Thrush chief said.

McLeod winced.

2.

A lthough Sunday's supper of "stoved howtowdie," a sort of chicken casserole, was far more appetizing than that of the previous night, Kuryakin

spent the entire meal nervously wishing it were over. Rhianna still seemed a bit shaken by the day's events, providing Napoleon with an all-too-convenient excuse to remain past the end of his shift.

For some reason, however, Solo declined to take advantage of the situation. He left the table soon after dessert, pleading an aching back and a splitting headache.

Although Kuryakin was careful not to show it, he was relieved to see his partner go. All afternoon, from the moment he awoke, Rhianna had been constantly on his mind, to the exclusion of nearly everyone and everything else. He'd even counted the hours until suppertime. He couldn't wait to see her again, to talk to her, to be alone with her. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that his concern for her was bordering on the obsessive, even as he rationalized it away as merely a professional preoccupation.

And now, finally, he had her all to himself.

Good, Kuryakin thought. Three's a crowd and all that. And there are only two sides to a chessboard, anyway...

"Let us not play tonight" Rhianna said, as if reading his mind. She yawned and Kuryakin's heart sank. All the excitement had taken its toll, after all. She probably intended to retire early.

"Let us go for a walk, instead."

The Russian agent arched an eyebrow. "A walk?"



"DO THE STARS
LOOK THE SAME

WHERE

YE COME FROM,

BACK IN RUSSIA?"

Rhianna looped her arm through his and whispered, "Aye, along the cliffs, by the sea. 'Tis a rare, bonny night, an' the moon is almost full. I'll show you where my wee filly took fright. Muime won't mind — if we don' tell her."

"It could be dangerous."

"Och, I'll no' be afraid wi' a brave lad such as yourself at my side."

Although her flattery prompted a smile, Kuryakin still hesitated.

"Oh Illya, please.

Ye'd no' refuse sae small a request?"

No, he thought, he wouldn't. He couldn't bear to see the disappointment on her face. In fact, he doubted that he'd ever be able to refuse her anything. So, Kuryakin checked the clip in his gun, Rhianna fetched her woolen shawl and they slipped out together, through one of the servants' doors.

She'd been right about the night: it was indeed a rare one. The sky was perfectly clear and studded with hundreds of stars bits of cool fire, glittering like diamonds strewn across a black velvet jeweler's cloth. The moon was just beginning to rise, a bright silver spangle hanging low over the sea.

Rhianna threw back her head and twirled slowly on her heel as Kuryakin named the constellations for her. "Do the stars look the same where ye come from, back in Russia?" she asked.

"Actually, they do. It may seem difficult to believe, but Moscow and Glasgow are almost on the same latitude."

Rhianna grinned. "Imagine that. Ah, 'tis a small world just as they say." She reached for his hand and tugged it. "Well, now, come along wi' ye."

"Where are we going?"

"To the beach, o' course."

Still grasping his hand, she led Kuryakin down to the western cliffs. A stiff wind blew in from the ocean, nipping at their clothes and ruffling their hair. Rhianna pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. "D'ye hear it?" she whispered, as she stood poised on the edge, overlooking the water.

"Hear what?"

"Wheesht! Listen."

Kuryakin listened. Rising above the roar of the pounding breakers, he could discern an eerie, high-pitched drone. Puzzled, he looked to the girl for an answer.

"That's the sands a-singin'," she laughed. She pointed to the beach below them, glowing in the moonlight like an iridescent pearl. "Aye, truly, 'tis the wee grains of quartz. They squeak when they're wet and sing when they're dry. But when a storm blows in, why then ye'll hear a symphony!"

Kuryakin tilted his head and paused to listen a moment more. "It sounds like someone weeping."

"Aye. There's some that claim 'tis no a natural sound a'tall, but the cry o' the banshee or the keenin' of Fair Annie's ghost. From the ballad, y' know?"

When Kuryakin shook his head, Rhianna began to croon softly, in a rich soprano:

Oh, who will comb my yellow hair, Wi' the new made silver comb?

Or who'll be father to my young bairn, 'Til Love Gregor come home?

"Annie waited and waited," Rhianna told Kuryakin, "but when he ne'er returned to her, she decided to go aquestin' after him."

I will get a bonny boat, An' I will sail the sea, For I must go to Love Gregor Since he canna come home to me.

"An' one night, in the midst of a terrible storm, she found his castle. An' wi' her wee bairn clasped tight against her breast, an' the rain a-blowin' through her hair, she knocked upon his door. Bu' Gregor didnae believe 'twas Annie."

Away, away ye ill woman! You've no' come here for good. You're bu' a witch or wile warlock, Or mermaid o' the flood.

I am neither witch nor a wile warlock, Nor mermaid o' the sea, I am Fair Annie o' Roch Royal, Oh, open the door to me.

"But he wouldna do it, tho' Annie tried and tried:"

Open the door now, Love Gregor,

Oh, open the door I pray,

For your young son that's in my arms,

Will be dead ere it be day.

Away, away, ye ill woman! For here ye shanna win in; Gae drown ye in the ragin' sea Or hang on the gallows-pin.

Rhianna glanced over at Kuryakin to see if he was still listening. He was.

"Sae verra heartbroken, that's what Annie did," the girl went on. "She went away, back to her boat an' the ragin' storm. An' when Gregor wakened the next mornin', he told his mother about his strange dream. An' his mother answered, 'twas nae dream. Sae Gregor ran down to the shore but he was too late, ye see:"

The wind grew loud, an' the sea grew rough, An' the ship was rent in twain, An' soon he saw his Fair Annie, Come floatin' o'er the main. He saw his young son in her arms, Both tossed aboon the tide; He wrung his hands, then fast he ran, An' plunged in the sea sae wide.

He catched her by her yellow hair, An' drew her to the strand, Bu' cold an' stiff was ever' limb, Before he reached the land. Oh, first he kissed her cherry cheek, An' then he kissed her ruby lips, Bu' there was nae breath within.

"An' that was the end of poor Annie." Rhianna sighed. A sharp wind blew past and she shivered.

"Cold?" Kuryakin asked. Before she could reply, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and drew her close. "That's a very sad story," he remarked.

"Aye. That's why I like it sae." She leaned her head back against his chest and stared out to sea. "Fair Annie's out there still. Sometimes, I can see her. No' on a clear night, like this one, but when the mist is high, she's out there, a-callin' to the livin' to come an' be wi' her."

"Like the sirens called to Ulysses?" Kuryakin said.

"No' quite. They had murderin' ways while Annie disnae mean harm. She's just lonely." The girl sighed again and murmured, "I ken how she feels."

So do I, Kuryakin thought to himself. He felt a bond growing between them that was based on more than sympathy or professional obligation. It was a true affinity, a mutual recognition of two kindred spirits. Without thinking, he leaned down and touched his lips lightly to hers. She tasted sweet and salty, like the taffy sold at seaside resorts.

"I've no' done that wi' a lad before," Rhianna told him softly when the kiss ended. Kuryakin stepped back, suddenly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry."

"Dinnae apologize, please. I wanted to." The girl smiled shyly, taking both of his hands in hers. "How do they say 'I love ye' in Russian?"

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

She looked into his eyes and repeated back to him, "Ya tebya lyublyu," exactly matching his pronunciation. Hearing the Russian words stirred something buried deep inside him. Something he hadn't allowed himself to feel for a very long time, not since that afternoon with Masha, in the summerhouse.

He kissed her again, cautiously at first and then, when she responded, more and more confidently, drawing her into an eager embrace. He lost track of time, of space, of the very ground under his feet. He was like a leaf buffeted by the wind, a spar adrift in a boiling sea.

But yet, here was Rhianna a harbor, a hollow, a safe refuge from the storm that swirled around him, luminous green eyes and thick coppery hair, flowing like pure honey in the moonlight. Even after the kiss was over, he held her, clung to her, unable and unwilling to let her go.

"Oh, look!" she cried out abruptly, twisting in his arms. "Illya, look! A dreug, a shootin' star!"

He followed her gaze just in time to see one of the pinpoints of light etch a path through the sky, arcing away into oblivion. "Quick," Rhianna urged him. "Make a wish."

She squeezed her own eyes shut. Kuryakin watched and smiled sadly, not bothering to join her. It was no use. He knew the wish he wanted to make couldn't possibly be granted.

"We'd better be getting back," he said when she opened her eyes.

"Och, no' yet."

But Kuryakin would not be dissuaded. To stay here any longer was risky, for more reasons than he cared to admit. "It's late," he added, guiding her back toward the footpath that lead from the cliffs.

"Promise ye'll think o' me tonight," Rhianna said, hugging him close.

"I promise."

In fact, he thought of nothing else, as he sat guard outside her bedroom door. And when he finally went to sleep hours later, the following morning, he dreamt of her, too.

3.

Dark. Sinuous. Mysterious. He roamed her body like a blind man, trapped and helpless, tangled in her lace, her ribbons, caught in her petticoats, drowning in the soft waves of her hair. He kissed her lips, her eyelids, her earlobes. The bridge of her nose. The edge of her brow. The hollow of her cheeks, warm and glowing in the sunlight. And then he returned to her lips, traveling the circuit again. And again. And again and again.

Spurred on by the sound of her sighs and the encouraging press of her hands, his mouth wandered past the fragrant locket at her throat and found her breasts, as pale and smooth as ivory. He nuzzled her, suckled her, enthralled by the scent and taste and touch of her skin. She was delicious, ambrosial, intoxicating.

He burrowed deeper into her skirts, her arms encircling him, imprisoning him, and he reveled in the imprisonment. There was no need to escape. Here was everything he needed, or wanted, or cared for, all that he could possibly desire in the world...

The garden gate suddenly clanged shut, jolting Solo back to reality. The agent blinked and took a breath, and pulled back within Rhianna's embrace. The girl lay below him in the bed of violets, cheerfully disheveled, her skirts gathered above her hips, the bodice of her dress completely unbuttoned.

Oh my God, what am I doing? Solo swore to himself. Even worse: what have I done?

He didn't know and yet he did. Horrified, he tore himself away from her and felt a stabbing, gut-wrenching pain, as if he'd just severed a limb. He stumbled to his feet as Rhianna asked innocently,

"What's the matter? Where are you goin'?" She seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Someone's coming."

He wasn't entirely sure that was true, but he needed the few seconds to collect his wits. He staggered, clutching a nearby trellis for support, and felt last night's headache return with a vengeance.

Solo closed his eyes and massaged a temple, desperately trying to recall the events of the past half hour. He had a vague, muddled memory of their meeting. And a song. And a kiss. A lot of kisses. But there was little more, beyond the bed of violets and a bundle of rumpled petticoats

Christ, I should be able to remember if it went much further than that, he thought. Watching him, Rhianna calmly stood up and fixed her dress. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Solo glanced down to find his own shirt open. He quickly tried to button it. "I, ah, think it's better if no one finds us here like this, I mean."

"Come, we'll hide then." Rhianna reached for his hand, but Solo neatly avoided her.

"No, um, I don't think so."

"Why no'?"

"Because ..." *Jesus.* "Because I don't think I can trust myself alone with you anymore." Cautiously, Solo drew away, inching backward, down the stone path. "I'm sorry. Really, I am. But I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Ye'll dance wi' me at my party tonight?"

"Yes. Of course I'll dance with you."

"Ye promise?"

"I promise."

Rhianna grinned. "I shall hold ye to it," she called after him. She laughed and broke into a song, the same one she had been humming to herself earlier that afternoon: How can I keep my maidenhead, My maidenhead, my maidenhead; How can I keep my maidenhead, Among sae many men, Oh.

I'll give it to a bonny lad, A bonny lad, A bonny lad...

The song followed him, reverberating in his head, long after he could actually hear it. When he was finally outside the garden walls, Solo halted and leaned against the gate. He tried to light a cigarette, but his hands were shaking so badly, he couldn't hold his lighter steady long enough to ignite the tip. He gave up and flung the cigarette away, just as Kuryakin appeared.

"Napoleon, I've been searching all over for you. Isobel wants to know if —."

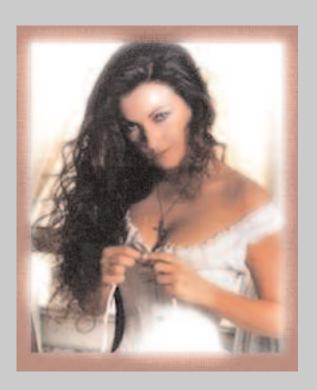
The Russian agent trailed off. He stared at Solo, noting the condition of his partner's clothing, the expression on his face.

And all at once, he understood. Everything.

"I don't believe it," Kuryakin hissed. The feelings of contempt and betrayal were so strong, they almost choked him. "Couldn't you leave this one alone? We're supposed to be protecting her, for heaven's sake!"

"Is that what you've been doing every night?" Solo snapped back, matching his partner's anger. "Protecting her?"

"Oh, Napoleon, really. The girl's a virgin! She doesn't even know what it's like to kiss a man."



"Oh yeah? And just how would you know that?" Kuryakin flinched, unwilling to answer. Guiltily, he looked away and Solo snorted to himself, satisfied.

"You said Isobel wanted me?"

"Yes," Kuryakin said quietly. "Something about Rhianna's birthday party tonight."

"Then I should try to find her."

He started to leave, but Kuryakin couldn't resist a parting shot. As Solo moved past him, he murmured, "You'd better zip your pants first. Your fly is open."

Back in the garden, as Rhianna smoothed her skirts, Willy McAllister ambled into view, peering over the hedgerows, a pair of clippers slung over one arm. He eyed the girl scornfully. "Sae ye have them both a-twitchin' under yer spell now, have ye? Och, ye have a greedy heart, so ye do, jus' like yer aunt."

Rhianna tossed her head. "No' a'tall. One lad yearns for the innocent maid, one for the saucy lass, an' I shall love them both, each in turn. One to begin and one to finish. One to take what I give; the other, to give what I need."

"I've a good mind to warn them, all the same."

"Ooh, an' ye'd be a fine one to do it, Willy McAllister. Ye best be careful or I'll tell Muime what ye've been sayin'."

"I've heard enough already," Isobel cut in, from behind them. McAllister jumped back a step as the housekeeper regarded him coldly. "Do ye no' have somethin' better to do than leerin' at the young folk? The grass 'round the pond cries out for hewin'."

"I'm goin', I'm goin'," McAllister muttered.

"He's right, ye know," Isobel said as she watched the caretaker shamble off. "We need but one man for our purpose. Ye must decide b'tween them."

"Why must I?" Rhianna demanded, indignantly. She folded her arms and struck a defiant pose. "Can one choose b'tween cool, gentle moonbeams and the sweet, warmin' rays o' the sun? Mother Earth requires both her consorts — and so dae I."

The girl's rebellion took Isobel by surprise. Although the housekeeper scowled and pointedly declined to argue, inwardly, she was pleased.

And so it begins, she told herself. At last!

4.

#### U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, New York City.

"ANOTHER DEAD END?"

Mandy Stevenson didn't really have to ask how the background check was going. Slumped behind the Section Four computer console, Sarah Johnson was a study in frustration.

"Are you kidding? It feels like I haven't even started."

"That's what I expected, so I brought you a salad from the commissary. Thousand Island dressing, right?"

Sarah nodded gratefully. Mandy deposited the tray on a nearby desk and sauntered over to her friend. She tapped out two tablets from a bottle of aspirins and set them down beside a paper cup of water.

"You're a lifesaver," Sarah said, swallowing the aspirins. Mandy leaned against the console, and propped up her chin with her hand.

"Hear from the boys lately?"

"No, and frankly, I don't want to." Sarah crumpled the cup and lobbed it into a nearby wastebasket. "When our tovarisch hears that I still don't have anything on that housekeeper, he's going to make Ivan the Terrible seem like a piker."

Mandy chuckled. "Illya was pretty mad yesterday, huh?"

"Livid. Now I know why the peasants revolted." The Intelligence operative heaved an emphatic sigh and surveyed the piles of folders before her. "This is like a jigsaw puzzle that won't fit together."

"When I was a kid, I used to chew on the pieces to make them fit. May I?"

Sarah waved her hand carelessly and laughed, "Be my guest." She moved to the desk to retrieve her lunch tray and munched on her salad as Mandy thumbed through the files.

"And where did you say they were working?" the translator asked.

"Duncreagan. It's a tiny island, a couple of miles off the northwest coast of Scotland. It's privately owned by that guy, that big tycoon, Peter McLeod."

"Duncreagan," Mandy repeated thoughtfully. "That's not a Gaelic name. Must be an Anglicized version of something else."

"How do you know that?" Sarah asked between bites. "I thought you only translated Portuguese."

"Portuguese is my specialty, but I can speak six other

languages. And one of my grandmothers was Irish, so I know a smattering of Gaelic, too. It's real tough to learn."

Mandy continued to flip through the pages until she found what she wanted. "Ah, here we are. Apparently, the locals call it Creag aig Dubh. Creag in Gaelic means 'rock'. I guess that's where the word, 'craggy' comes from. D-u-b-h means 'black'. It's pronounced doo. The 'bh' is silent."

"Black Rock." Sarah shook her head. "Sounds like a real charming place."

"That's not quite right," Mandy corrected her. "Actually, the aig is an idiomatic expression, indicating possession."

Suddenly interested, Sarah abandoned her early lunch and joined Mandy at the console. "You mean the Dubh is a noun, not an adjective — like maybe, a family name?"

Mandy shrugged her shoulders. "Could be."

"The housekeeper's name is Isobel Black," Sarah declared flatly. The woman exchanged glances.

"A coincidence?" Sarah wondered aloud. Mandy shrugged again.

"Maybe, maybe not. But it's a lead, however slim. I suggest you stop looking for Isobel Black and start checking those parish records for an Isobel Dubh. Or try Isobel Dub."

Sarah did exactly that, and soon the pieces of her stubborn jigsaw puzzle began to fall into place. Before the afternoon was out, she had confirmed several more interesting facts concerning the rest of the staff, and by two o'clock she was ready to report. When Solo and Kuryakin failed to call in, she decided to contact them herself. She went over to Communications and requested time on Channel D. It took a moment for the transmission to bounce off the satellite, before a familiar voice answered, "Solo here."

"Napoleon, this is Sarah. Listen: remember the background check that you guys requested?"

"Yes?

"Well, I have the information you need and it's very interesting."

"Go on."

That's odd, Sarah thought fleetingly. After Illya's upbraiding the other day, she expected a good-natured ragging from Solo at the very least. No matter how busy he was, the agent always found time to squeeze in a little small talk or some thinly veiled sexual banter.

But not today.

Sarah continued. "Well, you know that woman, the

housekeeper? I located birth records for an Isobel Dub. I did some research on family trees and Dub is the maiden name of Rhianna's maternal grandmother. Your housekeeper is really Rhianna McLeod's greataunt. In fact — get this — all the maids there are related to Miss McLeod. They're all first and second cousins, on her mother's side. They're not just servants. They're family!"

"Anything else?"

"Just a clipping I found from an old Highlands newspaper, dated November 1, 1918. Seems someone wanted to prosecute an Isobel Dub, but the case was dropped. And by the way, the charge was malicious sorcery!"

Sarah waited for Solo to share in her excitement, but his voice remained neutral and businesslike. "Good work, Sarah. Thank you very much."

"Napoleon, is something wrong?"

"No, why?"

"Your voice sounds kind of funny, like you're coming down with a cold."

"It's just a touch of the flu. Nothing to worry about. Thanks again. Solo out."

The line went dead. Well, I guess he has more important things to do than tease me, Sarah thought. She returned to her office, chiding herself for feeling so disappointed.

And on the other side of the Atlantic, Napoleon Solo stood in his guest bedroom, capped his communicator and promptly forgot everything about Sarah's call — including the fact that she had made it.

5.

T WASN'T VODKA, but it was Talisker, a very good ninety proof single malt whisky, so it would do. Illya Kuryakin knocked back his drink, set down the crystal tumbler and poured himself another.

Nearby, the antique wind-up Victrola played an obscure classical waltz, one he'd never heard before. Brooding and ethereal, with shivery strings and a weirdly ambiguous tonality, the melody coursed, tinny and hollow, through the ancient horn. It echoed eerily through the cavernous ballroom, bouncing off the high ceilings and laminated walls.

No doubt, this room had seen its share of lavish galas and rich, sumptuous feasts. The shades of long-dead lairds and aristocratic revelers still haunted it, their soft, shimmering whispers mingling with the moan of the wind outside, beating against the casement windows.

The place seemed strangely sad and empty now — except for the mirrors. The mirrors were everywhere, lining the walls with almost regimental precision, reflecting and repeating the images they shared. Inside the gilded, floor-to-ceiling frames, the room stretched on and on, into infinity, and the black tiled floor, polished shiny and smooth as ebony ice, enhanced the illusion.

As they waltzed, the figures of Napoleon and Rhianna were captured and multiplied in endless succession, until it seemed they were surrounded by dozens of swirling counterfeit dancers. The effect was hypnotic, like being trapped inside a huge kaleidoscope. It made Kuryakin feel dizzy and he was forced to look away.

He turned to the mirror behind him, and was momentarily startled by the image that stared back. He could hardly believe it was his own.

The ashen, drawn, ghoul-eyed face he saw in the light of the overhead candelabras seemed more suited to an apparition than a flesh and blood human being. Too miserable to care, he retreated to his drink for comfort.

After all, why shouldn't he look sick? He was sick. Sick to his stomach, sick at heart, sick right down to his very soul. He might have tried to cut in on the dance, but where was the use? Their moonlit walk along the cliffs notwithstanding, Kuryakin knew Rhianna's loyalties lay elsewhere. Tonight's little birthday celebration made that abundantly clear. She'd spent the entire meal next to Napoleon, gazing into his eyes, petting his hand, stealing morsels of food from his plate, giggling at his lame jokes. She'd even loaned him her father's evening clothes to wear for the occasion.

Now they were out there, on the ballroom floor, dancing, he in white tie and tails and she in a long, white satin gown. They looked like dolls from the top of a wedding cake.

And what does that make me? Kuryakin thought, bitterly. The best man? The ring bearer? Napoleon, you've done it again. Seduced yet another naive girl into thinking you love her, damn you. Damn you to hell.

The pain of watching them together was so real, so visceral, it was almost unendurable. The Russian agent wanted to crawl into a corner and hide, but since he was supposed to be on duty that night, he decided to get a little drunk, instead.

Preoccupied with his own misery, Kuryakin never noticed that his partner looked just as pale, just as mortally ill. And being so close to Rhianna, Solo didn't notice it either. He didn't bother to seek out his reflection in the panels of glass that passed by as they danced.

He never even looked. He only had eyes for Rhianna. Sweet Rhianna. Beautiful Rhianna. Darling Rhianna. Beloved Rhianna.

The anxiety and turmoil he'd suffered earlier that afternoon were gone, completely forgotten. She was here, right here in his arms, where she should be, and all he felt was a sublime, feverish calm. They floated from one end of the room to the other, airy and buoyant, the hem of her gown sweeping along behind them, hardly touching the floor at all. It seemed as if the music would never stop, but of course, it did. Soon, the record ended and the Victrola's spring-wound motor ground to a halt.

"Oh Napoleon, tha' twas gran'," Rhianna exclaimed. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him and all at once, Solo experienced a sinking sensation that swamped and overwhelmed him. He was drowning, caught in the drag of a psychic undertow, and oddly enough, it wasn't unpleasant at all...

And then she released him and he bobbed to the surface.

"But it is gettin' late." She sighed aloud, and Solo almost sighed with her. "Thank ye for a lovely birth-day party."

"You're welcome."

"Illya?" she called. Finally summoned, Kuryakin rose from his seat beside the double doors. "Oh, there y'are. We wondered what had become o' ye."

As Rhianna reached for his hand, Kuryakin glanced at his partner through cheerless, bloodshot eyes. The Russian agent was certain that Solo couldn't have cared less where he was.

Holding both of their hands in hers, Rhianna stood suspended between the two men, as if she couldn't make up her mind what to do next. Then, she bid Solo a "good night", offered him a parting peck on the cheek and said to Kuryakin, "Come along. Time to be goin' to bed."

Watching them fade away into the darkened corridor, Solo felt the muscles at the base of his skull tighten like a vice. By the time he reached his own bedroom, the headache was back, more ferocious than ever. He tore off his tie, unbuttoned his collar and collapsed, face down, on the bed.

I'll just lie here a minute or two, he told himself, and then I'll get undressed.

He never did. Before the thought was even completed, he was fast asleep.

At that moment, two floors above, Illya Kuryakin was escorting Rhianna to her parents' bedroom while he wrestled with his hurt and disappointment. For some reason, he was having a hard time keeping his roiling emotions under control. He supposed the whisky might have something to do with it.

"What's the matter?" Rhianna asked softly, as they neared the bedroom.

Kuryakin didn't answer. Finally, after a moment, he said, "You know, Napoleon has, um — dated — other women."

"I know," she replied simply. "He tol' me so."

"Many other women."

Rhianna laughed. "Och, so that's it. Yer jealous, are ye?"

"Not jealous. Just concerned. About you."

He opened the door to the outer sitting room for her and stood aside. "Well, ye neednae be 'concerned'," she said as she passed. "I understan' yer friend."

Kuryakin made a face when he heard the word.

"He lives verra close to the skin, Napoleon does." She halted at the bedroom door and turned. "Ye should learn to love as freely."

"It's not in my nature."

"It could be."

She slipped into his arms easily, kissing him full on the mouth. Surprised, Kuryakin responded hesitantly at first, before allowing himself to surrender to the momentum of the kiss.

"Y'see? Ye shouldna be jealous," she told him, still in his embrace. "The moon needna envy the sun. Ya tebya lyublyu, Illyusha."

She licked his cheek from ear to jaw, and buried her fingers in his hair. She kissed him again, more passionately, whispering things to him that he'd seldom heard from a woman's lips.

Slowly, she drew him back, toward the bedroom door and opened it. "I should stay out here," Kuryakin said, barely able to get the words out. He'd defied brutal interrogators. Endured long hours of torture. Survived pain, exhaustion and grueling deprivation.

But he couldn't resist this girl, and he knew it.

He could see the bed in the room beyond, awash in a golden sea of flickering candles.

"Don't you want me?" Rhianna asked. Her voice sounded thin and plaintive. It was then he realized that, for some time now, she'd been speaking to him in Russian.

"Da," he said. The word came out as a strangled sob. It was his last coherent thought that night.



6.

apoleon Solo had a dream. He dreamed he was awakened by a sound. It might have been a thunderclap. Outside, the wind howled, rattling the double windows in his bedroom. He waited for the accompanying tap of rain, but it never came. There was only the wind, roaring in from the northwest, like a freight train, rising to a shriek.

And then the shriek became voices. Women's voices, almost too unnaturally high to be human, and tenuous as a gossamer thread, but women's voices just the same. They sang to him wordlessly, calling to him, tugging at his consciousness like an insistent child, demanding that he respond to them.

Solo stirred. He raised his head and another sound, the sound that had awakened him, joined the voices. He felt rather than heard it, a low, ominous thumping, as regular as a heartbeat.

Sluggishly, shoulders rising first, he pushed himself off the bed and stumbled from the room on unsteady legs. Out in the corridor, the drumming continued, stronger now, permeating the walls and floorboards, penetrating the agent to the bone, until even his own body seemed to throb to its rhythm.

Dizzy, disoriented, not knowing where he was head-

ed or why, Solo staggered on. The beat drove him, the song irresistibly lured him forward, while all around him, Duncreagan Hall began to contort like a funhouse. The doorframes warped, the rafters crimped, the floor pitched and tilted, obliterating every right angle. The staircases canted crazily, like seesaws, but

Solo managed to climb them both.

On the third floor, he lurched through the gallery, weaving back and forth between the hanging portraits. The faces looked down and pitied him. Their collective sigh blew past, like the mournful wind and the walls sprouted magihands that cal reached out to help.

Kind hands. Caring hands. Supporting him. Guiding him to the end of the gallery. Soft hands. Feminine hands. Undressing him. Fondling him Stroking tenderly. him with a sweetscented oil.

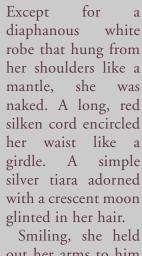
Solo closed his eyes and submitted to their attentions. His strength and vitality returned as they him, renewed restored him. The nausea, the fatigue, the pain in his head, were massaged away and in their place, he felt the rising tingle of sexual arousal.

Afterward, the hands led him into a room filled with so many candles, that it

seemed to be on fire. Through a gilded haze of smoke and burning incense, he glimpsed a bed and around the bed, a circle, inscribed upon the floor.

And there, in the center of the circle, Rhianna stood, waiting for him.

Solo moaned deep in his throat when he saw her.



Smiling, she held out her arms to him and spoke to him in French, as Francine had, that first time in his youth, so very long ago:

Venez-moi, mon chéri. Venez et chaud moi, mon soleil radieux.: Come to me, my darling. Come and warm me, my radiant sun.

Solo went to her gratefully, eagerly, aching with desire. Of all the women he'd known over the years, he couldn't remember wanting any one of them even half as much as this. He embraced her hungrily, feverishly. He kissed her face, her throat, the curve of her breasts, then sank down to his knees to kiss her slowly, deeply, between the thighs.



He would have remained there, worshipping her all night, if she'd allowed it, but after a moment, Rhianna bent down and coaxed him gently back to his feet. She took both of his hands in hers and drew him with her, to the bed.

As he climbed in beside her, the wind rose and hammered against the windows. He crawled between her legs, mouthing her with a ferocious urgency, caressing her body with his. When he entered her, he cried out, overwhelmed by the wave of intense pleasure that surged through him.

Rhianna shuddered in reply and the whole island seemed to quake along with her. Her breath came in short, shallow gasps now, each one answered by a rhythmic thump. The low drumming swelled in earnest, growing louder and quicker, until every vein in Solo's body pulsed to the same beat, completing the cycle.

Her arms and legs entwined themselves around him, binding him to her, like the silken cord that encircled her waist. She was as dark as the night and as deep as the sea. He wanted not just to join with her, but to

pour himself into her, to melt the boundaries that kept them whole and separate, to dissolve his entire being into hers.

His senses swam, suffused by the sound of the wind and the drumming, the faint chanting of feminine voices and Rhianna's soft bleating cries, all combining together in tumultuous concert. Slick with sweat, eyes glazed from the effort, Solo blindly stretched out a hand to grasp the bedpost for leverage and sensed another presence. Vaguely, he was aware that someone else was asleep beside them in the large bed. Someone familiar. Someone he knew. He felt Rhianna shift ever so slightly to reach out to the sleeper, to link all three of them together, and he strained to see who this third person was.

But suddenly, she clasped Solo's free hand tightly, and he no longer cared. His body convulsed violently with hers, wrenching him over the edge of consciousness. He lost his grip on the dream, and plunged downward, into the velvety blackness that was Rhianna McLeod.



# Act IV

"For a charm of powerful trouble, Like a hell-broth boil and bubble."

1.

OLO CAME AWAKE with a start. It might have been the rays of light from the morning sun, stabbing through the windowpanes, penetrating his eyelids, like so many daggers, that woke him. Or the soft buzz of conversation that came from somewhere in the manorhouse. Or perhaps it was simply the smell of fresh brewed coffee, drifting in from the kitchen wing.

One moment he was falling, plummeting downward, into a bottomless abyss. The next he was awake, or at least conscious, brutally jarred back to reality, as if he'd reached the end of the drop and abruptly hit bottom. He opened his eyes and raised his head to peer cautiously about the guestroom.

And then the headache slammed into him, hammering him face down, into the mattress. Solo groaned aloud. It must have been a hell of a party. Or one hell of a brawl.

He groped for a memory, but it hurt too much to think. It hurt even more to move. His whole body felt like a huge, throbbing toothache. His stomach was knotted, sick and hollow. His midsection was cramped, as if he'd been kicked in the groin. Slowly, gingerly, he tried to prop himself up again and this time, he succeeded.

He found that he was still sprawled sideways across the bed, in exactly the same position in which he'd fallen asleep the night before, still dressed in the wing-tip shirt and tuxedo pants. Dragging himself along the edge of the mattress, the agent trailed a foot until it connected with solid ground. It was sometime before the floor itself stabilized sufficiently to allow him to stand.

He aimed himself in the general direction of the bathroom and stumbled toward it. By the time he reached the sink, he was almost in control, but when he saw his reflection in the mirror, he lost it all over again. Under the shadow of his unshaven beard, his face was pinched and ghastly white, the face of a corpse.

Dear Lord, I look like a dead man, Solo thought. He caught himself. That's it, isn't it? I'm dead. I must be.

His reason ricocheted off the battered corners of his mind, fueled by a rapidly increasing sense of panic. But suddenly, a voice intruded, seeping like cool spring water, into his skull. A voice he'd heard the night before, a woman's voice. Sweet. Soothing. Irresistible.

Come to me, it coaxed him. 'Tis nothin' to fear. Nothin' to worry about. Come...

Solo saw no choice but to follow it, and so he did, through the guest bedroom, down the corridors, to the other end of the house. Unlike the rumble of conversation that swelled as he neared the game room, he couldn't tell if the voice was outside his head, or within. Reality seemed to twist, like a moebius strip, until it was impossible to say where his own train of thought ended and the alien one began.

The game room itself was a jumble of sensory impressions, garbled sounds and fragmented images, impossible to sort through completely:

Laughter. The smell of coffee. Men. Several men. Fatigues. A white lab coat. A Saville Row suit. Someone speaking with a clipped British accent. Someone else with a flat, midwestern twang. More Laughter. Loud, braying laughter. Round-headed gangster type. Short. Ugly. Familiar. Don't I know you, you son of a bitch —?

"Napoleon."

Solo swiveled at the sound of his name, and saw Rhianna.

Dear Rhianna. She filled the entire field of his vision until he could see no one and nothing else. "Napoleon," she said aloud, gently, "Come here to me. Come here now."

There was no alternative. He went. "Napoleon," she said again. "D'ye see Illya standin' here, next to me?"

Blond hair. Blue eyes. Russian. Friend.

"Yes."

"Tell me what it is he's holdin' in his right hand."

"An U.N.C.L.E. Special P-38, nine millimeter semiautomatic."

"Tell me what he's doin' wi' it."

"He's inserting the clip. There are eight shots in a standard clip. Now, he's aiming it at me."

She said something to Illya, who mumbled something in return, but Solo didn't listen because their words were not meant for him. He waited until Rhianna was ready to speak to him again. After she finished with Illya, she glided over to Solo and brushed her fingertips against his cheek.

"D'ye love me?" she whispered, the sound of her voice reverberating on both sides of the agent's skull.

"Yes," Solo replied, without hesitation, without the slightest embarrassment. He was aware that there were others present, but he didn't care. He would have gone

down on his knees to her again and pleasured her in front of them all, if she'd ordered him to do so.

"Will ye do somethin' for me?"

"Yes. Anything." He felt perfectly calm, even serene.

"Will ye let Illya shoot ye wi' his gun?

"Yes," he heard himself say, while somewhere, deep inside his brain, another voice screamed, No! No! For God's sake, no! Mentally, he smothered it, stomped it down until he couldn't hear it any more.

"D'ye understand what I'm askin'?"

"Yes."

"Ye'll stand perfectly still, then?"

No! "Yes."

"D'ye love me?"

No! "Yes"

"Will ye die for me?"

Nooo...!

The gun went off before he could answer.

"Bravo!" Arthur MacDonald cried, erupting into enthusiastic applause. "Wonderful! Absolutely incredible! I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!"

"I take it you're pleased with our little demonstration, Arthur?" Peter McLeod asked dryly. "Does this restore your confidence in our little scheme?"

"My God, you were right, McLeod. This is a lot more than hocus-pocus. It's not magic, really. You just pump them with massive doses of hallucinogens and aphrodisiacs, poison them within an inch of their lives and they'll do anything you want."

"Exactly," McLeod chuckled with a self-satisfied grin. He gestured toward the two U.N.C.L.E. agents. Kuryakin was curled up in a nearby chair, trembling violently, his face buried in his lap. On the other side of the room, Solo had collapsed to his hands and knees, shaken but alive. Although neither agent were aware of it, the clip had been pre-loaded with blanks.

"We can exploit their instincts for aggression and self-sacrifice by re-channeling and redirecting them for our own purposes," McLeod explained. "Would you like to see it again, Arthur, perhaps in reverse?"

"That's enough demonstratin' for the day," Isobel cut in sternly.

"Very well, Muime." McLeod sighed. "Whatever you, say." He walked over to Solo and knelt down beside him, balancing on one knee. The agent was breathing very hard and very fast.

"So, it's all been a set-up," Solo rasped, his head hanging low from his shoulders. McLeod nodded.

"I'm afraid it has, Mr. Solo. My sister played the part

of the terrified victim rather well, don't you agree? As for you and your partner here, after a few more days of conditioning, you'll solve the mystery of the death threats. A disgruntled villager, perhaps. Or we might offer up Willy as a sacrificial lamb. And then, pressed for time, you'll travel straight to your respective conferences — where the two of you will proceed to wipe out your organization's entire Enforcement section."

Across the room, Rhianna went pale. "I dinna understan' —," she began, but the men ignored her. "Without its field agents," MacDonald growled, "U.N.C.L.E. will be like an amputated giant."

Solo was not yet convinced. "No matter what you do to us, McLeod," he said between gasps, "if you think we're going to open fire on our own people, you have another thing coming. I'd rather die first, myself."

McLeod laughed heartily. "Oh, sending you and Mr. Kuryakin in as assassins is even beyond my sister's formidable talents. No, no, Mr. Solo. You shall die, that I promise you. But not before you take the special tube of toothpaste we will give you, squeeze six ounces of Aqualite into a sink, turn on the tap and toss in a lighted match."

The Scotsman leaned close to Solo's ear and added, "Believe me Mr. Solo, you will blow up your conference, just as Mr. Kuryakin will blow up his, because before you leave us, Rhianna will tell you to."

After what he'd experienced last night and this morning, Napoleon Solo had no doubt that he would do it. None at all.

"Take them down to the dungeon until we need them again," McLeod ordered the men in fatigues who lounged along the game room walls. A moment later, Solo felt strong arms grasp him by the armpits and yank him to his feet. "And make sure they're securely restrained. We don't want any heroic suicides."

"Peter!" Rhianna called out as the agents were hustled past her. She was displeased with the recent turn in events and determined that her brother should know it. "I dinna understan'. Ye didnae speak o' this. Ye didnae say anythin' 'bout —."

"Hush, child," Isobel warned her. The old woman touched a finger to her lips. "Can ye no' see 'tis best to keep yer feelin's tae yerself for the time bein'?"

"I'm no' a child," Rhianna retorted. She glanced across the room, to where her brother was engaged in conversation with MacDonald. Neither man acknowledged her presence.

"Then, 'tis time ye stopped actin' like one!" Isobel said. Glaring at her aunt, Rhianna turned on her heel

and left. Isobel crossed the room to join the men.

"I see my sister has worked herself into a royal snit again," McLeod observed.

"She's a sensitive lass," Isobel reminded him. "She doesna appreciate bein' taken for granted."

McLeod made a face. MacDonald offered his shoulder a comradely pat. "Don't worry, McLeod," the Thrush chief said, "women don't like me much either."

Isobel smiled thinly. "Indeed, Mr. MacDonald? I canna imagine why."

2.

THE DUNGEON OF DUNCREAGAN HALL had not been used for more than a century and looked it. The stones were uncomfortably cold and damp and slick with filth and fetid mildew. Still, as far as Kuryakin was concerned, the condition of their prison was the least of their problems.

Too sick and weak to do anything else, he lay against a wall, reviewing the events of the last few days. On the other side of the narrow cell, Solo crouched low, knees drawn up, forehead touching the floor, struggling against the grip of a debilitating nausea.

"I made love to her," Kuryakin murmured guiltily. Just thinking about what he'd done and how he'd been compelled to do it, made him feel unclean, violated. Now he knew how a woman must feel after she'd been raped.

"I know," Solo replied, remembering the sleeping presence in Rhianna's bed. If he couldn't tell who it was last night, he was sure now.

Kuryakin stiffened slightly. "Then, what I dreamed afterward. That you and she.... And I was there. It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"No," Solo managed to choke before a wave of nausea swept through him again, launching him into another bout of vomiting. There was nothing left in his stomach. He was down to dry heaves.

Kuryakin watched sympathetically. He'd been stricken the same way earlier that morning. He pressed his feverish forehead against the stone and groaned, "Oh Napoleon, what has she done to us?"

"You should have told me what you were feeling," Solo chided his partner when he was able to speak again. "You must have realized that something strange was going on." He regretted his words as soon as he said them.

"Is it so strange that I should fall in love?" Kuryakin shot back. "Or that a beautiful woman should fall in love

with me?"

"No, I just meant —."

Suddenly, Solo was interrupted by the iron clunk of the bolt on the dungeon door. Someone was coming in. The door swung open and Rhianna appeared. As soon as he saw her, Kuryakin turned and shrank back, to the rear of the cell, as far as the chain would let him.

Anxiously, Rhianna hurried in. "Oh, Illya, I'm sae sorry, I didnae know."

She knelt beside him, but the Russian agent refused to look at her. "Ved'ma. Witch," he spat. "Conniving, deceitful..."

Surprised, the woman rose to her feet, straightening to her full height. "'Tis true I belong to the wise folk. Bu' how can ye be sayin' such things to me, when ye know how much I love ye both?" Her manner shifted from pleading to petulant. "I can make ye love me."

Kuryakin shook his head incredulously. He looked up at her and said, "You have a good deal to learn about life, young lady. You can make us desire you, lust after you. Apparently, you can make us do whatever you please. But love not freely given, is no love at all."

"My pets love me..."

"Is that what we are to you?" Kuryakin shook the chain that stretched between the wall and his shackled leg. "Is that why you've leashed us like this?"

Rhianna didn't answer and retreated to Solo. Too ill to crawl away, he couldn't resist when she propped him up in her arms.

"Napoleon, will ye no' forgive me?" she begged. Solo stared up at her miserably, then turned back to the wall. Kuryakin answered for him.

"Forgive you? Look what you've done to him. To us. If this is how you treat your lovers, I'd hate to see what you do to your enemies."

"Aye, laddie, that ye would," she said, as she fixed Kuryakin with her gaze. Without another word, she released Solo and angrily stalked from the cell.

Outside the door, Isobel was waiting for her. "They willna speak to me," Rhianna told her. "They hate me."

Isobel folded her arms, coolly indifferent to her niece's distress. "An' what d'ye expect? D'ye think they'd take kindly to bein' forced into killin' themselves an' murderin' their friends?"

"But I dinna want them to die. Peter nev'r said anythin' o' this. I willna"

"Shhh, child," Isobel cut in. She pointed to the uniformed Thrush soldier who stood guard outside the door. "They may no' have brains, but they have eyes an'

ears. Come away."

She drew Rhianna farther along the dank passageway. "'Tis wrong, I tell ye," the girl began again, when they were beyond earshot. "I'll no' put it into their minds. When Peter asks, I'll jus' refuse him. He canna do anythin' wi'out my help."

"He might use myself or one o' yer cousins to threaten ye," Isobel suggested soberly.

"Och, he wouldna do such a thing." She looked at Isobel. "Would he?"

After a moment, the old woman asked, "Now d'ye believe what I've been tellin' ye? D'ye see what an evil man yer brother is?"

Rhianna nodded, sadly.

"An' how d'ye feel about him?" The girl frowned as she studied the patterns in the cobblestone floor.

"An' what will ye do about it?"

Slowly, Rhianna raised her head. She stared off into the distance.

And somewhere, not far off, thunder rumbled.

3.

EXHAUSTED FROM THEIR ORDEAL, Solo and Kuryakin spent the morning dozing fitfully in their cell. Shortly after noon, Isobel reappeared, accompanied by Fiona and Meg. While Fiona exchanged mild flirtations with the guard outside, Isobel and Meg went in to see the agents.

"How are ye feelin'?" the housekeeper inquired.

"Never better," Solo mumbled belligerently, and Kuryakin added, "We're hungry. When's lunch?"

Isobel smiled, pleased to find a token of defiant spirit left, even if it was only so much bravado. They were going to need it.

"Glad to hear it, gentlemen. Then ye'll no' mind drinkin' a wee bit o' my medicinal tea."

Kuryakin stared at the cup in Meg's hand and said, "You must think we're fools."

"All men are fools, Mr. Kuryakin. 'Tis jus' more noticeable in some than in others. Now, drink."

Supporting his head with her hand, Meg held the cup to the Russian's lips. She did the same for Solo. Isobel watched, waiting patiently for the potion to work. Gradually, the agents' cheeks flushed, flooding with color. Isobel nodded to herself, satisfied.

"Fiona is occupyin' the guard, sae we can talk. I reckon I should be thankin' ye gentlemen for beddin' Rhianna an' awakenin' her powers."

"Don't mention it," Solo cracked. The tea was having

some effect. He sat up against the wall, feeling better than he had in days.

"I'm sorry for what ye've both endured, but I knew ye to be stout-hearted lads an' 'twas necessary."

"Necessary?" Kuryakin asked sullenly. "Necessary for what?"

"For justice, Mr. Kuryakin. For returnin' to my clan wha' tis rightfully ours." Isobel paused, her skeletal fingers knitting together. "As ye may have guessed, gentlemen, I'm more than the housekeeper here. I'm called Isobel na Dubh by some — Isobel the Black — an' I'm Rhianna's great-aunt. Indeed, all the girls here on this island are my nieces.

"Ye should know that Creag aig Dubh has belonged to my family since the beginnin', before the writin' o' history, back when we all worshipped the Great Mother an' the male of the species knew his proper place. Our special gift, our 'craft' as some call it, has been passed from mother to daughter, on down through the generations."

"But Rhianna is not in your direct hereditary line," Kuryakin noted, his interest piqued.

"No," Isobel agreed. "I was too proud o' spirit to marry, but my sister, Rhianna's gran'mother, did. She was a grae bana-bhuidseach, a pow'rful woman. Och, she had but only one daughter tho', to receive the gift — Rhianna's mother, Moira."

"...Who married Bruce McLeod," Solo said.

"Aye, the thievin' rascal. He came to Creag aig Dubh, wi' his family portraits an' verra little else. His pockets were empty, but his head was full o' schemes. Moira loved him so, she did. She used her pow'rs to help him build the empire ye see t'day."

"But you haven't lost control of anything," Kuryakin pointed out. "Peter still heads the company."

"Have we no'?" Isobel snorted in disgust. "The boy is worse than his father. 'Twas his idea to shut up Rhianna, here on the island, far away from the business, sae he could do what he pleased. Nothin' is sacred to him. He's been makin' poisons that sour the earth an' foul the air. I hear he ev'n has one that rots the leaves right off the trees."

"Better living through chemistry," Solo muttered sarcastically.

"Well, nae mair, I say. 'Tis time for Rhianna to claim her rightful inheritance. The gift is strong in her. She will be a greater bana-bhuidseach than ev'n her gran'mother. An' so, we have nurtured her as our ban-righinn, our queen..."

"Like bees," Kuryakin said thoughtfully.

"Aye, an' you an' Mr. Solo here, have become part o' the hive. But mind: bees abandon their drones after servicin' the queen, while I'm here to offer ye both an' alliance."

"Oh?" Solo said softly.

Isobel nodded. "I will make ye a bargain. Understan' now, I care nothin' for yer organization or those Thrush people. My only concern is for my clan. I'll help ye both to escape. In return, ye must promise to protect Rhianna an' her cousins an' take them away from this island." She paused. "Ye mustn't be too hard on the girl. She's naive an' impulsive, but she truly does love ye, ye know. Peter an' I told her what to do and how to do it. She thought it all a game."

"What about you?" Solo asked.

The old woman arched an ivory brow. "Dinnae worry about me Mr. Solo. My task is almost done."

"How many men arrived with your nephew?" Kuryakin wanted to know.

"Ten. Eight soldiers in those uniforms, one in a white coat, an' the fat dwarf in the poorly fittin' suit."

"She means Arthur MacDonald," Solo chuckled, as he glanced over at his partner. "I thought I recognized the bastard this morning." He turned to Isobel. "Well, what can we say? It seems you have yourself a deal, Miss Black."

Isobel pursed her lips. She reached out, grasped Solo's hand firmly in both of hers and looked him straight in the eye. "Swear to me ye'll keep all my girls safe, nae matter what happens, Mr. Solo. Swear on yer life an' yer honor, for if ye fail me, ye'll have neither."

"I swear it," Solo said and nearby, Kuryakin seconded the motion.

"Good," Isobel replied, releasing his hand. She motioned to Meg. "Now we must be goin'. They're suspicious of us already. Meg will return ev'ry hour. Drink what she brings, ev'ry wee drop. By this evenin', ye should be healthy enough. Then we'll see about releasin' ye from those chains."

"And will you also release us from this infernal voice in our heads?" Kuryakin called out, from behind her.

Isobel stopped to consider. "That I canna do, Mr. Kuryakin. Ye belong to Rhianna. Only she has the pow'r to set ye free. Now, remember our agreement, an' good luck to ye both."

Then she slipped through the door and was gone.

4.

VERY HOUR, for the rest of the day, Meg brought the agents tea, or something that passed for it. Sometimes, the liquid in the cup was thick and chalky. Sometimes, it was clear and sweet. By early evening, when she brought them vegetable barley soup for supper, the agents could eat all of it with no ill effects.

The guard outside their cell finished his soup, too, and promptly passed out.

"Here's the key," Meg said, and watched as Solo unlocked his shackles. "An' here's his cursed gun."

When he was free, Solo tossed the key to his partner and took the Thrush rifle. He quickly checked the magazine. There were ten shots.

"Where are your cousins?" he asked.

"Everyone is gathered in the kitchen. Except Rhianna."

"And where is she?" said Kuryakin. Releasing his leg iron, he flung it away with a satisfied grunt. Meg chewed her lip.

"She an' Peter had a terrible row. He's locked her in her bedroom."

Solo looked at Kuryakin and cursed under his breath. "Is she being guarded?"

Meg nodded. "There are at least two men upstairs, maybe more."

"I might be able to reach her on my own," Kuryakin said, thoughtfully. "You can take the rifle. I'll take my chances."

"Muime said to tell ye that Peter has a large boat awaitin' in the cove."

"All right, then," Solo said, hefting the Thrush rifle. "We'll rendezvous at the boat." Kuryakin nodded in agreement. He watched as Solo hurried away with Meg. Then, ripping a lighted torch from a wall bracket, he hopped over the unconscious guard, and rushed off in the opposite direction.

The cellar passageways were narrow and twisting and black as pitch. Even with the torch, it took Kuryakin a few minutes to locate an exit to the grounds, outside. He finally found a wooden trapdoor, heavy and rotted. As he clawed the rusted clasp loose, he heard a deep rumble of thunder on the other side. Dousing the torch, he forced the door open and poked his head through.

Immediately, the rain hit him, washing over his face and soaking his hair. It came in torrents and kept on coming, driven by gale force winds, as powerful as those of a monsoon. Streaks of lightning sliced like quicksilver across the sky, searing the surrounding landscape with a fierce, electric-blue fire. As Kuryakin blinked to clear his vision, the lightning faded and the thunder rolled again, rattling his teeth.

The agent climbed through the trapdoor, ducked his head and broke into a run, sprinting along the western face of Duncreagan Hall. It was like tacking through a hurricane. The winds roared in from the West, lashing him with stabbing sheets of rain, pushing him offcourse. Thoroughly drenched and blinded by the downpour, Kuryakin skirted the ivy-covered wall of the manorhouse, using it for guidance and support. He kept moving, heading for Rhianna's bedroom, at the rear corner of the house, while hoping that they hadn't moved her.

Lightning flashed overhead again, striking a large oak. There was a crack and a sizzle, followed by the smell of scorched wood. Kuryakin kept going.

At the northwestern corner of Duncreagan Hall, the agent halted. He cupped a hand to his forehead and searched the third floor. A candle glowed in the window of Rhianna's bedroom.

Are you up there, I wonder? he thought, and the voice imbedded deep inside his head, answered softly that she was. Encouraged, Kuryakin grasped a handful of ivy, hooked a toe into the vine, and began to climb.

The ivy was thick and sturdy enough to hold him, but just barely. Halfway up, the branches began to sag under his weight. Buffeted by the storm, Kuryakin quickened his pace, hauling himself hand over hand up the side of the house.

Just as he reached the third floor level, the vines finally gave out. Under his right foot, a stalk splintered. He felt his body start to drop.

And then, suddenly, somewhere overhead, a window flew open. Desperately, Kuryakin flung out an arm and felt another hand grip his. He looked up and saw Rhianna staring down at him.

"Illya! What are ye doin'?" she cried, her hair blowing in the wind. Kuryakin squinted through the rain.

"Rescuing you — I think."

She gave his arm a solid tug, providing the leverage he needed. With one final effort, he propelled himself upward, clamoring headfirst, over the sill. Behind him, the vines separated from the wall and crashed to the ground, below.

"Are ye all right, laddie?" Rhianna exclaimed as the agent skidded to a soggy stop beside the bed. She knelt down beside him. Kuryakin sat up and shook his head.

"I think so."

When Rhianna studied him, unconvinced, the agent smiled. "Really, I'm fine. But we have to get out of here."

"A mite easier said than done." She jerked a thumb towards the window. "I take it we'll no' be leavin' the way ye came."

Without bothering to answer, Kuryakin looked across the room, to the door. "Anybody on the other side?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"Do you think you might persuade him to come in?"
"He's no' verra friendly. He's no' responded to any o'
my requests."

"Have you tried screaming?"

Rhianna laughed. "That might do it."

They stood up and crossed the room. Rhianna faced the door while Kuryakin positioned himself beside the jamb, tensing for the attack.

"Ready," he whispered. Rhianna let out a blood-curdling shriek and yelled at the top of her lungs, "Help me! Please! Someone, help me!"

Her pleas had the desired effect. There was a commotion in the corridor, followed by a jangling of keys. The bolt was thrown and the door cracked open. A bereted head appeared.

"Miss —?" the Thrushman asked uncertainly. It was all he had time to say. Kuryakin chopped him cleanly across the throat, then hit him again as he went down, breaking his neck. The guard died before he knew what hit him.

As the Russian agent bent to retrieve the Thrush rifle, Rhianna let out another scream. This one sounded genuine. Kuryakin snapped upright, a split-second before a second guard barreled into him, tackling him to the floor. Instinctively, Kuryakin abandoned the rifle and dropped into a backward roll, taking his opponent with him. He felt a body tumble up and over him. The guard landed with a loud thump a few feet away, and Kuryakin heard the scratch of another rifle, sliding across the polished floor, out of reach.

As the Russian agent twisted and sprang to his feet, the Thrushman fell upon him again, fists flying, renewing the battle. The guard lunged, driving Kuryakin backwards, into the corridor, smacking the agent's head hard against a wall. The vibration jolted two oil lamps from their brackets. They crashed to the floor, igniting the carpet.

Kuryakin never noticed. With beefy fingers locked around his throat, the wiry Russian kept struggling

within the guard's murderous grip. The guard was larger and heavier, but Kuryakin was faster. The Russian agent squirmed then jerked, weakening the hold. It was all the slack he needed. Kuryakin kicked out, catching the guard in the groin. The man groaned and doubled over, just as Kuryakin's knee connected with his chin. Two more chops and the fight was effectively over.

"Illya! Are ye all right?"

Rhianna rushed beside him, a Thrush rifle cradled in her arms. Recovering, Kuryakin rubbed his throat and croaked, "I told you: I'm fine."

He coughed and wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. Handing him the rifle, the girl pointed and said, "Look."

Kuryakin turned and found the corridor a tunnel of flames.

"Can we do somethin'?"

Kuryakin shook his head. The fire was spreading rapidly, from the rugs to the tapestries and the portraits. Already, the face of Sir Roderick McLeod, the fifteenth chief, was lost in a cloud of smoke.

"It's too far advanced. Forget it. We'll go the other way."

"But Illya —."

"Don't argue."

"Bu' my horses!" Rhianna planted her feet, standing her ground. "I'll no' leave them trapped in the stables to die!"

"All right," the agent relented. He laced his arm through hers. "We'll stop at the stables on the way to the boat. Now, come on!"

5.

"How many guards, Meg?"

The maid concentrated, mentally counting the black berets that bobbed beyond the open kitchen door. "I make it three. Two men at the table, eatin' supper. One behind them, near the cuttin' board."

"And the other girls? Where are they?"

Meg narrowed her eyes, studying the scene at the far end of the darkened corridor. After a moment, she turned to Solo, who was flattened against the wall, beside her. "That's difficult to say."

"Try. It's important."

"Verra well." She concentrated again. Lightning flashed through the windows and a crash of thunder broke the silence. "I can see Nelly, at the stove, to the left —."

Nine o'clock, Solo told himself, ignoring the sounds of the storm. He squeezed his eyes shut to reconstruct the layout in his mind.

"Jean is standin' a wee bit to the right o' the guard. That's our right, his left. Glynnis is farther ov'r, almost to the window."

One o'clock and two o'clock. Solo repeated the positions, committing them to memory. If one of the Thrush guards decided to be a hero, there wouldn't be time to assess the situation before pulling the trigger. He would have to act automatically.

"An' there's Winnie. She's crossin' to sit beside the door."

Four o'clock.

Meg sighed. "That's it, Mr. Solo. I'm sorry, bu' I canna see Fiona a'tall."

One unknown. Not good, but it would have to do.

"Okay," Solo said, clicking off the safety on the Thrush rifle. He offered Meg an encouraging grin. Despite the determined jut of her chin, the maid was obviously terrified. "Go ahead," he ordered her gently. "I'll be right behind you."

Meg sucked in a breath and then, with tray in hand, proceeded down the corridor. Solo crept along behind her, hugging the walls, trying to keep out of sight.

As she reached the threshold of the kitchen, Meg stopped. One of the guards sitting at the table, looked up at her and said, "So how's our friends from U.N.C.L.E. doin'?"

Solo answered for her. "Why, that's kind of you to ask. We didn't know you cared." Meg stepped aside to reveal the agent standing in the doorway, Thrush rifle drawn. The guard's hand instinctively reached for his own rifle, propped against the edge of the table, but Solo warned him back.

"Uh-huh." He motioned with the rifle barrel. "Everyone stay very stil —."

The sideways shift of the guard's eyes alerted Solo even before he heard Meg gasp. He twisted to confront a fourth guard, hiding behind the open door. The man's rifle was just coming up as Solo fired, pumping two shots into the Thrushman's chest.

"Mr. Solo!"

It was Meg again. Apparently, she'd found her voice. Solo spun on his heel, saw the three remaining Thrush guards move and shouted, "Get down!"

It wasn't really necessary. The maids were already dropping down, out of his line of fire. With almost surgical precision, Solo shot along an imaginary path, picking out his targets. He caught the first man in the belly, the second in the chest and the third, right between the eyes.

Even as the bodies fell, the maids rushed to Solo from their hiding places. The agent performed a quick count of the lovely heads and came up short.

"Where's Fiona?"

"Gone to find Muime," Jean said, her voice tight with worry.

There was no time to waste. Solo yanked a rifle from one of the guard's lifeless hands. "Do any of you know how to shoot one of these?"

"I can," Winnie volunteered. Solo handed her the rifle. "I'll find Fiona and Isobel. You girls go down to the dock and wait. There's a boat there. Get on it." He glanced at Winnie. "If anybody tries to stop you, shoot him."

"Aye, sir," Winnie said with a grin. She led her cousins as they crowded out the kitchen door, into the teeming rain. The agent turned and headed back to the main wing of the manorhouse.

As he jogged through the corridors, Solo listened to the storm. Although the aged beams of Duncreagan Hall creaked and rumbled around him, the thunder seemed duller now, the flares of lightning less intense. Apparently, the storm was letting up.

He traveled past the library and veered into the ball-room, remembering a rear stairwell he could use for a shortcut to the upper stories. As he cut across the black tiled floor, however, he found the ballroom filled with a smoky haze. The stinging, sandpapery scent of fire hung in the air. The agent called out, "Fiona!" He was answered by a flat, nasal growl.

"Hold it right there, Solo."

Solo froze in his tracks. From the shadows of the doorway at the end of the room, Arthur MacDonald slowly materialized. His left arm was clamped around Fiona's shoulders while his right hand held a .45 automatic pointed against the side of her head.

6.

HERE WAS ONLY ONE Thrush guard on duty at the stables. Kuryakin shot him easily. He expected to find Willy McAllister there, too, but the caretaker was nowhere around.

"Look! The fire!" Rhianna shouted over the storm. She pointed to the manorhouse. Already, the blaze had consumed most of northern end. Whipped by the winds, the flames were edging upward, licking the ancient stone keep.

Inside the stables, the horses whinnied and kicked against their stalls in panic. Working together,

Kuryakin and Rhianna released the carriage horses first, then the pony. Maise shied and refused to leave the shelter of the stall. Rhianna tried to coax her, but in the end, the filly had to be dragged by the reins. It took all of Kuryakin's strength to do it.

Gascedach was the last to go. The agent felt a sympathetic twinge of regret as he watched Rhianna swat the massive gelding, sending him on his way.

And then the girl paused.

"What's the matter?" Kuryakin said. "What's wrong?" Rhianna didn't answer. She cocked her head to one side, as if she were listening to something only she could hear.

7.

"DROP THE RIFLE," Arthur MacDonald ordered. Reluctantly, Solo did.

"Now, kick it away."

Solo hesitated. "I'll blow her brains out," MacDonald snarled. "You know I will."

Solo knew. He kicked the rifle away. MacDonald gave Fiona a shove and the maid retreated to the U.N.C.L.E. agent's side. Frightened, she clung to his arm.

"Well, well, well. Isn't this a pretty picture?" MacDonald smiled, ruefully. "I gotta admit, you do have a way with the ladies there."

"Let her go," Solo said. The Thrush chief laughed. "Why should I?"

"It's over, Arthur. Your scheme's a failure." Solo inclined his head toward Fiona and hissed through the corner of his mouth, "Run. Down to the cove. He doesn't really want you."

The woman shook her head. "No. I canna leave ye like this, Mr. Solo."

"There? You see?" MacDonald laughed again, his face stained violet by a splash of lightning. "They're all crazy about you. Last time, you seduced my goddamn secretary! I don't get it. What's the deal with you guys, anyway? "

Solo listened as the thunder rumbled overhead. The rafters in the ballroom ceiling shivered in response. It seemed the storm was growing stronger again.

"Even if you kill me, you can't win anymore," Solo said, stalling for time. Where was Illya? Or Rhianna? Or Isobel?

MacDonald ignored him. "Maybe it was all that crawling around that got 'em," he considered thoughtfully. "Aroused their sympathy. You know how soft-hearted women can be." He tipped his chin to Fiona. "What do you think, honey? Was that where I

made my mistake?"

With that, MacDonald aimed the automatic and pulled the trigger. The bullet sheared across Solo's right bicep, just above the elbow. The agent cried out, and fell to one knee.

And back in Gascedach's stall, Kuryakin yelped, too. He felt a sharp stab of pain in his right arm and clutched at it. His immediate thought was that he'd been shot, but when he inspected the arm, he found it uninjured and intact.

"So?" MacDonald demanded, gesturing to the maid. "Does that make him more appealing?"

"Are ye out o' ye bloody mind?" Fiona screamed back at him, as she knelt beside Solo. MacDonald remained unfazed.

"How about a bullet in the knee, then? Or better yet, right between the legs?" Braying with laughter, the Thrush chief steadied himself and took careful aim.

And at that moment, standing beside the stable door, Kuryakin heard Rhianna shout, "No!!!"

Her voice dissolved into a clap of thunder and in the next instant, the foundation at the northern end of Duncreagan Hall buckled and collapsed with a teeth-chattering crash. The rest of the house quaked under the strain and in the ballroom, twin fissures suddenly appeared on opposite sides of the room, fracturing the walls. As they raced along on parallel courses, the rows of gilded mirrors exploded in rapid succession, like a string of huge flashbulbs going off.

Huddled in the center of the ballroom, Fiona and Solo shielded themselves against the spraying shards of silvered glass, but McDonald was too shocked to take cover. Rooted to his spot, he watched as the fissures abruptly changed direction and accelerated toward the ceiling. Just above the Thrush chief's head, they finally met, shattering the plaster. A beam split, and an enormous chandelier rocked and broke free. It crashed to the floor, crushing Arthur MacDonald under its weight.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. Choking from the smoke and plaster dust, Fiona struggled to her feet.

"Can ye walk?" she asked Solo, offering a hand for support. The agent stood beside her, cradling his wounded arm.

"We have to find Isobel," he said, between coughs.

"Nae, Mr. Solo. I found her, in the ol' keep. She sent me back. She said to tell ye that she has Peter's concoction an' that ye must remember what ye promised. She said ye would understan'."

"Yeah," Solo replied sadly, "I understand." He looked

at the stairwell, swamped with billowing clouds of smoke. Already, he could feel the heat of the approaching fire. He hooked his good arm through Fiona's and said, "Let's get out of here."

8.

them, they climbed through a window and ran from the house. On the way to the cliffs, they encountered Kuryakin and Rhianna. The Russian agent glanced at Solo's bloody arm, but made no comment.

In the sheltered cove, they found a twenty-five foot cabin cruiser anchored and waiting, bouncing in the rough seas. The wind was still high but the rain was tapering off. Nearby, the body of a dead Thrush soldier lay sprawled on the ramshackle dock. Winnie and the other maids were on board, crowded into the cockpit.

"I'll start the engine," Solo said to Kuryakin as he stepped over the corpse. "You tend the anchor and the mooring lines."

Kuryakin nodded as he helped Rhianna aboard. He turned his attention to the ropes, knotted around a rotted piling, and came face to face with Willy McAllister. The Thrush rifle in his hands was pointed directly at Kuryakin's heart.

"Stop right there, laddie," McAllister said, "and put your hands up."

Drawing back from the ropes, the Russian agent obeyed.

"Ye'll no' be goin' anywhere." McAllister motioned to Rhianna with the barrel of his rifle. "I canna allow ye to take that spawn o' the devil from this island."

Inside the cabin, Solo hit the ignition and the boat's inboard motor roared to life. When Kuryakin failed to signal that the lines were clear, the dark-haired agent returned to the cockpit. He elbowed his way gently, between the maids.

"We seem to have a slight problem, Napoleon," Kuryakin observed, matter-of-factly, from the dock. Solo saw McAllister and sighed.

"Don't be stupid, Willy. Put down that gun and get on board."

"Beggin' ye pardon, sir, bu' it's yerself who's actin' the fool. They've bewitched ye, lad. I know. I've been under their spell for forty years. Isobel, she —."

The old man studied the group. "Where's Isobel?" Solo pointed to the burning manorhouse and said, "Probably up there."

McAllister peered up at the inferno and murmured, "Isobel?" There was real sorrow in his voice. On the deck of the boat, Rhianna burst into tears and wailed, "Muime!"

And high above them, at the top of the stone tower, Peter McLeod echoed the same word as he stumbled into the small, circular room.

"That's right, Peter, dear, 'tis I," the old woman said calmly. She stood behind a huge black kettle, calmly stirring its contents with a long, wooden ladle. "Please close the door. The smoke irritates my eyes, ye know."

Bewildered, McLeod pushed the heavy door shut. "What are you doing here?" he asked. He noticed his lab assistant lying on the floor. The man looked dead.

Isobel continued with her stirring. "Waitin' for ye, o' course. Och, ye've caused sae much mischief, here. Bu' then, ye've always been a wicked lad. Murderin' yer parents, like that, jus' to gain the inheritance."

Caught by surprise, McLeod protested. "I didn't kill them."

"Aye, but ye hired someone else who did. How much did ye pay the crew to sabotage the yacht?"

"It was an accident. There was a leak in the petrol line."

Isobel eyed her nephew slyly. "Och, dinna be sae modest. For whatever else he might've been, Bruce McLeod was a careful man. An' was it no' a wee bit convenient that the entire crew should survive while my niece an' her husband did no'?"

McLeod offered her a careless wave. "Oh, this is nonsense. I just came here for —."

"I know what ye came for. Be patient, laddie." She studied the pasty soup as it swirled in her kettle. "My brew's nearly done."

"Your brew —?" McLeod stiffened, all the color draining from his face. "That can't be my Aqualite in there...."

Isobel nodded. "Aye, ye know 'tis." She withdrew the ladle and tapped it delicately against the rim of the kettle. "Now, what was it ye said to that nice Mr. Solo? Oh, yes. I need a match. Will a candle dae?"

She reached for a three pronged candelabra. Horrified, McLeod shrank back to the door.

"No, Muime," he pleaded. "Please. For God's sake, I'm your nephew. You can't do this to me."

Isobel blinked innocently as she held the flickering candle above the mouth of the kettle. "An' why no', dear? I told ye: ye've always been a wicked lad."

She smiled once more. And tossed the candle in.

The resulting explosion was cataclysmic. Below, in the cove, the force of the blast shook the granite cliffs. The dock collapsed and as McAllister fell back, lost in a shower of rocks, Kuryakin hurled himself on the deck of the cabin cruiser. Solo rushed to the controls and hit the throttle, and the boat tore away from the island at full speed, riding the crest of a tidal wave. They didn't slow down until they were almost to Geilt.

"After this conference, I'm going to take a long vacation," Solo said wearily, as he leaned against console, guiding the wheel with his left hand. Kuryakin chuckled, and then his smile faded. He could hear Rhianna and some of the other maids sobbing softly in the background.

"Did you notice that strange sound, right before we left the island?" the Russian agent asked. Solo nodded.

"Yeah. Real eerie. What the hell was that, anyway?"

Kuryakin looked back over his shoulder, toward Duncreagan. The isle blazed like a nova in the Scottish night. "It was the sand," he replied. "I think it was keening."

9.

#### U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, New York.

"THAT SHOULD DO IT, gentlemen," Alexander Waverly said as he closed the file. "Good luck with your respective conferences."

The chief rose from his seat. His agents did likewise. "I take it you're suffering from no distressing side-effects as a result of this rather peculiar affair?"

His arm in a sling, Solo glanced sideways at Kuryakin. "Ah — no, sir, no," he murmured. "At least, nothing permanent."

"Good. Then I shall see you both next week." Waverly headed for the door. As it slid aside, the old man turned and smiled. "Oh, forgive me. I'd almost forgotten. It seems you have visitors."

Rhianna McLeod appeared beside him, flanked by Fiona and Jean. She was dressed in a beige tailored suit, her long tresses gathered into a business-like chignon. Waverly exchanged a few pleasantries with the women and continued on. The door swished shut behind him.

"I couldna leave wi'out sayin' goodbye," Rhianna said. "An' to try to press my case, one last time."

She went to Kuryakin and touched a hand to his cheek. "The fourth chief found happiness with a fairy wife."

Kuryakin smiled. "The fourth chief was not an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"An' what do ye say, Napoleon?" she asked, moving on to Solo. She looped her arms around his neck. "Must I lose ye both?"

"I'm afraid so," he said.

"I could make ye rich. I could keep ye safe. Do ye love me?"

"Very much. But sometimes, loving someone means knowing when to let them go."

Rhianna shook her head, defeated. "So be it: I release ye. I release ye both."

Solo winced, as something that felt like a mousetrap, snapped inside his skull. He looked over at Kuryakin. The Russian was running an anxious hand through his thatch of blond hair.

"Muime said that things have a way of turnin' out for the best," Fiona offered, but Rhianna was unconvinced. She sighed wistfully, as she studied Solo's face. "In this case, cousin, I think Muime was wrong."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed Solo deep and full on the mouth, hugging him tight. Then she moved on and did the same to Kuryakin.

"Goodbye my sweet, brave gascedachan," Rhianna said, and joined Fiona and Jean at the door. "We must be goin' now. We've a board of directors' meetin' to attend."

As the women disappeared down the stainless steel corridor, the agents stood in the doorway and watched them go. "Did we just make a terrible mistake?" Kuryakin wondered aloud. Solo frowned.

"Don't think about it." He shook himself, smoothed the folds of his sling and clamped his good hand on his partner's shoulder. "C'mon. I'll buy you a cup of coffee in the commissary. We can go over our speeches."

On the ground level, the two men ran into Mandy Stevenson. The little tarot reference book was clasped in her hand.

"Oh, Napoleon," she exclaimed. "I've been looking all over for you. I found out what that arrangement meant. Wait'll you read about it!"

Solo plucked the book from her fingers. "Umm. May I keep this?" he inquired politely. "As a sort of souvenir."

Mandy nodded, flattered. "Well, I guess. If you want to."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Thank you." And in one fluid motion, Solo turned and lobbed the book to Kuryakin, who caught it neatly and dropped it into a nearby wastebasket. Before Mandy could protest, Solo wrapped his free arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

"Now, about that house at the beach," he said as they walked. "I'll be away until the tenth, but the week after that....

The End