

## A Minor Difficulty

(appeared in We Have Each Other, 1996)

May 1969

"Mark Slate? Great. Glad to have him aboard." Napoleon Solo flipped through the sheaf of papers on the table before him, soaking in the information as he spoke casually to the others gathered around the briefing table. "We haven't had a chance to work with Mark for a long time."

"Thirteen months," supplied Illya Kuryakin, accepting the papers that Napoleon passed to him.

Alexander Waverly tamped the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe and threatened to light it, but spoke instead. "Mr. Slate has been doing an excellent job for our London office of late. The last time we saw him in New York was during that flash flood business. I'm glad you're not superstitious, Mr. Solo." He gave in and lit the pipe.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances. The "flash flood business" that Waverly referred to was an unpleasant memory.

"Well, Mark didn't have anything to do with my being left in that trailer in the path of the flood," said Solo softly. He did not add that he was at least as superstitious as every other agent in Section Two, and maybe a little more than most.

"Good," said Waverly, his tone final. "I look forward to a successful final report, gentlemen. That's all for now."

Illya collected the papers that held all the information UNCLE was able to put together on the Compton Lab scenario and half shuffled after his partner as Solo left Waverly's office. In the corridor, Napoleon noticed that Illya was losing half the files to gravity, and he stopped to catch the bottom-most sheaf.

"Spasibo."

"No problem. Did you see the page about the Trudnost?"

They were walking again, the files split between them.

"Da. I saw it." Kuryakin's blue eyes shone with anticipation, the pre-mission high of the adrenalin junkie. "Their participation should make life interesting."

Mark Slate's voice sounded behind them. "Who's participation, guv?"

Solo and Kuryakin turned to greet Slate.

"Good to see you again," grinned Solo, punching Slate's arm in a friendly gesture.

"London agrees with you, my friend," nodded Kuryakin. "You look very healthy."

Mark flashed them a quick smile. "What are my chances of staying that

way?"

"That depends," said Solo, "on whether we run into the Trudnost or not."

Mark's expression darkened. "Ouch. This is how you greet visitors to New York? Whatever happened to Welcome Wagon?"

In unison, Solo and Kuryakin droned, "They were a Thrush front and we closed them down." They shared a private grin before Solo pulled Slate back into the conversation.

"We'll fill you in while we work out. Feel like a run?"

Slate looked horrified. "In this heat?" New York was suffering in the high nineties.

"Air-conditioned indoor track," supplied Illya. "New addition."

"I'm impressed," smiled Slate. "I leave the country for a few months and UNCLE New York goes Disneyland."

"Not quite," countered Napoleon as they claimed a vacant elevator.

"Three of our people were gunned down while jogging in Central Park within a four month period."

Mark made a face. "Nasty."

"Very nasty," added Illya, "and none of them were killed by Thrush."

"Mr. Waverly was furious," said Solo, "and he countered with an indoor track."

"No muggers allowed in the building," finished Illya.

Mark grinned. "I see you two are still a finely oiled team. Finishing each other's sentences yet?"

Napoleon and Illya exchanged bemused glances.

"Not yet," Solo demurred.

Illya scratched his ear and dropped his eyes to the floor.

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

Trudnost was a renegade group, formerly a Soviet-based suicide squad. Because of that, its membership was hard to pin down. UNCLE never knew if an operative was Trudnost or not until the operative was dead.

"Rumor has it," said Solo, striking a comfortable pace on the track, "that one of the generals in Trudnost was disillusioned by the Party bosses and checked out, taking his organization with him."

Mark was relieved that Solo and Kuryakin weren't running wind sprints. Still, keeping up was no problem, considering his love of soccer. He just couldn't see the point in running anywhere without a ball to kick around.

"Oh, that's what happened," acknowledged Slate. "I heard the fellow had an affair with a Party boss's wife and had to flee for his life."

Illya commented wryly, "Wife? That's a new twist. At any rate, they are living up to their name: Trudnost."

"Difficulty," translated Solo. "This is the third time this year we've seen their name linked to a Thrush operation. Now if we could just figure out

whether they are Thrush's allies or their enemies."

A covey of first-year agents trotted onto the track. Illya nudged Napoleon. "Your friend is back."

Slate glanced to the rear as the six newbies gained on them. "Problem?" he asked.

Solo laughed, a short mirthless sound. "Not really." He glanced at Illya then added, "Hamilton seems to think that anyone over thirty-five is taking up valuable space that could be used by younger, more deserving agents."

"Ouch," said Slate. "I'm thirty-six this year."

From behind came a taunt. "Getting soft, Solo?" The voice belonged to a tall, beefy Anglo with an attitude. His companions laughed nervously at his teasing. They felt no compulsion to lob barbs of their own at the Senior Enforcement Agent.

Solo said nothing.

Illya shook his head in disgust.

Slate murmured, "I take it, you've had run-ins with this fellow before?"

Illya nodded. "Ignore him. Maybe he'll go away."

The herd of younger agents was less than a body-length behind them. Slate could hear them breathing.

Another taunt. "Is that as fast as you can go?"

Illya spoke softly, but there was an edge to his voice. "It is a big track, Hamilton. Go around."

Hamilton's companions began to drift away. They did not like the idea of irritating the two deadliest agents in UNCLE. But Hamilton was not prepared to lose face. He launched one last volley.

"Careful, Kuryakin, too much protein can slow you down."

Slate didn't understand the reference, but the innuendo in the man's voice was unmistakable. His taunts had nothing to do with age.

Napoleon's expression brightened, and he chuckled as if he found the line very amusing. He caught his partner's glance and signaled a question with one brow. The blue eyes responded in the affirmative. As if they had choreographed the whole thing ahead of time, they slowed their pace. Slate pulled ahead, and before he realized what was happening, Hamilton was between them. With a smile on his face, Solo pretended to stumble and propelled a fist into Hamilton's stomach with such force and speed that his arm was a blur. When Hamilton bent forward, Kuryakin slammed doubled fists between his shoulder blades and sent him crashing to the ground.

A second later, the partners were again pacing Slate, and Hamilton lay on the track, folded into a fetal ball. The other agents on the track pretended nothing had happened. Hamilton was a fool to taunt Solo and his partner. They were relieved that their superiors' irritation did not extend to them.

"Well," said Solo, loudly enough to carry, "I think we're all warmed up now, don't you, Illya?"

"Da, da. All warmed up. Let's go." Kuryakin picked up speed until he was pumping out a six-minute-mile pace. Napoleon matched him stride for stride. Mark Slate fell back a step or two before he realized the honor of every senior agent in the building could be riding on his ability to keep up. Without a word of complaint, he pounded along behind them as they circled the track, passing the other agents more than once as they completed their second mile, then a third, and a fourth. By the end of mile five, Mark was beginning to wonder if he would survive the workout, but mercifully, Kuryakin slacked off and Solo followed suit. They jogged another two circuits to cool down before they stopped to stretch.

Hamilton had disappeared. The other agents on the track nodded respectfully at the trio when they passed. When Mark could talk without betraying his heart rate, he quipped, "Nice preliminary. When do we work out?"

Solo grinned and slapped Slate on the back. "That's the spirit." He steadied himself against the wall and pulled one heel toward his backside in a quad stretch. "Actually, Illya was holding back. On a level track like this, he can do five-minute miles easy. I'm not that fast."

Illya made a deprecating noise. "Perhaps not, moy droog, but you are unbeatable at cross-country." He bragged to Slate, "He once carried me three miles on his back over hilly terrain with Thrush in pursuit. They never got close enough to use their weapons. He has lots more muscle than me."

Mark was impressed. "You were wounded?"

Illya pulled his running shorts up to reveal a seven-inch scar high on his right thigh. "I was bleeding to death. At the bottom of the hill, Waverly was waiting for us in his limo. Napoleon dumped me in his lap, pulled a suture and thread from the first aid kit, and stitched me himself."

Mark whistled softly. "What did Waverly say?"

Napoleon made a wry face. "He said, under the circumstances, he wouldn't charge me for destroying the interior of the limo."

Mark looked confused.

Illya explained, "Blood all over the car. And the driver got sick. It was a mess."

They finished stretching and headed for the showers. Mark shook his head and followed. "What I want to know," he said with mock irritation, "is why you waited for me to go to England to have all this fun?"

They spent the afternoon reviewing intelligence reports on Compton Laboratories.

"We're certain Thrush is stockpiling munitions in that building," said Solo.

The building in question was an old brick remnant of the depression era. It was six stories high with flat roof. The sign over the well-kept entrance was freshly painted. Surveillance photos showed normal office activity taking place in several locations. The windows of the three top floors were glazed and

modern. White-coated lab workers occasionally stepped out on onto the fire escapes to grab a quick smoke.

Mark examined the photos carefully. "There must be a central core used for munitions storage," he offered. "Look at the ventilation equipment on the roof. Added recently, I would say."

Illya nodded. "A bit ambitious for a laboratory that is engaged in cosmetics testing, don't you think?"

"Most definitely." Mark leaned back in his chair. "The building is occupied during the day, and guarded at night, and I see there is an apartment complex on the other three sides of the block. Nice pool, by the way. What's our objective?"

"Our mission is to render the place useless to Thrush," said Solo. "We can't destroy the munitions, so we must make them inaccessible."

"Aaahhh," said Mark, nodding sagely. One brow shot up. "You have a plan?"

Illya and Napoleon exchanged bemused glances.

"Napoleon always has a plan," said the Russian with satisfaction. "That is why working with him is so much fun."

Solo reached across the table and retrieved a carton of Lucky Strikes. He pulled a pack of smokes out of the carton and tossed it to Mark.

"What's wrong with that pack?" he asked.

Mark examined it carefully. "Aside from the carcinogens it contains, you mean? Well, I've been away for a while, but doesn't U.S. law still require a certain impost stamp?"

"Exactly," said Solo. "These are illegal. Or at least, we are rigging a truckload to look that way. And we are arranging for that truck of illegal tobacco to be unloaded into the Compton Lab building."

"Then," said Illya, his eyes gleaming, "we call the office of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and they close the place down!"

"Once the United States Government is involved," finished Solo, "it will be at least a decade before Thrush has access to the building again." He grinned. "A small exaggeration, of course, but in the meantime, the feds will go over every inch of the place and--"

"--and find the munitions," finished Slate with a grin. "Absolutely sterling idea!"

Napoleon bowed modestly. "Why, thank you, sir. Now, all we need is a quick trip into the place after hours to open the doors for the delivery boys. Illya, pass me that infrared photo--yeah, that one. Good. Look, Mark. I see a night watchman..."

"No, two," said Mark. "See that glow? The fellow's smoking inside the building. He'll be on the dole if his bosses find out."

The hours passed quickly. Strategy was one of Napoleon's strong points, and he never left a scenario till all the details were worked out. More than

once, the extra hour spent in preparation had evened the odds so that, by the time all the unexpected things had gone wrong, the balance was still enough in his favor to allow him, and his team, to survive their mission. The afternoon became evening before Solo decided they were finished for the night.

"Let's take a break," yawned Napoleon. "Dinner?"

"Sounds good," said Mark. "I'm famished."

"Let's do take out," said Illya, stretching to work out a kink. "I want to go home and--" He bit off the sentence half way, flashing a glance first at Mark then at Solo.

"My place," said Napoleon smoothly. "While we eat, Illya can figure out what toys we should take with us."

"Do we go tonight?" asked Mark.

"Tomorrow night," said Illya. "The tobacco arrangements take some time."

"That will give us another day to scan fresh recon photos for something these might have missed," added Solo. He pulled a quarter out of his pocket. "Heads, Chinese. Tails, pizza."

It was heads.

One a.m. The large glass top of the kidney shaped coffee table was strewn with fast food containers, glasses and bottles of Stolichnaya and Chivas. Napoleon stretched like a cat and yawned uninhibitedly. Illya drained a glass of vodka and suppressed a belch. Mark Slate decided that a numb face was a sign that he had consumed a sufficient amount of Chivas.

"I should go," said Slate. He announced with great deliberation, "Because it's late."

"Stay here," said Solo simply. "Your choice. Couch or guest room."

Mark nodded, giving the offer serious consideration. He silently weighed the pros of navigating the twenty feet to the guest room against the cons of waking up in the morning away from his suitcase.

Illya appeared at his side with a pair of blue pajamas and a new toothbrush in a cardboard package.

"You're staying," said the Russian with hardly any slurring at all.

Mark accepted the pajamas and toothbrush with gravity.

"What about you?" he asked Illya.

The Russian laughed without opening his mouth, a humming sound in his chest. His blue eyes wandered to Napoleon.

Solo cleared his throat and explained gently, "Illya lives here. He has for some time now."

Mark looked confused. "But he's been getting my letters, and his old address is on the return envelope."

Illya shrugged. "I sublet. Tuula Crighton, Section Three. She brings my mail to the office."

"Oh," said Mark. "I see."

"Does that make you uncomfortable?" asked Solo.

Slate frowned, considering his level of comfort. At last he shook his head elaborately.

"No. I'm not uncomfortable. Unless he plans to sleep in the guest room with me."

Solo grinned. "The guest room is all yours. Illya sleeps with me."

"Well, then," said Slate, letting his tone of voice accept the invitation.

"Goondight. Er, good night."

Illya was six steps ahead of him, turning on the guest room light, placing clean towels in the bathroom.

Mark stood in the middle of the bedroom and took a slow look around. The atmosphere was definitely frilly, and one wall was covered with shelves holding dolls and stuffed animals.

"This is a side of Napoleon I never knew about," said Slate in all seriousness.

Illya chuckled. "When his sister visits, this is her room. The dolls belong to her."

"Why doesn't she keep them at her place?" It seemed like such a rational question.

"There is no room in her cell," said Illya. "If you wake up first, help yourself to the kitchen." He made it through the door before Mark stopped him.

"Napoleon's sister is in a cell?" Slate looked horrified.

Illya shrugged. "She is a nun," he explained.

"Oooooohhh! A nun." The light dawned on Slate. His head reeled. It was definitely time to lie down. He climbed awkwardly into the blue pajamas. "A nun," he muttered to himself. "Of course, she is." He slipped between the pristine sheets of the double bed. The comforter was white eyelet lace and pink ribbons. He reached to turn out the lamp by the bed. The base was a pair of praying porcelain hands. On the bed table by the lamp was a three-inch-high plastic penguin and a 5-by-7 framed photo of Napoleon in his twenties with his arm draped across the shoulders of a tall nun with Solo's face. Slate squinted at the photo. No, her face was a little softer, a little older, and she had freckles, but they were definitely a close match.

Mark turned out the light and lay staring into the darkness. April Dancer would never believe this. The Napoleon Solo she thought she knew was certainly full of surprises. First, a live-in Russian partner and now a look-alike sister in a nunnery. Slate drifted off to sleep to the sound of Rod Serling's voice in his head, welcoming him to the "Twilight Zone."

The night was warm. No moonlight, but in the city it didn't matter. Streetlights made moonlight obsolete. Solo, Kuryakin and Slate sat in the late

model sedan and checked their watches.

"Ready to go?" asked Solo.

"Da, ready."

"Me, too." Slate made the thumbs-up sign.

Solo inhaled deeply and exhaled in a whoosh. "All right, let's do it."

Getting into the building was not difficult. Illya made short work of the Honeywell alarm. Once that was done, Napoleon managed the poolside door with ease. A slight breeze made tiny lapping waves on the surface of the chlorinated water. The sound drew Solo's attention, and he scanned the illuminated pool for a late night bather, but the only thing floating on the water was an inflated toy shaped like a swan.

Inside the building, Slate moved stealthily toward the security station. With no active alarm system, it was a simple matter to surprise the man and woman lounging at the front desk. Mark fired twice, and the duo slumped to the floor, unconscious before their hands could reach the tranquilizer darts in their backs.

"Nice work," said Solo softly.

"Where are the loading doors?" asked Mark.

"This way." Solo relieved one of the unconscious guards of his keys and found one that fit the door behind the security desk. The two blonds followed him down the concrete stairs to a low-ceilinged basement storeroom lined with ranges of shelves full of lab supplies.

Illya thumbed his flashlight on and swung it about.

"At the south end," he whispered.

Solo glanced at his watch. "The truck will be here in...eight minutes. Nothing to do but wait."

The worst part.

Illya turned the flashlight off and they stood silently in the dark. Solo concentrated on breathing quietly. Mark tried not to fidget. Illya found himself mentally reciting a prayer from the Russian Orthodox liturgy. Strange. What made him think of that? He tried to quiet his mind, and as he did so, he realized he was hearing the words outside his head.

"Polé? Do you hear anything?" he whispered.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," replied Napoleon.

Mark switched on his own flashlight and moved toward the murmuring sound. He ended up at a floor-to-ceiling gray metal box in the center of the basement. He examined the visible gauges and announced softly, "This is the control center for the ventilation system. The sound is coming through that vent."

Voices were distinguishable now, although they were very faint.

"The roof," whispered Solo.

Illya glanced at his watch. "The truck will be here in five minutes."

"We can't unload if there are Thrush in the building," said Solo. "Follow



me."

They were all grateful that the building was only six stories high as they padded quietly up the central stairwell to the roof. The door at the top was not locked. A bad sign. Solo opened it a crack, but saw nothing on the south end of the roof. The voices were much closer however. He motioned silently for Illya and Mark to draw their weapons before the trio slipped out onto the roof.

Solo took the point. Slate moved silently two steps behind and to his left. Illya completed the triangle behind and to the right. They did not go far before they spotted the source of the sound.

A cluster of men wearing blood red coveralls and red berets sat cross-legged on the roof of the building. One of them knelt in the center of the cluster, his hands closed around a short bar.

Solo recognized the red coveralls and berets as the trademark uniform of the Trudnost. In the same instant he realized that the bar in the hands of the central figure was attached to the plunger of a firing mechanism. A sudden spurt of adrenalin pushed his heart rate to a machine gun staccato as their situation became clear to him. They were standing on a roof with a Russian suicide squad saying its prayers.

Solo turned to his right and met the same realization in his partner's blue eyes. For an agonizing flash of a second, brown eyes and blue eyes exchanged a soul-felt message. With no time to explain, Solo dropped his weapon, grabbed Slate's arm with one hand and Kuryakin's with the other, and impelled them both toward the east side of the building.

"Run!!!"

As they hurtled themselves toward the edge of the roof, Solo tightened his grip on his companions. He could not afford to let either of them hesitate when they realized what he had in mind.

Slate figured it out when he heard Illya's shouts of protest.

"Nyet! Nyet! Nyet!"

But the Russian did not slow down. He forced his eyes to remain open only long enough to find the edge of the roof. But as soon as he was airborne, he closed his eyes and prayed silently that Solo had correctly calculated the location of the pool below.

Slate's heart pounded like a bass drum in his ears. In one corner of his mind, he bade a silent farewell to April Dancer and wondered what she would wear to his funeral. In another corner, he marveled at Solo's steely nerve as the senior agent clamped his vice-like grip tighter still and pulled Slate into an even wider arc as they jumped off the edge of the roof and aimed at the impossibly tiny square of pool light six floors down.

The drop was a slow-motion nightmare as their minds shifted into overdrive and the world around them time-warped to a crawl. As their stomachs tried to exit through their skulls and they descended past floor five, all the windows on floor six erupted in orange flame. As they dropped past

floor four, floor five erupted, and on down, as the building transformed itself into a crazy volcano spurting magma at right angles.

The water was not soft, and yet it barely slowed them down. They hit the bottom of the pool with painful force. Illya felt a sharp pain in his left ankle, filed the information, and shoved it aside. Solo got them off the roof, something Illya would not have dared alone, not from six floors up. His fear of heights was too strong. But now they were in the water, and it was his turn to play Superman.

Already Solo was fighting his way to the surface. Now it was Illya who clamped a hand on his partner's sleeve to control his movement. Surfacing now would expose Solo's bare skull to the shower of glass and debris that peppered the water above their heads. Illya tugged at Mark and pointed him toward the pool wall closest to the exploding building. Then he clamped his free hand over Solo's mouth and nose to keep his partner from swallowing water. No one would guess from the way Solo blithely aimed them at the pool that UNCLE's senior enforcement agent could barely tread water. Illya was the fish of the team, and he pinned Solo against the pool wall as flaming debris plunged past them, littering the bottom with myriad dark, unrecognizable shapes and one charred human body.

At last, Illya half-lifted Solo above the surface of the water. Mark was already gulping air. Napoleon sucked wind like a marathon runner. Illya pushed his wet hair out of his eyes and scanned the burning shell that only seconds before had been a substantial building. The wails of sirens already filled the air. On the opposite side of the pool, the sound of crashing glass punctuated the night, as apartment windows shattered by the explosion made small talk with the concrete. In the center of the pool the white plastic swan bobbed surreally amid the dancing reflections of the surrounding destruction.

The three UNCLE agents clung to the side of the pool. Solo wore a mask of stunned disbelief. He looked first at Illya, then at Mark. Then he touched one hand to his chlorine-soaked lapel as if to straighten his jacket.

"Don't tell anyone, but I think I wet myself."

Illya and Mark blinked at each other and began to laugh.

Three hours later, dried and dressed and bandaged, Solo, Kuryakin, and Slate sat in Waverly's office as the old man digested the oral report his senior enforcement agent had just delivered. Illya's left ankle was badly sprained. Mark's right arm was in a sling. Solo's grip had bruised it to the bone. Napoleon sat ramrod straight in his chair, waiting with guarded anticipation for Waverly's reaction.

"Well," sighed the head of Section One, "I suppose it couldn't be helped. No civilian casualties?"

"Apparently not, sir," said Solo. "The fire department is calling it a miracle."

"Hmmm." Waverly tamped tobacco into his pipe. "Indeed. Any idea why the Trudnost was involved?"

"It appears that we weren't the only ones who wanted to separate Thrush from their munitions storage," shrugged Napoleon. "We had our plan, and the Trudnost had theirs."

"Yes, well, after you get some sleep, Mr. Solo, see if you can't find a few more details for me."

"Yes, sir." Solo pushed his chair back, hoping the meeting was over.

"Oh, by the way," said Waverly.

Solo cancelled standing up.

"Yes, sir?"

"I suppose this can wait till morning, but you're all here now, so...I received a complaint today from one of your Section Two people, Mr. Solo. A fellow named Hamilton. He claims you and Mr. Kuryakin beat him up. He's demanding that I take disciplinary action." Waverly sounded like a fussy eater complaining about lumps in his cream of wheat. "Well? What do you have to say?"

Napoleon suppressed the urge to heave a tired sigh. He turned sad brown eyes on his partner. Dealing with homophobia was always hard, but it really hurt when it came from inside UNCLE.

Illya dropped his eyes to his lap and played with the hem of his turtleneck. The silence stretched uncomfortably.

Mark watched Solo and Kuryakin hesitate, and it made him angry that a pompous first-year rookie could stymie a team that was fearless in the face of exploding buildings and suicide squads.

"They don't have to say anything," said Mark. "I was there. They didn't beat anyone up. We were all running around the track. Hamilton was tailing too close. Napoleon stumbled. Illya reached for him. And Hamilton--ran into their fists." Mark spread his hands, offering his version of the truth to Waverly.

The old man sucked thoughtfully on his pipe.

Solo and Kuryakin exchanged uneasy glances.

At last Waverly nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Slate. I thought it might be something like that. Very well, gentlemen. Good job. Don't forget the paperwork."

End