

# THE D.R.E.A.M. MACHINE AFFAIR

Linda White

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Napoleon Solo stood on the sidewalk in the shade of twin maples and tilted his head back to look at the house. It was Victorian, three stories high, with gabled windows and an oval of stained glass in the front door. A covered porch ran from the entry around the right side of the house to the back door. It was on a corner lot, and a one-car garage had been built behind the house, facing the side street. Illya Kuryakin had parked the VW Beetle in the narrow driveway. The car and the house were the same shade of yellow, but the house had white trim and gingerbread along the eaves.

"An apartment building?" Illya set two suitcases on the sidewalk.

"Nope. Single-family dwelling," said Napoleon, still squinting up at the gabled windows.

"Decadent waste of space."

"Well, gird your Communist loins, my friend, because we're going to be staying here for a while."

Illya's face brightened. "Really? Just the two of us?"

Napoleon grinned and lowered his gaze to his partner's face. "What happened to decadent waste of space?"

Illya shrugged. "When in a foreign country, one must experience cultural differences with an open mind. You have the key?"

Napoleon pulled it out of his pants pocket. "Right here."

Illya took it. "Good. Bring the luggage." He mounted the five steps to the porch and followed it around to the front of the house. He paused at the door with its oval of stained glass and waited for Napoleon.

"What's our assignment, by the way?"

"You know as much as I do, partner. Mr. Waverly said the answer would be waiting inside."

"I hope that is all that is waiting." Illya opened the door and let Napoleon precede him into the hall.

Napoleon set the bags down and looked around. "Very nice." The hardwood floors were polished to a high shine. The walls were a muted sand, the interior doors white. Double French doors led off to a dining room on the left, and the entry hall opened to a large living room on the right, running from the front to the back of the house. They knew the layout already, they'd studied the file, so they knew a big kitchen waited at the back of the house. A curved staircase led from the entryway up to the bedrooms and they knew that behind a door in the kitchen a more modest set of stairs rose steeply to the attic and down into the basement.

"Where's the toilet?" asked Illya.

"Under the stairs." They strolled to the kitchen entrance, flanked by a set of double French doors. Napoleon pointed at the white wood door near the center of the room. "That must be the door to the basement." He opened the folding doors in the wall by the refrigerator. "This pantry is as big as Tuula's apartment." Tuula Crighton was head of Section Three, New York. She had been subletting Illya's old one-room apartment ever since he and Napoleon moved in together. Napoleon closed the folding doors. "Waverly said the basement was secured and sealed by our people."

Illya grunted and headed purposefully for the bathroom under the stairs.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," called Napoleon. "I'll just drag those suitcases upstairs all by myself." But instead, he peeked into the other rooms on the first floor, waiting for Illya to emerge.

"Learn anything in my absence?" Illya was drying his hands on a monogrammed towel.

Napoleon took the towel and held it up. The letters RD were monogrammed on it in gold thread. He handed it back to Illya. "It's strange coming into someone's house like this," he said. "There's food in the cupboards, and dishes drying on the dish rack. The kitchen looks kind of girly, but the other rooms seem spartan and masculine."

"So RD was a tyrant who treated his women like slaves," said Illya dryly. "At least the plumbing is adequate."

Napoleon lifted an index finger. "Yes, but is it clean?"

Illya averted his eyes and devoted his attention to folding the towel. Part of Illya's Third Level dependency was an obsession with cleanliness. Not for himself, for Napoleon. Germs cause disease, and a sick partner would put them both in danger. He'd been known to scrub motel facilities before letting Napoleon near them. It was their secret. "Hard to believe, but yes. It's clean."

"Great. I have to pee."

Illya frowned at the suitcases sitting silently in the entryway and muttered, "Speaking of treating people like slaves..." He hefted his suitcase and headed upstairs.

There were four rooms on the second floor, two on either side of the landing. The two rooms at the back of the house were identically furnished: bare floors, pale green walls, dark green window shades, simple desk and chair. Illya set his suitcase in one of them and went to check the rooms at the front of the house. The door to the one on the dining room side was closed. The other was a bedroom, but aside from that qualification, it had little in common with the two rooms he'd already explored. The bed was a four-poster, and the duvet was the same yellow as the walls. A casual mountain of pillows issued a multilingual invitation to lay his head down. In the left corner, beside the closet door, was a floral

print wingback chair with a tufted footstool. An elegant dresser promised to lend class to any items tucked away in its drawers. It sported an oval mirror that Sleeping Beauty's stepmother would have envied. On the walls were framed prints, impressionist views of country gardens and other abysmally cheerful landscapes.

Napoleon's voice startled him. "They say that women dream about houses." He let his suitcase thump to the floor. "Some woman somewhere is having a doozy of a dream."

"There's a thought," said Illya, mildly amused. "We are in Tuula's house dream."

"Dream house," corrected Napoleon. He brushed past his partner and bounced on the edge of the bed. "Nice." He swung his legs up onto the duvet and relaxed against the mound of pillows. "Very nice. This should do." He twisted his neck to scan the room. "Where's your suitcase?"

"In the bedroom back there. And I did not mean dream house. I meant dream about a house. House dream."

"Your English is amazing. Where's the bath?" Napoleon rolled off the bed and began checking the drawers in the dresser. They were empty.

"It's tucked between this room and the one at the back. And your Russian would be amazing, too, if everyone around you was always speaking it."

"Any sign of whatever it is that Waverly said would be waiting for us?" Napoleon tried the wingchair.

"Not yet. But we haven't explored the fourth room. And there's always the attic."

Napoleon sighed. "Why can't he just tell us what the mission is? Am I getting too old for this job? I just don't enjoy these enigmatic puzzles anymore."

Illya humphed. "I think it is more likely that Waverly is getting too old. He has forgotten that a field agent prefers no surprises." He grabbed Napoleon's hand and pulled him out of the chair and out of the bedroom.

They stood at the closed door of the fourth room.

"After you," said Napoleon, drawing his weapon.

Illya allowed himself a whisper of a smile. "Always so gallant." He tried the

knob. It wasn't locked. He pushed the door open. "It's an office."

Napoleon slipped past him, gun raised, and made sure there were no hostile surprises in the room.

"You are expecting trouble here but not in the rest of the house?" queried Illya.

Napoleon made a face. "Just a feeling."

But no one lurked. Napoleon frowned when his feeling yielded no result. He opened the folding doors to the converted closet, but it contained no enemies, only shelves filled with office supplies. Against the wall opposite the door was a desk, neat and tidy, an upholstered leather chair on wheels huddled against it. Toward the front of the house was a tall window with a dark blue drape and valance. On one side was a large television on a rolling oak stand. On the other side was a round table with a lamp. Next to the table sat an overstuffed armchair in blue tweed with a matching ottoman. The walls were a pale blue with prints of hunting dogs clustered on the wall behind the chair. It was definitely the most masculine room in the house. "That's strange," said Napoleon, looking puzzled. "There's nothing menacing in here." He put his gun away and let his gaze drift to the ceiling. "I suppose this means we have to check the attic."

Illya chuckled. "Silly man. As if we had a choice."

Napoleon stalled. "Maybe there's something in here to give us a clue, some idea of what Waverly expects us to find," said Napoleon. "A note, or a manuscript..." Their thoughts flew in unison to the same memory and they moved to the bathroom to check the toilet tank. It held only water and the necessary hardware for the function of the toilet.

They exchanged chagrined glances.

"We had to check," said Napoleon.

Illya took an even breath. "At least the basement has been secured. But there is still the attic."

"Oh, joy."

"My turn to take point," said Illya, checking his semi-automatic. "How do we reach the attic from this floor?"

"My guess is the door at the end of the landing." The window that provided light to the second floor landing was nestled

beneath the tell-tale slant of a staircase. The stairs had been closed in and second-floor access was through a solid white door with a brass handle. "Very French," said Napoleon as he pressed the handle down and pulled the door open.

The door opened onto a smaller landing for the attic stairs. The interior of the staircase space was lit by a small window that matched the one that gave light to the second floor landing. Napoleon peered down the flight next to the wall. "That must lead to the kitchen. That's odd. They appear to be closed off down there." He turned his gaze upward. "But these definitely lead to the attic."

His weapon drawn, Illya slid past Napoleon and moved up the stairs. "Whoever built these stairs was thin," he muttered. "They are barely wide enough for us to go single file."

"You think my hunch is groundless," said Napoleon with a hint of tension. If Illya believed there was a threat, he wouldn't be talking as he climbed the stairs.

Illya paused and half turned to make eye contact. "Our people have secured the house. However," and he tapped his gun to make his point, "I have great respect for your hunches."

Napoleon nodded, satisfied, and Illya continued his ascent. At the top of the narrow stairs was a small landing and a three-quarter size door. Illya whispered, "Thin and short."

"Alice in Wonderland," Napoleon murmured. He turned the knob and pushed the door open. Illya stooped to scan the area that was visible. A moment later he ducked under the frame and stepped into the attic space. Napoleon followed.

The attic ran the length of the house, back to front. The areas closest to the eaves were filled with boxes and trunks, the detritus of someone's life. Each box had an U.N.C.L.E. seal on it. Their people had indeed secured the house, and most likely had searched every box and catalogued the contents. The space under the tallest part of the ceiling was empty. U.N.C.L.E. personnel were tidy and organized. At the front of the house was a round window that allowed a little light into the space.

"I'll bet it's spooky as hell at night," said

Napoleon.

"Just be thankful you are not sleeping up here," said Illya, putting his gun back in his shoulder holster. He shook his head left and right. "Still no sign of what Waverly might have wanted us to find."

Napoleon shrugged his shoulders back and breathed easier than he had since they entered the house. "Well, there appear to be no hidden Thrush in the place. That's a comfort."

"So your feeling has gone away?"

Napoleon thought for a moment, taking stock. Then darkly, "No, it hasn't. That's odd."

"But worthy of note," said Illya.

"Well, I suppose this means a room by room inspection," said Solo, "and hope we stumble on the mystery."

Illya eyed his partner with concern, but turned his gaze away when Napoleon looked in his direction.

Too late.

"What?" snapped Napoleon.

Illya lifted his hands in surrender. "Nothing."

Napoleon wiped a hand over his face. "All right. Let's start in the living room. Perimeter check, all the usual stuff. Let's see if there's some kind of clue about what we're doing here."

They searched in silence. Nothing in the living room. Nothing in the dining room. They checked the attic staircase from the kitchen entrance. Nothing again. By that time it was noon, and Napoleon began examining kitchen cupboards.

"I checked that one already," said Illya.

"I'm not looking for clues," said Napoleon. "I'm looking for lunch."

"Ah. A noble pursuit." Illya checked the refrigerator. A note taped to the top shelf read, "Stocked by Crighton. Enjoy."

Illya smiled and wagged his eyebrows. "Excellent."

Napoleon nodded but didn't smile. "So it's safe to eat. Assuming no one sneaked in here after our people secured it."

"It's fine," said Illya, pulling out a bowl of potato salad. "They would tell us about a breach of security."

"Exactly. So why are we here searching for Waverly's clues?"

Illya shoved the potato salad bowl at

him and Napoleon took it.

"What's really bothering you?" asked Illya.

Napoleon made a sarcastic sound. "As if there were a safe place to talk."

Illya paused, one hand on a cold roast chicken. He glanced around at the kitchen walls, then pulled the chicken out and carried it to the table. "I see." He was suddenly tense and withdrawn.

Napoleon understood immediately. Illya thought he was hesitant to talk because it was about their relationship. "No," he said softly. "It's not that."

"Oh." Illya relaxed again, ever so slightly. "Good." If others were watching, they probably hadn't even noticed. But he and Napoleon could read each other's every nuance.

They gathered the necessary items for chicken sandwiches and set plates and cutlery on the table. Illya found a pan of frosted brownies in the refrigerator and added them to the feast.

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Tuula Crighton stood up and stretched. The table full of monitors was interesting to her only because Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were on one of them, eating the food she had taken care to prepare for them. She didn't bother to tell the three Research and Development boys in the basement with her that she had actually prepared those dishes and more with her own hands. They didn't need to know that. But it warmed her heart that they saw her signature and immediately trusted the food.

The basement of the big yellow house was soundproofed, but she still felt the need to speak softly.

"Hey, Finnback."

"For the third time, my name is Finny. Roger Finny." He pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose and ran a hand over his receding hairline.

Tuula grinned. "Sorry." She tossed her head in the direction of the large bank of computers that ran the length of the basement wall. "What do you call that machine?"

Finny's shorter colleague, Daniel Sorenson, lifted his head from his

typewriter and answered her question. “The D.R.E.A.M. Machine. Dream Recording, Enhancing, and Modifying. Clever, huh?” His frizzy red hair was pulled back in a pony tail.

Tuula nodded. “Oh, yeah, highly clever. But I still have a bad feeling about testing it out on Napoleon and Illya.”

The third scientist of the trio finished making adjustments on the computer’s control panel and approached from the front end of the basement. “Don’t worry, Miss Crighton, no harm will come to your precious warriors. Mr. Waverly felt that the extreme significance of this project warranted a test on U.N.C.L.E. personnel with the highest possible clearance.”

Tuula didn’t like Terence Bigelow. She didn’t like his shiny, hairless head. She didn’t like his condescending tone. And she didn’t like his lanky, bony frame. In his white lab coat, he reminded her of a Titan missile ready for launch, its warhead gleaming, without feeling.

And at the moment she wasn’t liking Alexander Waverly much, either. She disagreed with his decision to use Solo and Kuryakin as test dummies. She felt they deserved to be treated with more respect. And she was certain they would be furious when they discovered they had been used. She turned her attention back to the monitor and settled in her chair before speaking.

“I’m not worried about them coming to harm, Dr. Bigelow,” she lied. “I’m worried about you and your friends, because trust me, they are going to be two pissed off killing machines when they find out what you’re doing to them.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the three scientists exchange nervous glances, and that made her smile.

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Napoleon and Illya ate in silence. Each understood that U.N.C.L.E. had secured the house. However, that generated the question of why they were there. Waverly always had his reasons, but why send them to cover territory their people had already covered? Especially on an over-nighter?

“Maybe he thinks there are ghosts,”

suggested Illya.

Napoleon did not respond.

Illya was worried by his silence. Napoleon could talk his way out of, and through, anything. When he was taciturn, something was wrong.

“We did not find any surveillance equipment,” said Illya, “and we know what to look for.” Especially if it was U.N.C.L.E. equipment.

“Not necessarily.” Napoleon stretched sideways toward the countertop and retrieved a yellow kitchen towel to wipe his hands on. “You’ve spent very little time in the R and D lab over the last several months. They could have an entire new line by now.”

Illya shrugged a grudging acknowledgment.

Napoleon picked up a table knife and poised the tip over the pan of brownies. The fudge frosting glistened. He cocked his head to one side. “I think it was thoughtful of Tuula to include brownies, don’t you?”

Illya chewed his last bite of chicken sandwich. His gaze followed the tip of Napoleon’s knife as it traced lines in the frosting.

Napoleon spoke slowly and softly as he moved the knife. “This part for me and that part for you.”

“Yours is bigger than mine.”

“It always has been.”

“Very amusing,” said Illya, closing the plastic bread cover.

The knife stopped moving and Napoleon turned the pan to face Illya. “That looks fair, don’t you agree?”

Illya read what Napoleon had written in the icing. ‘IT’S A TEST.’

Then he picked up his own knife and smeared the surface smooth again. “Not only fair, but accurate as well,” he said, slicing two small rectangles off the end of the dessert. He pried one out and offered it to Napoleon, then pried the other one out for himself. They nibbled at the brownies, each aware that the other one was pondering the same question. What kind of test was it?

When the brownies were gone, they tidied the kitchen with quick, militaristic precision. Their eyes were moving the entire time, double-checking the likeliest spots for surveillance devices, and triple-

checking the least likely spots.

"Nothing," said Napoleon.

"Now what?" asked Illya.

"You already checked the books on the shelves?"

Illya nodded. "No hidden notes. Nothing stashed behind them."

The first sign of a playful twinkle brightened Solo's eyes. "No odd but telling message in the sequence of the titles?"

For a moment, Illya thought he was serious. "You don't think...?" Then he punched Napoleon in the arm. "You have a fiendish, twisted mind."

"It must be the close proximity," said Napoleon. "You were bound to rub off on me sooner or later."

They strolled through the dining room and the living room. "We've done it all," said Illya. "Shall we begin again?"

Napoleon's brows came together in a frown. "We haven't done it all." He glanced overhead. "Check for a step ladder. There must be one in a closet somewhere. Otherwise, grab a chair. Let's take a closer look at the ceilings."

Illya didn't expect to find anything, so he wasn't disappointed. But it was something to do. And while they conducted this aspect of their search, he concocted seven different ways he could utilize moldings and light fixtures to his own advantage in the field.

Two hours later, they stood on the second-floor landing and conceded that the ceilings appeared to be free of bombs and surveillance devices.

"Now what?" asked Illya.

Napoleon used his fingertips to swing the office door open. "Did you notice the television in the corner?"

Illya blinked. "It did not escape my highly trained powers of observation."

"Nor mine," agreed Napoleon.

"Perhaps we should keep an eye on it," said Illya. "Waverly could be broadcasting his clues to us via the airwaves."

Napoleon grinned. "Dibs on the arm chair."

"Cossack." Illya settled in the desk chair, not too great a hardship since it was a swiveling, tilting leather-padded number. He leaned back and propped his feet up on the edge of the desk that had yielded no

information at all. "Look for football."

Napoleon knew he meant soccer, but the available channels offered only game shows and soap operas. He stopped at Dark Shadows.

"Nyet," said Illya. "No sleeping in coffins, please."

Napoleon switched the knob to a harmless looking domestic scenario. A very attractive woman was expressing her devotion to an extremely attractive man. As was his habit, he turned the sound all the way down so they could hear if anything transpired in the house as they watched. Then he settled back in the armchair, determined that his subconscious mind would figure out the reason they were there while his conscious mind was occupied by the images on the screen.

Illya made a rude noise. "Wrong tree."

Napoleon swallowed a grin at Illya's shorthanded commentary that the woman was barking up the wrong tree because the man was probably gay.

They stared at the screen in companionable silence. Within minutes, their breathing was even and relaxed and their eyelids drooped shut.

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They were kneeling on sand, shoulder to shoulder, hands tied behind their backs, eyes blindfolded. Around them they could hear the sounds of Thrush activity, an operation wrapping up, loose ends being gathered, personnel being loaded onto trucks.

"This is it," said Napoleon flatly. "This is the end. We're going to die here."

"At least we're together," muttered Illya.

A few feet away, a passionless voice gave instructions for their demise. "Once these trucks are out of here, kill them. Do it clean. Bullet through the brain. No sense in pissing Waverly off any more than necessary."

Napoleon found himself praying the trucks would break down.

Illya leaned slightly into his shoulder and muttered again, "I don't suppose you have a plan?"

Napoleon whispered back, "Me? I thought it was your turn to think of a plan."

Illya snorted softly.

The noises around them grew fainter, less frantic. A starter kicked over and a truck engine fired. Then another. And a third. Napoleon's heart began to thud against his breastbone.

Businesslike footsteps crunched in the sand toward them. Napoleon wondered if he would hear the bullet. Illya's shoulder pressed against his. Such a good friend. No more time together. All the time in the universe together. Anger surged within him. How could he run out of ideas at a time like this?!

An elephant trumpeted above their heads. Solo and Kuryakin lurched sideways, away from the sound. Their would-be executioner shrieked, then gurgled, then dropped heavily to the ground. Solo could smell blood.

They heard more screams. Most of the Thrush agents left with the trucks, but Solo heard half a dozen different throats crying their last. He wished he could see. He could feel Illya tensing beside him. The executioner was dead. They were still alive. The Russian was feeling hopeful, readying himself for a struggle. Ever the optimist, thought Solo, with our hands tied and our eyes covered.

The screams faded. The smell of blood was thick around them. And they could hear breathing, panting, feet crunching in the sand. And they could feel bodies surrounding them. Napoleon felt a large hand seize his upper arm. A moment later he was on his feet.

"Easy, lads, you're safe now."

The sound of Waverly's voice was the sweetest music Solo could have imagined. Much sweeter than heavenly harps. Friendly hands undid their blindfolds, sharp edges sliced through their bonds. Napoleon pulled in a lungful of air and let it out slow and easy. Breathing was such a pleasure. He glanced to his right. Illya was flushed, relieved.

"We are alive." He beamed.

Solo laughed. To Waverly, "Are we ever glad to see you."

Waverly's gray eyes sparkled. He allowed himself a smile. "I echo that sentiment. I feared we would arrive too late to save you."

Solo glanced around at his rescuers. Bodybuilders in dark glasses, mouth-breathing sumo-wrestlers. Weaponless.

He felt a sudden gut-freezing chill. Some of them had blood on their chins and swollen upper lips. The bodies that littered the sand bled from slashed throats.

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Napoleon jerked awake. His hands were clammy and he wiped them on his slacks. Crazy dream. But it reflected what he was feeling, especially about Waverly. Possible savior, but very dangerous. The old man had been in the spy business for a long time, and if Napoleon's conscious mind was lulled by the aged and charming exterior, at least his subconscious was smart enough to recognize the man's lethal qualities.

He decided the dream made sense, or at least as much sense as dreams ever made. But what did not make sense was his own lack of alertness. Why had he drifted off to sleep? He wasn't tired. They hadn't done anything to wear them out.

Boredom. That was it. His brain was numbed by the ridiculous task that had been set for them. Hours of searching a house that was already secure. He glanced over at Illya, whose eyes had also closed, and wondered what he was dreaming about.

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Tuula stared, open-mouthed, at the monitor in front of her. "Oh, my God," she whispered.

"Amazing technology, isn't it?" Finny rubbed his hands together with unscientific glee.

"Is that what they're dreaming about?"

Sorenson kept his voice low. He was as absorbed as she was. "That's what Solo is dreaming. You see? His name is on this dream monitor. Kuryakin's name is on that one. The others are just surveillance throughout the house. Their physical reality." He fiddled with a series of knobs on the bottom of Solo's dream monitor. "I wish I could make the images clearer." He called over his shoulder, "Terence, there's too much snow on the screen."

Terence Bigelow spread his arms in

amazement. "I build the greatest scientific advancement of the century and you complain about reception?! The television receivers are your responsibility, not mine."

Roger Finny cleaned his glasses on the hem of his lab coat. "Now, now, gentlemen, no arguments, please. This is our finest hour. Waverly will be amazed at these results."

"You're recording this?" asked Tuula.

"Yes, of course," said Sorenson. "Dreams are ephemeral things. We have to record them. They may never dream the same thing twice. And it's all part of the package, you see. The recording device must also be tested." He smiled at her, eager to please her.

Tuula had the sinking feeling that Sorenson had a crush on her. Mentally, she echoed Illya. 'Wrong tree, buddy. Wrong tree.' Aloud, she said, "Why isn't there anything on Illya's dream monitor?"

Sorenson tapped the screen above Illya's name. "Oh, well, he's not dreaming yet. The dream prod works at a different rate on different people, you see. Oh, there, that flicker? That's the beginning. Roger! Start the Kuryakin tape! Watch now, Miss Crichton. He's dreaming now."

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Illya watched Solo steady the barrel of his gun by bracing it against his left forearm and sight carefully, caressing the trigger with his finger. Their target, Antonio María Feijoo y Gómez, emerged from the tall door of the San Sebastián Municipal Library surrounded by bodyguards. Solo drew a bead on the target's forehead. Their location, two floors up on the other side of the Plaza de la Constitución, allowed Solo a clear shot for the five or six seconds it would take the group to move along the Plaza to the southeast exit where Feijoo's car was waiting. He watched as Solo followed the target's head across the end of the plaza, his finger tensing on the trigger. But he did not fire.

Then Solo exhaled shakily and rolled away from the window, leaning his back against the wall of the high-ceilinged room. The window was twice as tall as he was, and

as wide as two men. Its size made him feel, for a second, like a little boy again, navigating through a world designed for big people. Ironic that the grandiose architecture of these old buildings was intended to house people who must have been at least a foot shorter than its twentieth-century occupants.

Illya lounged against the far wall, and in a corner of his subconscious he marveled at the magic of dreams that would allow him to know what Solo was feeling and thinking. The pale October light silvered his white-blond hair and ivory skin. When Solo turned a troubled face in his direction, Illya looked away. The American was on the razor's edge between control and despair, and the pain of his balancing act was more than Kuryakin could bear to watch.

Solo's voice was surprisingly calm.

"It would be so easy..."

Illya nodded.

Solo's face reddened and tears threatened. He covered his eyes with his left hand.

"...so damned easy!"

Suddenly, Illya was there, beside him, touching his arm.

"But you didn't do it."

Solo struggled to draw a calm breath.

"No," he said at last. "I didn't do it." He accepted a handkerchief from the Russian and wiped his eyes. "But I wanted to," he added in a guilty whisper.

"I know," said Kuryakin.

Solo's voice dipped into a gravel register that few ever heard. "I hate that bastard."

Kuryakin shifted his gaze to the window and nodded. "Me, too."

The American drew a calming breath and pulled the last pieces of himself together. His voice was normal now.

"Thank God one of us has a grip on himself." He forced a lighter tone than he felt.

Illya made a rude noise and squeezed Solo's arm through his jacket.

"You are the one with control, my friend. You stood at the window and took aim, and you did not fire." At last, he looked his partner in the eye and confessed, "I stood across the room because I knew if I saw him, I would kill him."

Napoleon allowed himself half a smile.



"Come here." He pulled the Russian into an embrace and buried his face in the warmth of his pale neck. "Tebya lyublu!" I love you.

Illya returned the embrace and stroked the back of Napoleon's head. He said nothing. They were working. They never indulged in these caresses on the job, and this lapse disturbed him, because it told him how fiercely his partner had fought the urge to kill. But he held Napoleon tight until the American made a move to pull away.

"Sorry," said Solo, switching back to English.

Illya accepted the apology with a glance.

"We should go now," he suggested. "Feijoo's meeting is over. We need to reach the dead drop before his people figure out where it is. We do not want Chema's death to be in vain."

Solo inhaled deeply and exhaled noisily. He put his automatic back in its shoulder holster and nodded agreement. "Let's go."

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Napoleon saw his partner's eyes twitching in REM sleep, and he thought he should shake him awake. But his body refused to lift off the chair. Odd. He hadn't felt tired when he sat down. He cast another glance at Illya. He didn't appear to be in distress. And after all, U.N.C.L.E. had secured the house, so even though they didn't know what they were supposed to be doing there, they were not in danger.

Lulled by that thought, he swiveled his head slowly back to the television screen. The soap opera had given way to after school cartoons. Strangely shaped characters with bizarre skin colors and gratuitous violence. Well, that certainly explained a few details of his own dream. He chuckled silently at himself, exhaled softly, and leaned his head against the back of the chair.

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It was raining steadily by the time they slowed to a walk and the entourage scattered enough to allow the two agents to examine their surroundings. The canyon walls rose steeply on either side. On the

north face, fifteen feet above the canyon floor, a dark hole gaped. The mouth of a cave. Access was a steep trail. Too steep. Napoleon knew they could not scale the path without special equipment.

Illya leaned close. "That cave was not here when we came through this canyon earlier."

Napoleon nodded. Illya was right. But it was here now.

"Come along, gentlemen," urged Waverly.

"Excuse me, sir," began Illya, "but we cannot scale this... cliff... face." His words jerked to a halt as, one by one, their rescuers removed their oversized shoes and dug clawed toes into the dirt of the cliff. Quads and hamstrings bulged through their clothing as powerful legs carried them up the impossibly steep slope. And they staggered themselves along either side of the path and clung to the wall like bizarre three-dimensional art forms.

"This way, lads," encouraged Waverly. He reached up to the first set of wall hangings and let them pull him up the cliff face. They passed him along to the next set and the next, until strong hands reached for him from the mouth and the cave. He stood at the opening and looked down at Solo and Kuryakin, his hands on his hips. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

Napoleon and Illya exchanged uneasy looks. "You first," said Solo weakly.

Illya grinned, and clapped his friend on the back. Then he followed Waverly's example. Napoleon was close behind.

As the last of their rescuers entered the cave, the storm broke wide open and rain sheeted past the cave-mouth overhang.

Solo and Kuryakin instinctively pressed together as their eyes took in the contents of the cave. There were at least twenty of Waverly's unusual friends milling about, with ten more lying at ease on mattresses along the low-ceilinged edges. The reclining mouth-breathers looked all-in. Some of them were covered in cave-colored dust. One of them winced and moaned in pain as a companion doctored a torn toe-claw. The resting workers were not wearing dark glasses. They stared openly at the two UNCLE agents with irises that filled their sockets. No whites showed around the

edges. The effect was unsettling.

The mass of bodies parted to reveal a comfortable recess in the cave's center back. Waverly steered his agents in that direction. "Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. We'll have dinner soon. No doubt you have a few questions."

Napoleon and Illya lowered themselves cross-legged onto the thick mattress. Tough-skinned pillows mounded about, and Waverly stretched out against a pile of them, sighing with pleasure.

Illya was uneasy. The unending, whiteless stares of the cave's occupants made him very nervous. He glanced at Napoleon for some clue about their position, but Solo's expression was not reassuring. His brow was furrowed and he was chewing his bottom lip, a sure sign he had no answers. Illya scooted closer to his friend. Somehow, the two feet between them seemed far too distant. "These people are not **people**, Napoleon."

Napoleon acknowledged his comment with a brief pat on the shoulder. He cleared his throat and spoke to Waverly. "I don't mean to sound disrespectful, sir, but what the hell is going on?"

Waverly responded, "Illya is right, in a way. We are people, of course, but we are different from you. However, we are not monsters. We come from a another planet. You've seen that our feet are different, our eyes are different, and we're stronger than humans of similar size. We took an interest in your world quite some time ago. I came here with a small group during the American Civil War."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged "I told you so" glances.

"Others joined us, and we worked behind the scenes for many years. Then, after World War I we became aware of a sinister group of criminals whose goal was world domination. It soon became apparent that a concerted effort would be needed to thwart them. My group founded U.N.C.L.E., and we dedicated ourselves to that fight."

"There are others like you on Earth?" Napoleon looked worried.

"There were many, at first. But accidents happen. Some of them sickened and died. Others fell victim to accidents or were murdered by Thrush. Part of the

U.N.C.L.E. history before either of you came aboard. The last one, my wife, activated our last life pod and returned home six months ago. She went for help. She saw how I was deteriorating, and the same was happening to her. We needed help from our people to renew ourselves in order to continue the struggle. She made the trip safely, and at last these voyagers have come to assist me."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged looks of alarm. "Will you be leaving us as well?" asked Illya.

Waverly chuckled. "It's not that simple, lads. No, I'm not leaving. But not because I don't long for my people. They have informed me that Thrush has enlisted offworlders to help them in their dirty work. They have offered substantial rewards to other aliens to help them in their cause. The only way to keep things even is to ask this group to stay and help U.N.C.L.E. fight."

Napoleon was grim. "You are telling us, basically, that we have been invaded."

"Yes. I suppose I am."

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Napoleon jerked awake. Again, his hands were clammy. Maybe that's what kept waking him. He wiped them dry again, and his gaze drifted to Illya. He looked uncomfortable, his head drooping at a precipitous angle. Napoleon heard him snore very softly and decided he was okay.

Well, the good news was that he would not have to sleep tonight, alone in a bedroom without his partner. He could lie in bed and read, if need be. But he had no intention of allowing himself to fall asleep without his partner nearby. It made no difference to them that U.N.C.L.E. had secured the house. Their Third Level condition posed its own constant threats to their physical and mental safety. And Napoleon had no desire to experience the kind of nightmares that would ensnare him if he were foolish enough to fall asleep without Illya in the room.

With that rationalization safely tucked away, he allowed himself a half smile. If U.N.C.L.E. was somehow watching all of this, they weren't getting much of a show. And that suited him just fine. He watched

Illya sleep until his eyelids drooped again.

Can't wait to hear what his dreams are about.

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Tuula was uncomfortable. Illya's dream had revealed way too much information about his relationship with Napoleon. She wondered if the three scientists had noticed. After all, they did not speak Russian, so they probably didn't catch Solo's mumbled 'I love you.' Even so, it bothered her that they were privy to the intimate relationship between the two men.

Solo's dream screen was dark for the time being. She turned her attention back to Illya's screen. It was displaying more of the same dream, apparently in flashback.

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Chema Arregui was dead, and nothing would bring him back. But Solo was determined to make the man's death count for something. There it is again, came the thought from Illya's subconscious. More like watching a movie... or sharing Napoleon's feelings... than dreaming. Chema's maternal uncle was rumored to have saved Alexander Waverly's life during the War on more than one occasion. Although not officially part of the U.N.C.L.E. organization, Chema and his cousins had done favors for the Old Man many times. The most recent favor had been Chema's last.

Waverly's call was curt and brusque. "This morning we received a coded transmission from Chema Arregui. Half an hour ago, I received a phone call from his mother. Chema has been killed. As yet, we have no key to the code. Find it, Mr. Solo."

Waverly's distress was no greater than Solo's own. In one of those ironic twists that life can take, Solo and Arregui had been boyhood friends. Summers spent on the Cantabrian coast with his mother's relatives were among his fondest memories. His mother had owned a house here in San Sebastián. The Basque locals called the city Donostia. When his sister entered the convent, Napoleon became the sole owner. He agreed, on the condition that he was

merely a trustee. In his heart, the house still belonged to both of them. He and Illya had come here after the disaster in Madrid to put the pieces back together before returning to New York. They had only been here three days when Waverly's call came through.

Chema was gunned down in broad daylight by an assassin wearing a bandana across his face, but eye-witnesses knew who the man was. He walked with a sideways gimp, the result of a club foot that surgery had not entirely corrected. He was called "El Feo," Feijoo the Ugly. The Guardia Civil had done nothing, nor was it likely that they would in the future, for the Arreguis were well known for their anti-Franco leanings. Only open supporters of Francisco Franco's regime would experience justice under Spanish law.

Three days was not enough time. Solo was walking a fine line. Kuryakin was angry that Waverly would call on them so soon. There were other agents in Spain, and more in France who could have been pressed into service.

"No," said Solo. "I want to do this." Long summer afternoons on the soccer field, the "amerikanua" and the "euskaldun" sharing the glory of victory and the secrets of preadolescence. They also shared their first pack of cigarettes, fiercely aromatic Ducados that raked their lungs like sandpaper and left them dizzy and nauseated under the esplanade along the beach. And they spoke to each other in the forbidden language of the Basques, the ultimate secret code, careful to never use it in front of strangers because the Spanish authorities would cause their families terrible grief if they were overheard. They loved each other as only ten-year-old boys can, with oaths to be loyal to one another forever and promises to never forget each other. But those feelings were too complex to put into words. Instead, Napoleon turned grieving brown eyes on his partner and said only, "Chema was a friend of mine."

The pain in the brown eyes was all the explanation the Russian needed.

"Ponyatno." Understood.

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Illya shifted in his sleep and his feet dropped off the edge of the desk. His reactions were excellent and he caught himself before his shoes hit the floor. But he was alarmed by the depth of his grogginess. It was as if his body's reflexes worked on a completely different set of circuits from his thought processes.

Idiot, he thought. That's exactly what they do.

He noted that Solo was also snoozing. Good. Better now than later, alone, in separate rooms.

But then, if they were being watched, it was by U.N.C.L.E., and surely the Old Man knew they were Third Level. If he didn't, it was high time he figured it out. Napoleon was only a month shy of his fortieth birthday. Even if their status was news to Waverly and he was outraged, it wouldn't matter. In another month they would pull Napoleon from the field.

And none too soon, from Illya's point of view. There had been too many missions like Madrid and San Sebastián, especially during the last year. And then there was the debacle in Bayonne. The French office was very good at pretending that Illya had not crossed the line in his desire to avenge his partner's suffering, but he had felt Waverly's glare on him for weeks afterward.

Too bad. In another month, Waverly would find himself short two agents, not one. For Napoleon would still need his partner. Thrush would not forget all they had done just because U.N.C.L.E. declared Napoleon too old for field work. And Illya's continuing mission would be watching Napoleon's back.

He nodded to himself as he made the decision that, surveillance or no surveillance, he would stay by Napoleon's side throughout the night. Having settled that question, he gazed at the television screen as Walter Cronkite silently delivered the day's news. So amusing with the sound off. A tiny smile played at the corners of his mouth as he drifted off to sleep again.

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Mark slate shook Napoleon Solo's hand. "Thanks for coming. I know you and Illya

just completed a mission."

Napoleon nodded wearily. "No problem, Mark." He ended the hand shake and glanced around the room. April Dancer paced to and fro in front of the gas fireplace. Napoleon humphed softly at the absurdity of a fireplace in a Las Vegas safe house. The place was a split level. The front door was in the middle of the front wall. Two steps down into the living room on the right, five steps up to the hallway and the upper-level bedrooms to the left and another set of stairs to the basement-level bedrooms. The three scientists Slate and Dancer were escorting were in the living room, two men on the yellow couch and one woman in the Barcalounger.

The kitchen and dining nook was on the same end of the house as the living room, on the back side. Illya Kuryakin came around the corner from the kitchen and offered Napoleon a bottle of Coca-Cola. He leaned against the wall and sipped at his own. Napoleon pulled out a dining room chair and swung it around to straddle it.

"There's beer," offered Mark.

Illya shook his head no. "Pain meds. No Beer."

Napoleon settled stiffly on the chair.

"Stitches?" asked April.

Napoleon grunted a negative. "My contusions have bruises."

April smiled thinly. "Well, no stitches is good. You can use the pool."

Napoleon flashed her a quick smile. "Maybe later. Waverly said you could use a hand here." He sipped his cola and used the movement as an excuse to examine the civilians and catalog their physical characteristics in his mental library.

Rufus Clarion, nuclear physicist, too thin with a conspicuous hump high on the right side of his spine. He always looked hunched over, even when he stood up straight. One of the most brilliant physicists in the country at the age of forty-three.

At the other end of the couch, Julian Stuyvesant, white hair, translucent skin, one blue vein constantly throbbing in his left temple. Straight nose, pale blue eyes, with a taste for off-the-rack plaid jackets. He was South African, an expert in the mining, refining and handling of plutonium.

The woman, Carla Danish, was fiftyish, squat, and nervous. Brown hair streaked with gray, worn too close to her round head. Her ankles bulged slightly over the tops of her brown oxfords. She did not resemble her surname at all. And yet there was something disciplined about her, the way she wore her tweed jacket and straight tweed skirt, the way she sat erect even though the lounge wanted her to sink into its tan naugahyde.

In his dream, Napoleon thought, 'Oh, no, not this mission again. I've been trying to forget this one.'

But his subconscious showed no mercy. The events of the disastrous mission unfolded on fast forward, through Mark and April's furtive explanations that they suspected Carla Danish of being in league with Thrush. Illya thought their reasoning was spurious, based on the woman's unlikable qualities, but he respected their concerns. Napoleon at first paid the woman little attention, then realized her frumpy appearance could be the perfect cover, intended to throw men like himself off her trail by her very invisibility. He seized on that thought as his own rationale for her being a Thrush operative, to the exclusion of the other two.

'I was on pain killers,' he reminded himself. 'I wasn't thinking straight.' But he brushed off his own excuse and gritted his teeth in his sleep as the memory of the mission rushed toward its ugly conclusion.

He had settled on a plastic reclining chair by the pool for a few moments of fresh air. It was midnight, oddly enough a perfect time in Vegas for lounging by the water. The pool lights were off, but he could hear the soft lapping of the water against the sides. The stars overhead sparkled in the black sky. A mild breeze carried desert scents and dropped the temperature to a pleasant eighty degrees. He had just taken a pain pill, and he had decided it would be his last. They made him sleepy. Sleepy. Like now.

Now? Confusion. Where was he? In Vegas? In a big yellow house in Vegas? No, no pool in the big yellow house. He was dreaming.

Dreaming about blood. The smell of blood drifted to him on the warm breeze.

He awoke beside the pool, alarmed but still groggy. He fumbled for his gun, managed to flick the safety off. Illya? Where was Illya?!

Urgency now. Into the house. It was dark, but his eyes were already adjusted to the night. The blood smell was sharper now. He marveled at adrenalin's ability to cut through drug-induced fog. Every sense was on overload. His first stop was Carla Danish's bedroom. Her window curtains were pulled back and the sliding window was open to let in some night breeze and a bit of light from a street lamp. The open window had also allowed the smell of blood to reach him on the patio. That was when he realized she was not the Thrush mole, not unless they were moving their activities into the afterlife. It was her blood he was smelling. It was spreading from under her crushed skull, unmistakably darker than the hardwood floor beneath her. Next to her were several four-by-six inch cards, their white surfaces reflecting the meager light. Later he would lift them from the edge of the pool of blood and turn them over and see that they were pictures of her grandchildren.

On to Clarion's room. At first it appeared all was well. Clarion was in bed, on his back, but then Solo realized Clarion's eyes were open and staring at the ceiling. Then he saw the knife handle protruding from his chest.

'Where is Illya?' It was the only question that mattered. He moved on to Stuyvesant's room, knowing the man would not be there. Then down to the basement level. On the stairs he found April's unconscious body. It was her watch. She moaned and he pressed a finger to her lips to silence her.

All happening faster than it took to replay it in his memory. The shock of white hair that gave away Stuyvesant's location. The blond of Mark and Illya's hair not reflecting quite as much light. In retrospect, he wondered how he knew. How could he have felt so certain that he was aiming at the right man?

Instinct. Never question instinct. It was the great savior. Aim and fire. Phhht.

Afterward, his multiple failures on that mission were overlooked by Waverly, who

commended him on having the presence of mind to use a sleep dart.

What a joke. He was thinking only of Illya. He had to protect Illya, save Illya, preserve Illya, because Illya was necessary to his own survival. There was no presence of mind involved. He had assumed his gun would fire bullets. He only wanted to protect Illya. His own stupidity and ego had blinded him to the possibility that Stuyvesant was the mole. He was focused on Carla Danish, and she died because of it. And still his only concern was Illya.

Mark and Illya had instincts of their own. Each had been alerted by something amiss, perhaps the sound of April landing softly on the carpeted stairs. Each had emerged into the hall. Mark stepped out of the room he and April shared alternately for sleeping in time to be grabbed by the lethal Stuyvesant on his way to destroy Solo and Kuryakin. Stuyvesant didn't know that Solo had slipped up to the pool for some fresh air. He was heading for the room shared by Solo and Kuryakin, to take them out, and afterward he would finish off Mark and April.

Waverly would crow about the skills that U.N.C.L.E. training had instilled in his agents and he would commend Napoleon for bringing the Thrush agent back alive for questioning.

But in his dream, Napoleon was still standing in the narrow hall, gun in hand, watching the whitest head of hair slide to the floor. Mark fumbled for the wall switch and flipped it on. The sixty-watt bulb revealed to Napoleon that even in the dark Illya's blue eyes had locked on him, and they stood for several seconds like that, staring at one another, realizing at the same moment how close they had come to the final separation, while Mark took action. They stood, frozen by the enormity of their potential loss, while Mark ran to April's aid.

And later, much later, after the clean-up crew arrived and initial reports had been made to Waverly via communicator, after the sun had risen and heated the patio to one hundred and fifteen degrees, Napoleon sat on a bench in the shade beside his partner and picked at the back of his hand, searching for the words to confess that he had been thinking only of one person when

he entered the house. Mark and April could have died that night, but he thought only of Illya. The scientific community lost two of its greatest minds, but he thought only of his partner.

And Illya sat beside him, uncomfortable in the heat but refusing to return to the air-conditioned house. Illya sat in silence, staring at the surface of the pool, waiting.

Napoleon never found the words he was looking for, but the pressure of Illya's arm against his own made the words feel unnecessary in the end.

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In the basement, four pairs of eyes were riveted to the Solo dream screen. Tuula finally dropped her eyes to her lap. This was too much. She glanced at the faces of the scientists and realized that even they had gotten more than they'd bargained for. Sorenson looked pale. Finny was perspiring. And Bigelow was trying to control his breathing. Then she realized that they had never been this close to a real mission before, and certainly not to a mission gone bad. The dream screen was showing them everything from Solo's point of view, and for him the whole thing had been the worst kind of nightmare.

Well, she thought, if nothing else they can use the damn thing to create horror movies. The profits would fund U.N.C.L.E. for years to come.

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This time Napoleon groaned his way up from sleep. His eyes felt heavier than before. Indeed, his limbs were also heavy, but he forced them to move. He needed to know he was not still asleep. At first he couldn't tell because it felt as if he were struggling to move with no success, the way it happens in dreams. But finally his muscles responded and he straightened in his chair. His gaze moved at once to Illya, whose position had changed but who still snoozed in his leather chair.

If he had been in a different place, any place not secured by U.N.C.L.E. personnel beforehand, he would have wondered what the hell was going on. But here, in this

house, he simply marveled at the depth of his fatigue. Their fatigue, because Illya was also dozing.

‘What do you expect?’ he thought to himself. ‘You’re almost forty. Maybe everything they say about agents approaching forty is true. Maybe it is time to get out of the field. Lord knows you don’t want to go through another mission like that Vegas safe house affair.’

He forced himself to take a deep breath, hoping the oxygen would clear his mind. He was startled to realize it was twilight outside. He glanced at his watch. It was almost eight p.m.

“No wonder I’m stiff,” he mumbled. He called to his partner. “Illya, wake up.”

Nothing. Not loud enough. He tried again.

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Illya floated on his back in the pool, luxuriating in the warm water. After the Vegas safe house fiasco, U.N.C.L.E. had secured a small motor inn for the clean-up crew and for the four field agents involved. He didn’t bother to wonder why Waverly was being so generous. He left that kind of worry to Napoleon, who was so very good at it. Instead, Illya just enjoyed the water. They were far enough away from The Strip that he didn’t have to worry about multi-story buildings nearby, places where snipers might nest. None of that. Just the water and the sun.

From behind his dark glasses, he kept an eye on Napoleon. For the moment his partner appeared to be dozing on a banana lounge on the shady side of the pool area. He could also see one of the U.N.C.L.E. sentries posted on the other side of the metal fence, the part that wasn’t obscured by tall shrubs. He knew that April and Mark were back from the hospital. April had a bump the size of a golf ball but no skull fracture. She was ordered to lie down in a dark room, and Mark was supposed to wake her up every hour or so and make sure she wasn’t seeing double. Aside from that, they were okay.

Both of them had taken the time to thank Napoleon for saving their lives. Illya knew that, although Napoleon nodded

grimly in acknowledgment, inside he didn’t feel he deserved any thanks. Because the mission had gone awry, because Napoleon had not been omniscient, he blamed himself for not preventing April’s injury. Illya had observed this pattern in the past. Napoleon had always come out of his guilty fog in the past, but it seemed to take longer every time. Now the man was silent and morose, still mulling over the events more than twelve hours after the fact. For that reason, the sound of Napoleon’s voice startled him.

“You’re going to turn into a prune.”

Illya lifted his head from the water and looked in Napoleon’s direction. “I thought you were in a trance.”

“I was. The gypsies you are so fond of call it a ‘healing trance.’ It works like this. I stay in a trance long enough and my friends heal from the injuries they have incurred in my presence.”

Illya rolled in the water and swam to the edge of the pool in three strong strokes. He grabbed the lip of the cement and pulled himself up and out of the water. Dripping as he walked, he moved to the patio chair beside Napoleon and wrapped himself in a towel before he sat down. “You are talking. This is a good sign.”

“You’re so easily pleased,” said Napoleon darkly.

Illya swallowed a smile and murmured under his breath, “Almost everything you do pleases me.” He glanced around out of habit before adding, “That’s why I love you.”

Napoleon smiled for the first time since shooting Stuyvesant. But it was a sad smile. “My tricky Russian. He says it without actually saying it.”

Illya rubbed his hair until it was merely damp instead of dripping. “I often say it, just not in English.”

“You’re turning red. You need to put a shirt on.” Napoleon held out Illya’s white tee shirt.

“Good idea.” Illya took it and pulled it on. He looked amused. “You also say it without saying it.”

Napoleon cocked his head to one side. “How do we know it’s not just self preservation?” Third Level.

“Perhaps there is no way of knowing,” said Illya matter-of-factly. He was used to

these philosophical exchanges. He refused to read anything into them. "Whatever the reason, it is close enough to the real thing to satisfy me."

Napoleon nodded his agreement. "Did we ever figure out what planet Waverly and his aliens were from?"

Illya frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You remember. That time we were nearly executed, kneeling in the sand. Saved by Waverly and his alien buddies."

Illya took off his dark glasses and looked Napoleon in the eye. "That is not how this poolside conversation went the first time we had it."

Now it was Napoleon's turn to frown. "The first time...?"

"Yes. I am dreaming this. I am remembering the Vegas safe house fiasco, and..."

"Must you call it a fiasco?"

"Sorry. But you never talked nonsense when it happened."

"Nonsense? I'm being very serious." He paused. "Or am I? Wait. No, I think I imagined that alien thing."

"Good," said Illya. "Let's move on to the good part." He stood up and moved his head slightly in the direction of Napoleon's room. "I need a shower, and a little birdie tells me that the showerhead in your room works better than the one in mine."

"Then by all means, use my shower," said Napoleon, rising to lead the way.

Inside the room, all thoughts of the shower were forgotten once they threw the deadbolt. The tee shirt Illya had donned by the pool came off first, and they embraced, skin on skin, faces nuzzling necks, inhaling each other's warmth.

"I could have lost you," whispered Napoleon.

"But I am here," murmured Illya. He ran his tongue up the side of Napoleon's neck and along his jaw. Then he nipped at the skin.

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"Holy shit," muttered Finny.

"God almighty," said Sorenson.

"Well, this will end their careers," said Bigelow.

Tuula was out of her chair and in Bigelow's face before he finished the sentence. She pushed him up against the bank of computers and pressed her forearm against his throat. She was livid, and she took great satisfaction in the surprise and fear that mingled in his eyes as he gasped for the breath that she had blocked.

"Not a word," she ground out through clenched teeth. "Not a fucking word of this goes anywhere, do you hear me?"

Bigelow was turning blue. Tuula's hours at the gym were evident in her bulging biceps, and she was using her strength to make an impression on Bigelow.

"I will kill you here and now and think of a reason later," she seethed. "Do we understand each other?"

Bigelow tried to nod. The fear in his eyes was escalating to panic.

"Miss Crighton, please." Sorenson reached out to stop her but pulled his hand back.

Tuula released Bigelow with a contemptuous shove against the bank of computers. She moved to the recorder and punched the eject button.

Finny uttered a momentary protest, but when Tuula turned her glare on him, he cut it off.

"This tape will be seen by no one," she barked. "The machine malfunctioned."

No one said a word. Silently, they turned their attention back to the dream screen.

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Napoleon's hands skimmed over Illya's back, up to his shoulders, and down to his ribs. His fingertips landed on every scar, barely touching some, lingering over others.

Illya's touch was firmer, more insistent. He grabbed Napoleon's ass and pulled their bodies together, grinding his hips against Napoleon's. Then he lifted one hand to Napoleon's head and pulled him into a kiss.

It began athletically, but the heat of the kiss slowed them down, until by the time they found the bed, it was a slow, sensuous tango of lips and tongues. Illya drew back for air and used the moment to rid them both of their swimming trunks. Then he lowered himself on top of his partner and



resumed the kiss. Out of breath, Napoleon turned his head to the side and said, "Illya."

Illya ignored him and tried to reestablish the kiss.

Napoleon's voice grew more insistent. "Illya!"

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"Illya! Wake up!"

Illya jerked awake and nearly fell out of his chair. "Shto? Gdye...?" He looked around and remembered where he was. "Oh. The big yellow house." He ran a hand over his groggy features. "Strange dreams."

"Tell me about it." Napoleon forced himself to leave the armchair and turn off the television set.

As soon as the picture faded to black, he began to feel more alert. Suddenly his stomach reminded him of the hour. "Hungry," he mumbled.

Illya glanced at his watch. "Your stomach makes an efficient alarm," he said. "It's eight o'clock."

"Food," said Napoleon.

"I suppose alcohol is out of the question."

Napoleon massaged his own neck. "Oh, I don't know. Let's see what else is in the kitchen." He rolled his head left and right, then shook out his arms. "Do you feel like you've been hit with a sleep dart?"

"Now that you mention it, yes." Illya stamped his feet against the floor. His legs were asleep. "I hate that feeling."

In the kitchen, Napoleon opened cupboards and pulled out crackers and olives. "Did Tuula leave any more food in the fridge?"

"Oh, yes. Wait." Illya opened the refrigerator and pulled out a Pyrex loaf pan. "Lasagna." He spoke the word like a lover's name.

Napoleon laughed. "Can you work this stove?"

"You are so domestically challenged." Illya turned a knob, opened the oven door and set the pan on the top shelf.

"Don't you need a match?"

"It's electric."

"How long will that take?" Napoleon tossed a can of olives in the air like a baseball.

"Perhaps half an hour."

"Okay," said Napoleon, digging in a drawer for a can opener. "In that case we'll need hors-d'oeuvres." He found the opener and freed the olives. "I had the weirdest dreams upstairs."

Illya grunted. "Me, too." He picked up jars from the refrigerator door, examined them and put them back, until he found a jar of caviar. He flashed a triumphant grin and set the caviar next to the water crackers. "I dreamt about the Vegas safe house affair." He prudently avoided the word fiasco. Napoleon was still sensitive about that mission.

Napoleon stopped an olive on its way to his mouth. "You just gave me goose bumps. I was dreaming about that, too."

Their eyes met.

"Did you happen to dream the part where you started talking about Waverly and the aliens?"

Napoleon's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"You did, didn't you?" Illya opened the freezer door, gave a small yip of satisfaction and extracted a bottle of Stolichnaya.

Without a word, Napoleon got glasses from a cupboard.

Illya poured them each two fingers.

Napoleon drank his like a shot of whiskey, straight back. When he could breathe again, he motioned for Illya to pour another one. "Actually, I had an entire dream about Waverly and his alien friends. Or rather, in the dream, Waverly was one of the aliens. But you say that I mentioned it in your dream?"

"Yes."

Napoleon's eyes dropped to the oven door.

Illya knew what he was thinking. "Tuula left that for us. It's clean."

"Unless someone knew we would trust her and they used her name in vain."

Illya shook his head, adamantly. "Nyet. We know her handwriting."

"Okay," said Napoleon. "So there's nothing in the food. That's a relief, because I'm starving."

"Could it be a coincidence?" asked Illya.

"We could conceivably dream about the same incidents because we've lived a lot of them together," said Napoleon. "But for you

to dream that I told you about a dream I just had, sitting a few feet away, that's no coincidence. That's spooky."

Illya's expression brightened. "The house is haunted! That's what Waverly wanted us to discover. Can't spirits cause strange dreams?"

Napoleon screwed his face into an expression that kept him from having to say you've got to be kidding.

"Very well. You come up with a theory while I soothe my haunted nerves with this vodka." He poured another dollop into his glass, then opened the water crackers and the caviar. "What about your idea earlier?"

"Brownies," said Napoleon.

"That's the one." Illya popped a caviar-laden cracker into his mouth.

"I still think so," said Napoleon. "But I don't know why they would bother at this point in my career."

Illya glanced around, his face showing that he doubted they should speak so obviously.

Napoleon spooned caviar on his own cracker. "Who cares?" he said wearily. "If they set us up in this house to do some kind of test, what does it matter if they're listening? They think we are no more than guinea pigs."

Illya didn't like the direction Napoleon's mood was going. "Perhaps they chose us because it's a top secret development of some kind and they want to know that their guinea pigs will help it remain a secret."

Napoleon tilted his head to one side and eyed his partner. "Now, explain to me when our roles reversed, because I missed that moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm supposed to be the optimist and you're supposed to be the pessimist." He used the tip of a finger to keep a small cluster of caviar from falling off the side of the cracker. "You really think they might be testing something important?"

"Of course."

Napoleon didn't believe him, but it was nice to know that Illya cared enough about him to lie to keep him happy. He sat at the kitchen table and nibbled at his cracker.

Illya alternately drank, ate, and laid out plates and silverware for the warming

lasagna. Then he checked the oven, turned the heat up fifty degrees, and sat down across from Napoleon. "Here is my theory," he said to pass the time. "They have very cleverly concealed a device in this house that the R and D boys want us to test."

"Cleverly?"

"Well, we didn't find it and we are very good at that sort of thing."

Napoleon conceded that they were very good. He popped two olives into his mouth. "What kind of device?"

Illya shrugged. "What has happened since we arrived?"

"We got sleepy. We dreamed." Napoleon held up a finger. "We shared information in our dreams."

"But we were not aware that it was happening until we told each other the content of those dreams," said Illya. "How many field agents pass the time by comparing dreams?"

Napoleon frowned. "Damn few. So it wouldn't work for sharing information."

Illya shrugged. "Perhaps it would, but there are more efficient ways to do that. So I doubt it is a dream-sharing machine."

"Then what is it?"

"Perhaps it is some kind of energy or ray that brings on drowsiness," suggested Illya.

Napoleon made a rude noise. "Sleep darts are faster."

"Granted," said Illya. "But what about the energy part? Or the ray? As a delivery system."

"It has to be generated by something," said Napoleon, "and we didn't find anything that could do that. All we did was..." The words faded away as the realization crawled up his spine. "The television. We didn't check it..."

"...because they are harmless common devices," said Illya, already up and moving toward the door.

They raced up the stairs to the office. When they turned the television around to examine the back, Illya found only one screw holding the cover on.

"I am an idiot," he muttered.

"You can't take all the blame," said Napoleon. "I was here, too."

Illya used his pocket knife to remove the single screw. Carefully, he lifted off the pressed cardboard back of the set.

At first, Napoleon saw nothing out of place. It looked like the inside of a TV, with vacuum tubes and the slope of the cathode ray tube. After a moment, he squinted at a small gray box affixed to one side of the cabinet wall, with wires running into the back of the screen. "That looks suspicious."

"Indeed it does," said Illya. "Shall I pry it loose?"

Napoleon reached out and stopped his hand. "Could it be a bomb?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Illya sounded irritated. "I am not that out of touch with Research and Development. If it's a new weapon, they tell me about it because we could use it in the field."

"All right, just checking." Napoleon nodded at the box. "So, what does it do?"

"It makes us sleepy," sniped Illya. "How do I know what it does?"

Napoleon pulled back a moment. "You don't think it's an U.N.C.L.E. version of that device Thrush planted in that suburbia affair, do you?"

"No, it's not that," said Illya with a hint of apology in his tone. "I'm just hungry. It makes me irritable."

Napoleon nodded. "Then let's go eat. We can decide what to do after lasagna."

They took their time over dinner. After all, they weren't going anywhere. Their orders were to spend the night in the house.

"Nice lasagna," said Napoleon.

"Tuula is a good friend," said Illya, helping himself to seconds.

"I'm going to miss her," said Napoleon.

Illya froze for a moment, then continued moving his fork to his mouth. After he swallowed a bite, he said as casually as he could muster, "Nothing says you have to abandon your friends."

Napoleon shrugged. "You know how it is. After a while, you run out of things to talk about. They can't talk about work anymore, and they're not really interested in your post-agent activities."

Illya gazed quietly at Napoleon's face. "You have been thinking about this for a while, yes?"

"Yes."

"Were you going to include me in this

conversation?"

"I am," said Napoleon. "Right now."

Illya rolled his eyes. "Here? Under these circumstances?" When our every word is most likely being recorded by our own people? was the unspoken fragment that hung between them.

"Why not?" asked Napoleon. "I'm a month out. Four weeks. Nothing left to do but clean out my office."

"Leaving the field is not a pink slip," said Illya. He poured himself another shot of vodka and poured Napoleon a double.

Napoleon picked up his glass and gave Illya a look.

Illya barely spared him a glance as he began working on his second helping of lasagna. "If you don't care if they hear our conversation, then what difference will the vodka make?" He paused and shook his fork in Napoleon's face. "And who says you will be cleaning out your office?"

Napoleon shook out the dish towel he was using as a napkin and folded it carefully and laid it beside his plate. "If I stay, you will stay, and if you stay, you'll still be a field agent. And you know that won't work."

"Everyone knows it won't work. Including Waverly."

"You really think Waverly knows?"

Illya looked around the kitchen, knowing there must be recording devices even though their search had revealed none. "He must know," he said to the invisible camera. "We have been Third Level for seven years. How can he not know?"

"Longer than that," amended Napoleon. "We just figured it out seven years ago."

Illya drew a deep breath and let it out noisily. "Very well. The plan is total honesty?"

Napoleon gave him a sharp look. "Don't be an idiot."

Illya laughed silently, but raised both hands in mock surrender.

Napoleon relaxed visibly. "We're Third Level," he said. "That's as honest as it gets."

"So true, my friend," said Illya. He spread his hands to indicate the remains of their dinner. "What next?" He wagged his brows. "Want to watch more television?"

Napoleon snorted. "Hardly. I wish we

knew what that thing we found is supposed to do.”

Illya looked toward the basement door in the corner. “There is one way to find out.”

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Sorenson wiped his damp fingers on his lab coat. “Jeez! They’re coming downstairs!”

Finny was pouring a cup of coffee and staring at the observation screen. “Are you sure that’s not a dream sequence?” Coffee overflowed his mug and burned his fingers.

Bigelow’s hairless dome was shiny with perspiration. “This is absurd. They were ordered to ignore the basement.”

Tuula didn’t even waste a glance on him. “Field agents are trained to make their own decisions in the field. They follow orders as long as they make sense. But for all they know,” she nodded at the screen where Solo and Kuryakin debated their next move, “Thrush has infiltrated, taken over the house, and planted some weird device in the television set upstairs.”

“What do we do?” asked Sorenson. “That’s our only exit!”

“Try hiding,” said Tuula, sarcastically. “But when they get down here, do exactly as they say. I don’t want to report friendly fire deaths to Waverly.”

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Napoleon followed Illya’s gaze to the basement door. “It does make sense, doesn’t it?”

“After all, they went to all that trouble to tell us not to worry about the basement. Our own people have secured the house.”

“How thoughtful of them,” said Napoleon with exaggerated gratitude. He pulled his wallet out of his inside coat pocket and removed a flimsy envelope from the bill compartment. “Would you care to do the honors?”

Illya puffed up with the imaginary honor. “I would like that very much.” He took the envelope and carefully removed a short red thread by one wax-coated end.

Napoleon tried the door handle, just in case, but it was locked. He stood back and

let Illya work.

Illya rolled the envelope carefully between his hands until the flimsy substance warmed and became pliable. Napoleon leaned against the refrigerator door, one foot crossed over the other, arms folded across his chest. One corner of his mouth was tilted up in a tiny smile.

Illya mirrored that smile as he tucked the now pliable plastique around the door knob and into the keyhole. Then he pressed the red thread into the plastique, lit the end of the thread with a match, and backed away.

Napoleon was not so adventurous. He clasped a hand around Illya’s elbow and pulled his partner out of the kitchen and behind the dining room wall. A few seconds later, a subdued whoosh-and-pooftold them the special plastique had done its job. They reentered the kitchen.

The temperature in the kitchen had gone up thirty degrees. The door knob was gone and tiny flames licked at the paint on the door. Illya wet a kitchen towel and doused the flames with it, and he used the towel to protect his hands as he gripped the hole where the knob had been and pulled the door open. Beyond was a landing. A hastily built wall blocked the part of the stairs that would have led up to the attic. The remaining stairs led down to the basement.

“Aren’t basements supposed to be dark and dank?” asked Napoleon sarcastically.

Illya humphed. “Dark and dank are the words to describe the minds of the occupants, I think,” he said.

Hushed voices tinged with panic created an amusing murmur from below.

“I don’t think they were expecting us,” said Napoleon. Just in case, he drew his gun before heading down the stairs.

The scene in the basement was chaotic. Three men in white coats scurried about. One reached for a red phone. Another carried an armful of papers toward an explosion-proof safe. And the third tried to conceal himself behind a supply cabinet. He was two-thirds successful. The other third of him stuck out like a large piece of popcorn against a giant gray molar.

“Freeze!” ordered Illya.

They froze.

Napoleon walked toward the one trying to use the phone. "Put it down," he said softly.

As if hypnotized, the man returned the handset to the cradle.

Napoleon squinted at the man's face. "I know you. Your name is Finny."

The man nodded repeatedly, eager to establish a personal connection and avoid being shot.

"Well, don't move a muscle, Finny. You know what they say about field agents."

Finny started to nod again, but decided against it. His eyes ballooned as they fastened on Napoleon's drawn gun.

Tuula Crighton's voice came from the recess behind the stairs. "Don't shoot that one, Napoleon. He's harmless. Aim for Bigelow, the guy with the papers."

"Tuula?" Napoleon subtly shifted his aim toward Bigelow.

With Napoleon watching the scientists, Illya provided a more effusive greeting. Straight-faced, he said, "Tuula, my sweet, how lovely to see you again."

With an equally straight face, Tuula replied in kind. "Illya, my secret love, the last twenty-four hours has been unbearable for me as well." She ruffled his shaggy blond hair and moved into Napoleon's line of vision. "The device in the television is called a D.R.E.A.M. machine, standing for Dream Recording, Enhancing and Modifying. I haven't seen what the Modifying part does yet, but the Recording part is fan-damn-tastic."

"Recording?" Napoleon looked bleak.

"As in, seeing what we dreamed about?" Illya looked dismayed.

Tuula nodded. "And getting it on video tape." She held up the sex dream tape she had confiscated earlier. "This video tape, to be specific."

"And may I ask what is to become of that tape?" asked Napoleon, his voice eerily even.

"Well, that depends on who you're asking," said Tuula. "Ask old Bigelow there, and he would tell you it was going to wind up on Waverly's desk..."

Sorenson and Finny started to object, but Tuula cut them off.

"...after God knows how many of the R and D boys got a peek at it..."

Sorenson broke through. "Never, Tuula! I would never let anyone see that tape!"

Tuula nodded. "I know, Dan. You're a good man. But you're not in charge of this project, are you?"

Sorenson faltered and cast a glance at Bigelow. "No," he said, defeated. "No, I'm not in charge."

Napoleon adjusted his grip and his aim at Bigelow, shifting from heart to head, just for effect. "And if we asked Tuula what's going to happen to the tape?"

Tuula grinned. "I've always wanted to see how fast one of these things can catch fire and burn."

Napoleon grinned back at her. "Great. Illya has matches." He relaxed his aim, but he didn't put his weapon away.

Bigelow sputtered. "You can't do that! I'm reporting all of this to Waverly. This is a top secret project, highest priority!"

"We report first," said Tuula, making up rules to suit herself. "Section Two and Section Three always have priority over Section Eight."

Sorenson raised one hand and wiggled his fingers. "Finny and I are Camouflage and Deception," he offered, "but Bigelow is Section Six."

The tone in the room changed in an instant.

Illya took a step toward Bigelow. "Security and Personnel? Why would Section Six employ a scientist?"

Napoleon's expression hardened. "I told you it was a test."

Bigelow's arrogance could not be contained, even in the face of Napoleon's semi-automatic. "A test you have failed," he announced.

Tuula also took a step toward Bigelow, and that deflated him. "You shut up," she commanded. "I thought I made it clear earlier that I have had enough of you."

Bigelow swallowed hard, but said nothing.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances, then looked at Tuula with increased admiration. Then Illya spoke.

"But Tuula, my giant goddess, eventually they will report to Waverly what they have seen, with or without the video tape."

"Yes, my Soviet stallion."

Napoleon laughed out loud. Illya

gouged him in the ribs with an elbow.

Tuula did not crack a smile. She continued, "They will report what they think they have seen."

"Are you suggesting a smear campaign?" asked Napoleon, his eyes darting around the lab.

"Don't worry," said Tuula, "the lab is not rigged for surveillance."

Illya held up a finger. "Speaking of which, I really want to know how they concealed their cameras and microphones. We did not spot anything."

"Don't worry," said Tuula, "I have brand new electronics scanners for each of you, guaranteed to locate all the newest stuff." She shooed Finny away from the table covered with controls. "As for a smear campaign, they take too long and boil down to 'he said, she said.' I had something else in mind."

"Yes," said Illya, joining Tuula at the table and examining the controls. "We shoot them and report it as friendly fire."

Finny blanched.

Tuula shook her head no. "Too much paperwork," she said. "I had something more fitting in mind."

"Well, hurry up," said Napoleon. "My arm is getting tired." He waved his gun in Bigelow's general direction.

"Do share your brilliant idea, my flamboyant Finnish queen," said Illya.

Tuula laughed in spite of herself, then protested. "No fair. It was your accent. The way you pronounced it! Points are awarded only for content."

Napoleon's eyes sparkled. He shook his head no. "Too bad, my dear. You laughed first. Illya takes the title back."

Illya tried to suppress a triumphant smile, but failed. "Your idea?" he prompted.

"Well, they named this thing the Dream Recording, Enhancing and Modifying machine. I figure the technology is related to what we use for programming deep cover, but it definitely elevates the concept to a whole new level. Now, as a thinking, intelligent woman, I want to know what the Modifying part does."

Finny and Sorenson didn't seem to mind. In fact, they admitted that they had always wanted to test the machine on themselves. They called it the "human fly"

syndrome.

Bigelow was another matter. But with Finny and Sorenson in compliance, it didn't take much to overwhelm Bigelow. An hour in front of the upstairs television had induced a dream state in the uncooperative scientist, and as he relived the events of the day under Napoleon's watchful eye, Tuula, Illya, Finny, and Sorenson altered his dream memories. By the end of the session, he remembered Napoleon's crazy dream about aliens but in Illya's sexual dream, Napoleon had been replaced by Tuula.

The tricky part came when they tried to agree on how to modify his opinion of the machine and the experiment. Illya and Tuula ran upstairs to confer with Napoleon while Bigelow dreamed on. Illya felt the machine would be a great boon to U.N.C.L.E. if used on Thrush and other enemies, while Napoleon was adamant that the machine be ruled a failure, citing his own nonsensical dream as evidence that results could not be trusted. Tuula broke the tie.

"Okay, here's the deal. The recording part is unreliable and not worth the effort. But the modification component could save agents' lives by making their cover impenetrable."

"Excellent," said Illya.

"Agreed," said Napoleon.

And so it was that when Bigelow awoke, he was disappointed and grim about the outcome of the experiment. He decided he would have to suggest to Waverly that R and D focus on the programming aspects of the device and abandon the dream recording angle.

Finny and Sorenson volunteered to help Bigelow close up the lab. They also promised to let Tuula know if there were any signs of the dream modification wearing off.

Napoleon and Illya gathered their suitcases and offered Tuula a lift in the VW. She accepted. As Illya prepared to back out of the driveway, Tuula said sardonically, "Well, this was fun. What's next?"

Illya and Napoleon exchanged a long look. Then Illya said, "We should burn that tape. And then, perhaps, Tuula, my love, the time has come to discuss our future."

