

The Revenge is Mine Affair

By

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In a private hospital in Manhattan, 2:15 p.m.

You are sitting in a plastic chair in a hospital room, pretending to read a magazine. Your partner is sleeping on the hospital bed. The doctors have sedated him heavily. They say he may never recover. But you have hope. You know something they don't know. You know that he's Third Level, and his condition is a result of the lengthy separation you both suffered during your last mission. You think that when he wakes up and sees you by his bed, his condition will improve dramatically. You and your other Third Level friends are virtually certain of it. But you don't want to take any chances. Science is doing all it can. U.N.C.L.E. money has provided the best doctors. Your name is Illya Kuryakin, and you are afraid science and money are not enough. Not in this case. Not when the patient is Napoleon Solo.

Your eyes stare hard at the print on the page but the words merge in a blur of black and white. Your Communist Party membership card is in your wallet in the inside pocket of your jacket. But you're not thinking about Marxist-Leninist theory. You're mumbling in Russian under your breath, prayers your dead mother taught you when you were small, nearly forgotten pleas that come back to you more and more often with each passing year you spend as an U.N.C.L.E. agent.

You glance up when the door opens. It's Avery Bates and Misha Stalin. Bates looks leaner than usual today, and his gray-blond hair is slicked back with pomade. His steely gray eyes are red from lack of sleep. He has been Solo's friend since Korea, and Stalin has been Bates's friend since Bates saved him from being arrested for spying in Germany. Stalin's black hair, brown eyes, and muscled build contrast nicely with Bates' pale skin. The pink scar that runs like a fat slug from the center of Stalin's left cheekbone through the bridge of his nose and over his right eye makes civilians turn away from him on the street. Some day you'll ask Stalin what his real name is. Even the "real" Stalin wasn't really named Stalin. Misha found the American acceptance of his assumed name quietly amusing. But if you never learn his real name, it won't matter. You're Russian. You measure people by what's in their hearts, not by the syllables of their name. Stalin is a good friend. He and Bates are Third Level, like you and Solo. They've been close by ever since you found Napoleon nailed inside that shipping crate.

The enemy shut him in like a piece of furniture, like an animal being sent to the zoo. No, worse than an animal. He had no food, no water, nothing. They left him to die. They were hiding a body before it stopped breathing.

You know what he did to stay alive that last twenty-four hours, because you had to do it yourself once. It wasn't pleasant, but it gave you a few extra hours. And that was all you needed

— a few extra hours in which to find him. You didn't have to search for him alone. Bates and Stalin, Dancer and Slate, and Treacle and Crighton helped. In fact, it was Crighton's unorthodox contacts who finally provided the essential clue to Solo's whereabouts. Napoleon would appreciate that. When he's up and around again, the two of you will take her out to dinner and celebrate being alive.

"No change?" asks Bates.

"*Nyet*. Nothing." You're so tired, you feel like an old man, but you lever yourself out of your chair and toss the magazine on the table beside it. "At least the nightmares have stopped."

Bates nods. "He can smell you. He knows you're in the room."

You start to laugh, but Bates is serious. Then you remember all the times in the middle of the night when you've done the same thing. You smelled Solo nearby, you knew it was him by his scent, the smell of his sweat, his musk, his personal aroma. Yes, Bates is right. Napoleon can smell you nearby, and as a result he's sleeping peacefully.

"Anything from Waverly?" Bates props his rump on the empty bed next to Solo. Misha moves to the window and looks out.

"No, nothing." Waverly's silence bothers you. It's not like him to ignore an agent injured in the field, especially when that agent is his protégé, Napoleon Solo.

Or at least, Solo was his protégé, before he went Third Level. You wonder if Waverly has pulled away because of that, or maybe because of the other secret you share with Napoleon, because you're lovers.

He stirs on the pillow, and you push all other thoughts out of your mind. You bend close to his ear and speak to him.

"*Ya zdyes*. I'm here. Don't worry. Everything is all right."

His eyelids flutter, but they don't quite open. Your heart pounds in your chest. Bates is at your elbow, and you glance up at him, full of hope.

"Hey, buddy." Bates slips into his laziest drawl, the one Napoleon loves to tease him about. "Ya'll come back here with us, now. I don't care how bright them damn lights are, son. You got bid'ness to finish here." Bates nods at you, and you take over.

"Your sister is worried about you, Polé." His sister pronounces it Po-lay, with French vowels. You pronounce it Po-lye. It sounds French to you, but you know Solo can hear your Russian through it. You don't mind, because you can hear his American through his Russian, and after so many years together it seems completely natural for Russian to leak American Ls and lack perfect palatalization. "She wants to leave the convent to come and visit you." Mary Paul called forty-eight hours ago to talk to Napoleon about a personal crisis in her spiritual life. She has an uncanny knack of calling when he's in trouble or when he needs her. You had the unpleasant task of telling her Napoleon was missing. Waverly would have cooked up a convenient lie, but you know her, and she knows you. She can always tell when you're lying, so you don't even try. It felt so good to be able to call her back and tell her you rescued Napoleon. She made you promise not to say a word about her crisis of faith until her brother was stronger.

Napoleon's eyelids flutter again, and this time his lips move, but no sound comes out. Even so, you feel it's a good sign, and your relief is painted on your face in a wide grin. Misha is standing on the other side of the bed now, and he smiles at you and winks one brown eye.

Misha seldom smiles. The doctors pieced his nose together and rigged it so he could breathe through tubes, but the Thrush bullet carried a big chunk of it away, and he's always in pain. He doesn't have a lot of reasons to smile, and you're touched that he shares your relief at Solo's improvement. You blink furiously, fighting off too many feelings coming too close together.

Bates rumbles through a lazy grin, "Looks like he's coming out of it." He grips your shoulder and squeezes hard. You nod at him, your eyes on Solo again. "Treacle's on the door," says Bates. "Tuula can't get away yet, but you can hear her fussing and ranting the minute you walk into Del Floria's." Fussun unrantin'. The words as he speaks them mean nothing to you, but you don't care. If it's important, Misha will translate the Texan for you.

You draw a deep breath and exhale a portion of your leaden anxiety. Hope is alive in you again, and you feel younger.

Misha is back at the window. Hospitals make him nervous. Whenever he's inside of one, he's always looking at the outside, anxious to get there. His voice bounces off the glass.

"What do we do now, Illya Nikolaevich?"

As Misha pronounces your name, a memory of Solo comes to you, and you smile. He was teaching his sister Mary Paul how to pronounce your name, and he wrote it out phonetically for her, approximating the way it sounded when Misha said it: ee-yon-ka-lie-itch. She extended a hand and teased, "Nice to meet you Mister Lie-itch. May I call you Yonka?" You had to speak sternly to Napoleon to keep him from christening you Yonka for the rest of your partnership. That was years ago. Today you would be pleased to hear him say it.

"Illya?" It was Misha again, waiting for your answer.

Your jaw clamps shut so tightly you can barely speak, but you utter the two syllables that have been eating away at you ever since you found Solo struggling against the dream demons. "Revenge."

You will not leave his side. Every time a nurse tries to clear the room, Treacle stops her with some story about official U.N.C.L.E. business. You hear his slightly apologetic voice use words like "top secret" and "foreign governments" and "fate of the world." His voice evokes his image for you, a tall, broad teddy bear of a man with green eyes, big hands, sandy hair, and freckles across his nose.

You sit on the edge of Solo's bed. He's sleeping normally, now, partly because you're using him as a back rest. You turn your head every few minutes to look at his face.

Stalin leans against the wall by the window. His eyes drift out to the park below, but his attention is on you. Bates is stretched out on the other bed which he has cranked upright to a forty-five degree angle. He punches a pillow into a pleasing shape behind his head and crosses his cowboy boots at the ankles. His eyes are closed but he, too, is attentive.

Mark Slate and April Dancer arrive. They're on their way to headquarters, but they want to make sure Napoleon is all right. Slate paces in the small space between the foot of the bed and

the bathroom door. His hands are deep in his pockets and he jingles his keys as he moves. He's nervous.

"I'm all for getting even," he assures you. "Playing by the book, we haven't really done Thrush any major injuries in yonks. But if Waverly finds out—"

Dancer cuts in, sardonically. "But Mark, dear, Waverly already knows everything."

You look at her for several seconds, reading her mood. She's wearing black slacks and a black turtleneck. She calls it her "Illya look." You're amused but flattered all the same. Only on her, it looks different. She has a natural elegance, a pervading femininity that men's attire cannot conceal. Her brown hair billows, thick and shiny, around her face and shoulders. Her delicately pretty face is beginning to show lines etched deep by some of the ugliness she has witnessed. The deepest ones were carved by the pain her own actions brought down on other people. You know this. Solo knows it, too. You wonder if Mark does, or is he too close to her to see the bitterness and sarcasm that are slowly invading her soul? You realize suddenly that all three teams in the room have a dark partner and a light one. You never noticed it with April and Mark because April is a woman. You wonder what else you've missed about April because she's female.

You ask her calmly, "April, do you wish to leave?" Your voice is neutral, but it's clear in the quick glance she sends your way that she's hurt and offended by the implication. You add softly, "Because if you do, we cannot continue."

The tension drains from her. She pretends to ponder for a few seconds, but you know what her answer will be before she speaks.

"I'm in. Let's teach these animals that U.N.C.L.E. agents have dangerous friends."

You nod, suppressing a smile of satisfaction. But your approval does not escape her. That's why she has survived so long in this business. Promoted quickly and beyond her years, you suspect that someone was secretly setting her up for failure, but she surprised them, because nothing ever escaped her. That was why she was so angry that night she found out you and Solo were gay. She said she was hurt because Solo hadn't told her, but mostly she was furious with herself for not seeing it.

"And what about you, Mark?"

He stops pacing and chews a nail. Mark is already a favorite in the London office. He spent a year there with April, and the two of them worked the European scene together. Mark saved more than one high official from political or physical disaster. They miss him over there, and only his humility keeps him from requesting a permanent posting there. That and his loyalty to April, who was ordered back to New York, with or without Mark Slate.

You know that Mark is thinking about what an unofficial operation could do to his career, and you understand. You have done many things that might prove your undoing if the wrong ears in Moscow catch the right gossip. You wait patiently for his answer.

Bates does not. "Fer cryin' out loud, Mark, we're talking about making a statement here. This ain't just about Napoleon. He's our excuse, and you know it. Thrush has been getting sicker and more twisted every year. Just three months ago, they left that poor courier half skinned alive

down in the Amazon. They wanted us to think some band of natives did it, but that just means they're twisted and stupid. We know who did it. We was pissed off then, but nobody'd risk it all for a lowly courier." He sounds disgusted with U.N.C.L.E. and with himself. "They put him in The Home. You know what that means. I hear every time they unfasten his restraints, he tries to kill himself."

Stalin adds, "Don't forget the fish man."

The room is suddenly cold and still with the shared memory. You and Napoleon were there when Bates and Stalin airlifted what was left of Arturo Canarias to Headquarters. Bates wanted to take him to the nearest hospital, but Section One sent orders to deliver him to U.N.C.L.E.'s emergency medical team. Some midlevel Thrush boss with delusions of grandeur had stocked his Long Island pool with piranhas. Canarias was Section Two out of Mexico City. By the time he was rescued, his arms were gone up to the elbows. He kept asking, "Why? Why? Why?" They never interrogated him. They weren't after information. They just wanted to kill an U.N.C.L.E. agent, they told him, because it would look good on their resumes, as if it were some sort of fraternity prank they had to play in order to be granted membership in Thrush. Solo sent for a priest while U.N.C.L.E.'s medics tried to stabilize him, but in the end, he had lost too much blood, and it was Solo who heard Canarias's final confession.

You remember the fish man's victim. The fish man got away. You catch Mark's eye again. "It must be all of us or none of us." You're lying, but it sounds good, and Mark capitulates.

"All right, then. I'm in. What's the plan?"

You refuse to leave Napoleon's side as you talk. He needs you nearby for several days to allow him time to center himself. Your presence will help him remember what it feels like to be safe and secure. But you've promised yourself the chance to stare his tormentors in the face. Tormentor. You want the one who gave the order. You have everything figured out except the name of the Thrush agent responsible. If only Napoleon would wake up for a few minutes.

You decide it doesn't matter. There's much to be done before the snatch is made. You outline your plan.

"Any questions?" you ask at the end.

From behind you comes a groggy voice you feared you'd never hear again.

"Yeah. What's a guy have to do to get a glass of water around here?"

"Napoleon!" You grab his hand and squeeze until your knuckles turn white. The others are smiling and making jokes, teasing him. You don't even try to understand the punch lines. It doesn't matter. You laugh silently at every joke. The others aren't as quiet as you are, and after a few seconds, Dennis Treacle opens the door and peeks in.

"Hey! He's awake!" Dennis is pleased and winks at you. But he returns to his post. You know he's on his communicator telling Tuula Crighton that Solo is conscious. Soon the nurses will know, as well, and they'll intrude upon your reunion. You lean toward Napoleon and speak intently.

"I need a name."

Napoleon touches your face with his free hand. His fingers tremble for a moment, but he steadies them. “A name?”

Bates drawls, “For the guest list, son. We’re throwing a party in your honor.”

Napoleon is tired, and the drugs aren't out of his system yet. It takes him a few seconds to understand what Bates is saying. Suddenly his eyes fill with caution. He whispers, “Be careful.”

You whisper back, “We will.”

Then his lips form words silently, for your eyes only. 'Don't leave me.'

“I won't.”

He nods and gives you a name. “Randall Barnhart.”

You straighten up and your mouth is a grim line. “The Western Oil Cartel.”

Napoleon nods, and his eyes fall shut. You draw a deep breath and smooth a hand over his hair. He's asleep again.

Dancer stands, arms folded, at the foot of the bed. “You know this Barnhart fellow?”

You nod. “His name appeared twice in the last coded information we received about the Trudnost.”

Slate asks, “Was he their target or their friend?”

One side of your mouth twists with the irony of it. “Both. The first mention made him sound like an ally. The second made him sound like a target.”

Stalin says, “Complicated.”

Bates finishes lifting himself off the other bed and rubs a big mitt over his thinning gray-blond hair. “Shoot fire and save matches, son. Are we gonna swing the Trudnost's sights around our way?”

You look puzzled, so Stalin translates. “Will this make them our enemies?”

“Oh. Perhaps they are already our enemies. We've never been certain.” You ask Bates, “Do you want to rethink the plan?”

He snorts. “Hell, no. I just wanted to know what to wear. The Trudnost always dress in those red robes, right? So I think our bulletproof vests should be blue, don't you?”

April tosses her hair. “Blue is always a good color, Avery. And I love the way it enhances your eyes.”

Bates grins at her. “Thanks, little lady. But you two won't need vests. Stalin and I'll need you to feed us some info on Barnhart, though, from the U.N.C.L.E. files.”

Mark nods his consent and looks at his watch. “We had better get on, or Waverly will want to know where we are.” He holds out an arm for Dancer. “Coming, darling?”

April takes his arm. “You're always such a gentleman, Mark.”

They leave.

Bates exhales noisily. “All right, Illya, you stay put. If someone shoots us down, remember what we told you.”

Yes, you remember. Before his last mission, Bates explained how he wanted things to go, in case the worst happened. The others kidded him about it, but you and Napoleon knew he was serious. Put empty coffins under their headstones. Pour their ashes into the same jar. That was

Misha's part. So Bates said okay, one jar. But don't bury it and don't lock it into a tomb. Avery's greatest fear was being buried alive. Even the thought of his ashes being interred in the dark cold ground made him nervous.

"Don't worry," said Solo. "We'll put you in the Section Two Museum." Everyone laughed. The Section Two Museum was one of Solo's jokes. "What do you want on the jar?"

Bates didn't even blink an eye. "Davy Crockett and Alexandr Pushkin."

Napoleon explained to you later about Davy Crockett. You smiled for a long time.

Now, you say to Bates, "Wait for the light."

He laughs out loud, and you exchange grins with Misha. "Wait for the light" is your private code, the one you'll be using on Channel L for the next few hours. It means "Kick ass."

Bates and Stalin are gone, now, and you stretch out on the bed next to Solo. Your communicator is at the ready, your right hand is on the butt of your gun, and you close your eyes just for a second because you're so tired.

5:30 p.m.

The beeping of your communicator startles you awake. You roll off the bed and open the channel in one fluid move.

"Kuryakin here."

Bates's voice replies, "Hey, buddy. Did you ever hear the one that goes, 'Helen had a steamboat'?"

You smile. Transportation secured. You wonder how he did it so fast, then you glance at your watch and realize you were asleep for an hour.

"Perhaps you should teach me that one in person," you reply. "I'm still working on Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts." You tick the words off on your fingers and wish some of the code was in Russian. But then, April and Mark couldn't use it.

Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts. Situation normal at this end.

Bates signs off with, "Talk to you later, then."

You remember the night you all spent together inventing your own code.

You were all getting drunk that night. Napoleon was stretched out on the couch with his head in your lap. You were philosophizing with Misha, and Avery was reminiscing about Korea with Napoleon. Well, Avery was reminiscing and Solo was murmuring encouragement between sips of whiskey. Mark and April were playing scrabble, with double the usual number of letters, but the game was limited to words that appeared in the U.N.C.L.E. training manual. The highest scoring word that night was gelignite, and April was getting bored.

"Enough about Korea! All you boys do is talk about past glories. Don't you ever discuss anything interesting?"

Avery teased her. "Sorry, little lady, I ain't been to the beauty parlor recently."

April knew he was teasing, and she teased back by walking calmly up behind him and wrapping her arms around his neck. It took him a second to realize that, although her grip was slack, her hands were placed in the perfect position to snap his neck.

“You were saying about the beauty parlor?” she cooed.

Avery laughed out loud. “Whoa, there, darlin'. All right, no more about Korea.”

April patted him on the head and moved to your end of the couch. She took a handful of your shaggy hair and tipped your head back.

“And as for you two, either you speak something I’ve studied, or put a sock in it.” April was on her fifth glass of white wine.

You looked up at her with your most practiced expression of innocence and you asked, “What language would you prefer?”

She let go of your hair and her eyes narrowed in concentration. “Something fun but useful. Something no one else in the world can understand.”

“That’s not a language,” said Napoleon, his voice as relaxed as his body. “That’s a code.”

April made tiny jumping up and down motions. “That’s what I want! A private code so we can talk to each other but no one else can understand us.”

Misha objected. “We are not all here. What about Tuula and Dennis?”

April did a brilliant imitation of a sulk. “Oh, poo. Can’t we just fill them in later? We almost never get all of us together in the same room!”

You nod. “She’s right, you know? We’ll just fill them in later. And then they can contribute, if they wish.”

“Y’all are serious about this?” asked Avery, pouring refills for himself and Napoleon.

Mark came to the triad of sofas with the pen and paper he’d been keeping Scrabble score with. “Your secretary is ready,” he announced expansively. He lowered his backside onto the sofa next to Misha and lifted his gin and tonic in a salute to the group. “Well, then, come on lads...and lassie... let’s invent some code.”

Silence ensued as everyone drank and thought. You had all done this exercise many times before, working out little phrases to alert each other on a mission. But that was work. This was play, and that made it even more important.

April paced behind the center couch, arms folded, head bowed in thought. “It has to sound like part of a casual conversation,” she said, “so no one will know it’s code. Not even U.N.C.L.E. personnel.”

Napoleon sat up and grinned. “Well, I think they’ll figure it out if we’re using it on an U.N.C.L.E. channel. We would suspect code, wouldn’t we? If we heard someone on the channel being too casual?”

April nodded. “Right, we would. And they may suspect, but if the code is random enough and stays in our small group, they won’t know what we’re saying.”

“Not at first,” you added, “but later, after events occur and they relate our code to the events, then they will begin to figure it out.”

“But we won’t care, will we?” asked Avery. “I mean, shit, son, if we’re playing with code on an U.N.C.L.E. channel, we sure as hell won’t be doing nothing anti-U.N.C.L.E. Hell, I can’t see none of us doing anything anti-U.N.C.L.E. anyways.”

Everyone laughed at the absurdity of the thought..

Then April said, “Wait for the light.”

And Mark wrote it down. “Meaning?” he prompted.

Napoleon said, “Kick ass.” He turned you so you faced the arm of the sofa and started rubbing your back through your turtleneck. It felt so good, his hands on your shoulder blades, kneading and pushing in just the right spots. “You know, as in, Let’s do it.”

“Got it,” said Mark. “Next?”

Avery's eyes were half closed, and he was slouching into the cushions. “Greasy grimy gopher guts,” he smiled. “I always liked that rhyme as a kid.”

Mark made a face. “Lovely. And what does it mean?”

Misha enunciated carefully, “Situation normal.”

Mark scribbled.

Napoleon volunteered, “Helen had a steamboat.”

Avery chuckled and translated, “Transportation secured.”

“Be true to your school,” said April.

“Target sighted.” You could barely speak, the backrub felt so good.

Napoleon put his arms around you from behind and rubbed his face against your back as he dictated, “Moscow nights.”

You grinned as Misha translated, “Direct hit.”

“Or target acquired,” added Avery.

Mark offered, “Fourth Street and Vine.” Then he jumped up and positioned himself behind April so they could do their two seconds of choreography while Napoleon and Avery chorused, slightly off key, “Love potion number ni-i-i-i-ine!” You and Misha looked at each other and shook your heads in mock disgust. Mark returned to his notepad, all seriousness, as if choreographed musical moments were as normal as breathing. He repeated, “Fourth Street and Vine?”

Avery offered, “Abort the mission.” He lifted his glass in a salute to the group and drained the last of his beer.

April made a face. “That’s a little pessimistic, isn’t it? I mean, we are the best, aren’t we?”

“Only because we have learned to cover all contingencies,” drawled Avery.

“Oh,” said April. “Point taken.” Then she added, “Ollie, ollie, ox in free.”

“Send reinforcements,” translated Solo.

“My turn,” you said. “Baba Yaga.”

The others paused, thinking. Then Misha laughed. “That is easy. Baba Yaga is code for Mr. Waverly.”

Napoleon wakes again, and you pour water for him.

“I'm hungry.”

“I'll go get something.”

He stops you by grabbing your arm. “Send out.”

“Yes, of course.” You go to the door and ask Dennis to order pizza. You're back at his side in seconds. “Pizza on the way.”

“I'm surprised Waverly is letting you babysit me.”

“He did not intend to, but I made several people miserable at headquarters. He finally ordered me to come here.” You keep your voice light, but it's all true.

He grins. Then he lifts the sheets and makes a face. “Am I hurt bad? It feels like I'm on drugs.”

“Bruises and contusions. The doctors sedated you. The worst part was—” You don't know if you should say it out loud.

You don't have to, because he finishes it for you. “—was being stuffed in that shipping crate all by myself for... How long was I in there?”

“Too long. When they brought you in, you were delusional. Drifting in and out, you know?”

He makes a face. “Brother, do I ever.” He throws the sheet off. “Get my clothes, will you?”

“They won't release you for another twenty-four hours, if that's what you're thinking.” You go to the little closet and bring his clothes to the bed. They're clean. You brought them with you when you came. The clothes he was found in were beyond repair.

“Well, if I have to sit here and wait, at least I can do it with my pants on.” He dresses slowly, discovering all his sore spots as you help him slip his arms into sleeves and help him get his socks and trousers on. When he's finally dressed, he's exhausted. “Yes, well, maybe one more night is a good idea.” He stretches out on the bed again. “But you'll be here, right?”

“*Da. Ya budu zdyes.*” Yes, I'll be here.

He nods and closes his eyes. “Wake me when the food gets here.”

When the pizza arrives, it's accompanied by Tuula Crighton.

“I got here as soon as I could,” she says. She sets the pizza carton on the rolling over-the-bed table and slips out of her motorcycle jacket, a gift from a lady friend. Underneath she's wearing a short-sleeved white shirt. Her arms bulge with muscle, and the sleeves barely cover her tattoo. She looks incongruous in a straight gray skirt. Her meaty calves are bare and hairless. She's wearing short white socks and black penny loafers. Her honey blonde hair is pulled off her face in a French braid. You wonder how you know what it's called. You must have learned that from Napoleon. His knowledge of women astounds you.

Napoleon smiles a welcome. “I can't believe the Old Man wants all his agents over here guarding me.”

“What the Old Man doesn't know won't hurt him,” says Tuula. “Besides, I'm off duty.”

“Illya, tell Dennis to come have pizza.” Napoleon's voice is still groggy.

Tuula stops you. “I already invited him. He says his place is at the door.”

You understand. Dennis was badly shaken by Napoleon's condition when they brought him in. He wants to make sure no bad guys get close to him again.

Tuula leaves pizza duty to you. It calms you down to test what Napoleon is going to eat. You're not too worried, because Tuula brought the pizza, and the pizza parlor had no way of knowing who called in the order. But you bite off a piece of Napoleon's slice anyway, and he waits patiently until you give him the nod to eat the rest of it.

Tuula nibbles at a slice of her own. "Mark said the guy who boxed Napoleon up is involved with the ladies in red. Is that true?"

"Yes." You take a slice of your own. "But we don't know if he's one of them or if he's being hunted by them."

"Well, that makes life interesting," says Tuula. "What are you going to do to the guy after you grab him?"

You frown at her. "You've been talking to Avery?"

"Nope. April. She came down to Section Three and filled me in. You know, the better I get to know her, the more I like her. She's good people."

You smile. "Don't let her hear you say that. She may get nervous."

Tuula grins. "No, we got that out of the way real early. In fact, it may surprise you to know that me and April went to lunch together a couple weeks ago. Girl's day out. And she told me some very juicy stuff." She says it as provocatively as possible.

Napoleon takes the bait. "Stuff about us?"

"Can't tell you," says Tuula. "I swore the oath of the U.N.C.L.E. Sisterhood."

Napoleon laughs wearily. "You'd better be careful, or April will have you painting your nails."

Your communicator beeps and you answer it. "Kuryakin here."

Avery Bates drawls at you, "Y'all don't forget to be true to your school. Bates out."

You close your communicator. "Target sighted."

Napoleon looks uneasy. "You know, partner, if you go through with this, someone might wonder why."

You blink at him without comprehending. "Why what?"

He picks the olives off the top of his slice and lines them up like little tires on an obstacle course. "Why you wanted revenge when your partner wasn't physically injured. I mean, not seriously, anyway. You know I've been lots worse than this after a mission."

He has a point. Now you understand. They will wonder why you avenged a separation, and then they might figure out how badly you need each other. And if they make that connection, they may increase their efforts to do away with one of you. Either one, it won't matter, the result will be the same. You'll both die.

You open your communicator. "Open Channel L. Come in, Bates."

"Bates here."

"A subtle change of plan, my friend. When they play Moscow Nights at the school dance,..." You pause, at a loss for the code phrase for non-lethal. You wonder if there was one.

Napoleon manages to scribble words on a napkin and pass it to you. You read it into the communicator. “When they play Moscow Nights at the school dance, you will discover your girlfriend wears falsies.” You frown at the napkin. “Shall I repeat that?”

You can hear Bates' grin in his voice. “No need. I think I got it. You mean, I'm too young to die for love, right?”

You look at Napoleon, and he nods yes.

“That is correct.”

“What do you suggest I do instead?”

Napoleon is already writing another note. You angle closer and read it as he goes. “Write her a love letter.”

“Dynamite idea,” says Bates. “I'll do that. By the way, the ladies in red have shadowed our every move.”

You grunt. “How very enterprising of them. Have they tried to cut in?”

“Not so far, but I think they know the tune to Moscow Nights. Oops. Gotta go. Bates out.”

You're frustrated as you put your communicator away. “What exactly did that mean? They know the tune to Moscow Nights?”

Napoleon gives you a lopsided grin. “I think he's saying they know who the target is.”

“Oh.” You hand him the rest of your pizza slice. “Here. I already tried this one.”

Tuula looks worried. “Hey, guys, what do we do if our little plan stirs the ladies in red to action? So far, they've sort of stayed out of U.N.C.L.E.'s way, haven't they?”

You snort softly. “If you call blowing up a building we happen to be in 'staying out of the way.' But you're right. They haven't really impeded us in the past. And they had no way of knowing we would be in that building.”

“That's right,” says Napoleon. “In fact, it was Thrush's building, remember? With all that illegal tobacco.”

“I remember the six-story drop to the pool.” You scowl into space. “And the sprained ankle.”

Napoleon is feeling better. He teases you. “And you nearly broke my eardrum with your *Nyet, nyet, nyet* on our way off the roof.” He wipes his fingers carefully on a paper napkin. “Having the Trudnost show up does make me wonder, though. They were helpful enough last month in Boise.”

“You're still not thinking straight. They were there,” you say, “but I wouldn't interpret breaking into our motel room and leaving enigmatic messages as helping.”

Napoleon turns a hand over. “Maybe you're right. Now do me a favor. Call Gloria Burnside and have her get me the hell out of here. I want to sleep at home tonight.”

“I'll make some calls,” says Tuula. “Illya can entertain you while we wait around. Here. I brought a deck of cards.”

Napoleon's mind is still fuzzy. By 7:30, he has lost two million dollars to you at poker. You decide not to hold him to the debt, especially since you know the exact state of his bank balance.

The phone rings. Tuula grabs it. “Yes? Oh, hi, Doc. You got my message? ... Uh-huh. Yep. Sure thing. I'll tell him.” She hangs up. “Burnside says you stay here tonight. She says you'll be

too groggy to function at home, even if you do have a little helper. Oh, she also says she'll come check on you before lights out.”

Napoleon is not surprised.

Your communicator beeps. “Kuryakin, here.”

It's Bates. “Ask Napoleon what kind of ice cream he wants. We finished our little chore, and we're heading back to the hospital. Got some pictures of the dance to show you.”

You don't have to ask Napoleon. “Bring chocolate with chocolate swirls in it. We look forward to the photographs.”

Bates and Stalin arrive forty minutes later with ice cream, grim smiles, and three Polaroid photos of Randall Barnhart tied to a ladderback chair.

“Here you go,” says Bates as he hands the photos to you.

Barnhart is blindfolded and pale. Duct taped to the front of his suit is a sheet of white paper. On the paper in thick black letters is written, “Bang, you're dead.” But it's obvious from the facial contortions in the photos that he is not dead at all. Part of you wishes he were. Part of you wants to see his blood, his brains, his guts spilling out. But you calm that part of you. Napoleon is right. If you kill the man, his superiors will wonder why you reacted so strongly when Napoleon was rescued relatively unharmed. As much as you want to tear this bastard limb from limb, you must deny yourself that pleasure.

It's as if Stalin can read your thoughts. “I don't know why we do not kill him. You said revenge, but all we do is scare him.”

You nod. “I know. But Avery said once that none of us would do anything anti-U.N.C.L.E., and unfortunately, killing this man for revenge would be very anti-U.N.C.L.E.”

Stalin understands. And he also knows that you don't give a damn for such niceties, not where Napoleon is concerned. So the decision not to kill must have been Napoleon's. You read all of this in Stalin's face. He's a good friend, and you're glad he's on your side.

Napoleon breaks into your thoughts. “Hey, partner, are you going to let me see those photos?”

“Oh, sorry.” You hand him the Polaroids.

He glances quickly at the first, then the second. Then more slowly, he moves on to the third. “He looks a little spooked.” He examines them again. He's not smiling, but there's something in his expression, a sense of justice, a sense of satisfaction. At last, he hands the photos off to Tuula, and says to Bates and Stalin, “Good job. Thanks.”

Now Bates grins and drawls, “We phoned a number we found in his pocket and told his people where to find him. All anonymous, of course. Don't want no public credit for this one.” He winks at Stalin.

Napoleon takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He leans back against his pillow, his stockinged feet crossed at the ankles. His eyelids are heavy, but he looks truly relaxed. At the same time, the sedatives are wearing off. You can tell by the way he moves his hands and by his reaction to his friends' comments. He's going to be okay. You sit on the edge of the bed, turned so you can watch his face. He notices and rewards you with a shadow of a smile. Life is good.

8:30 p.m.

Your friends have left. Tuula has requested a replacement to guard the door, but Dennis doesn't want to leave. You tell him he can move inside the room and stay as long as he wants. Burnside has paid a visit and instructed the nurses to leave Napoleon alone unless help is requested. They know her, and they have treated U.N.C.L.E. agents in this hospital before. They're more than happy to let you and the bodyguards fetch and carry whatever Napoleon needs.

"If he shows any strange symptoms," says Burnside, "call me at this number. I'm only five minutes away. But frankly, I think he's fine."

You take the phone number. "But not fine enough to go home?"

She pats you on the shoulder. "If he's here, Waverly is willing to requisition bodyguards. If I release him, he'll think Napoleon's ready for duty and yank the muscle. I just think you're both better off here for the night."

You study her face, wondering how much she knows about the two of you. She's one of those doctors who intuits a great deal from her physical observations. It's unsettling at times. But you also think she's right. Napoleon is safer here tonight. So you agree.

"Very well, doctor. With me and Dennis in here and Mr. Jurado at the door, we should be able to handle things." You tuck the phone number in your pocket. "Hopefully, I won't have to interrupt your evening."

"Well, don't hesitate if you need to." She turns to your partner. "You just relax and let those sedatives wear off. When you get up in the morning, you can go. But not before nine a.m. Waverly can wait a few hours for his debriefing. If he's in such a hurry, let him come down here in person."

Napoleon grins at her. Burnside is always on the side of the agents. Her vocal objections to some of Waverly's demands on recovering agents are legendary in the halls of U.N.C.L.E. New York.

At last she's gone. Dennis stretches out on the other bed, his firearm at the ready. Napoleon changes into pajamas and manages it all without your help. You make space for yourself next to him on the bed. He snakes his arm beneath your head, and you use his shoulder as a pillow.

Thursday, September 17

U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, 10:30 a.m.

You lead the way into Waverly's office, and Napoleon follows, a quiet smile on his face. You are his ice breaker, you plough the road, you brook no nonsense from those who would stop him with foolish questions or demands for paperwork. These hours and days in the building are the easiest part of your job, and at the same time they're the most difficult. You prefer life in the field, life without bureaucracy, life or death, where you can make a decision and take out your

enemies when they try to kill you. But here, there are rules and restrictions everywhere you turn. You just keep your head down and watch out for your partner.

Waverly glances up from a file on his desk when you enter. "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning." You respond at the same time, in almost the same voice. Something in Waverly's tone makes you wary.

"We found a package next to Del Floria's door this morning. Here's a picture of it." He spun the tabletop in your direction as you sit. On top of the file is a Polaroid of Randall Barnhart. He is still bound, still blindfolded, but now he looks very, very dead. The piece of paper is still taped to his chest. The same letters spell out, "Bang, you're dead." But now, underneath, in another hand and another ink, are the Russian words, "A present for you from the Trudnost."

You inhale sharply. For a nanosecond, you wonder if Stalin and Bates decided to fulfill the mission you originally sent them on. But no. They would never do such a thing. Oh, they would kill for you, without hesitation. But they would never do it in such a manner that you or U.N.C.L.E. would be implicated. They would never drop the body at U.N.C.L.E.'s door.

Napoleon's eyebrows shoot up. "I think this is the first time the Trudnost have ever signed their work."

Waverly's bushy brows meet in an angry huddle over the bridge of his nose. "Did you gentlemen have anything to do with this man's death?"

Napoleon answers for both of you. "No, sir. I was in a hospital bed and Illya was standing guard."

Waverly grumbles, "So were Treacle and Jurado."

Before you can stop yourself, you say, "Then you know we had nothing to do with this."

The Old Man's gray eyes are full of suspicion, but after a few moments they clear and he harrumphs into his handkerchief. "Yes, yes, of course. Forgive me, gentlemen. Mr. Del Floria was in quite a state this morning. And you know how I dislike these untidy messes so close to home. Mr. Solo, this is the man who nailed you inside that shipping crate, is he not?"

"Yes, sir, he was the one who gave the order."

"Well, then. I suppose the Trudnost have done us a favor, after all. I only wish I knew why."

You wonder the same thing, and one thing more. What happens when they want the favor returned? You resolve to ask Bates if he remembers the phone number he called. Perhaps your people can determine who was at the other end, Thrush or the Trudnost? But you say nothing. For now, you don't care. Napoleon is alive, and his tormentor is dead. In your world, that is the best of all possible outcomes.

End