

The S'Mores Affair  
by  
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Napoleon Solo leaned against his partner in the back seat of the gray Chrysler Imperial and waited for the rhythm of the road to lull him to sleep. The Beatles' "Let It Be" played softly on the radio. Illya Kuryakin shifted his weight beneath Solo's head and stuffed a pillow between his cheek and the window. The sun was shining brightly but the glass was still hard and cool.

"Tuula?"

Tuula Crighton paused in the middle of braiding her strawberry blonde hair. She turned and looked into the back seat. "You rang?"

Illya almost smiled. "Thanks for bringing the pillows."

"You're welcome." She grinned at Dennis Treacle as she snapped a rubber band around the end of the braid.

Dennis kept his eyes on the road. He was driving, and with his best friends in the car, he was not going to do anything silly. No frivolous conversation. No staring at Solo's sleeping features in the rearview mirror. Dennis was a big teddy bear of a man with sandy hair and a sprinkling of freckles. His soft features had fooled many a Thrush agent into letting his guard down. Like his friends, Dennis was gay and in the closet. He was also madly in love with Napoleon Solo. He clenched his jaw and pulled his eyes away from the mirror, again.

Tuula was head of Section Three, New York. Technically, she was Dennis' boss. But their friendship ran deeper than the job. Until they met Solo and Kuryakin, they thought they were the only gay and lesbian in U.N.C.L.E. New York. She allowed herself a private smile. She had spotted Solo as family the first time she met him. It had taken Solo a little longer to figure it out. Tuula stretched luxuriously and hoped all her plans would work out. She wasn't used to deceiving Napoleon and Illya, not even for a good cause. She hoped her luck held for a while longer.

If Waverly had not negotiated a month-long truce with Thrush New York, the four of them would not be headed into the Jersey pines with a car filled with food and pillows and other essentials that Tuula had deemed necessary for a trip into the wilderness. Then again, if Waverly had not negotiated a truce, there might be no need for their trip. She decided it was all too complicated for a day filled with sunshine and trees.

She opened the glove box and pulled out a large Hershey bar.

Dennis glanced sideways at her choice of snack. "I thought you packed fruit and stuff."

Tuula ripped the paper and foil off the chocolate. "Yep."

"But you're going to eat that instead?"

She grinned. "Yep. Three blissful days of cheating on my workouts. Not a weight bench in sight. No track to run on. Oh, yes, I plan to eat chocolate until I puke. Any objections?"

"Only if you keep it all to yourself."

Tuula grinned and broke a block off the bar. Dennis took it. A second later, a hand extended over the back of the seat.

Tuula made a face. "I thought you were asleep."

Illya spoke softly. "Napoleon is asleep. I am a pillow."

Tuula put a block of chocolate in his hand. "No comments about decadent American candy?"

Illya wagged his brows mischievously. "British chocolate is better. This is just to tide me over until my next trip to London."

"What a snob."

Dennis laughed.

A Volkswagen micro bus pulled around and slipped into the lane ahead of them.

Tuula made a disgusted noise. "Dennis. For the love of God, how slow are you going? A slug bus? Really?"

Dennis tapped the gas and retook the lead.

Illya commented, "We're off duty. Vacation. No rush."

But he and Tuula studied the Volkswagen carefully as Dennis pulled past it. Nothing alarming there. They both relaxed in unison. Then they both chuckled as they realized what they had done.

"No problem," said Tuula, voicing the similar thought patterns they were sharing. "We're still alive."

"Yes," said Illya, "we are. My Queen of Observation."

Tuula grinned. She loved this game. "My King of Vehicular Viewing."

Dennis groaned. "It's going to be a long ride."

Illya smiled and closed his eyes, just in time for Napoleon to open his and ask wearily, "Where are we headed?" He blinked against the bright midday sun.

"It's a surprise," said Tuula, smacking her chocolatey lips.

Solo took a breath and exhaled noisily. He hated surprises.

Dennis couldn't stand the thought of displeasing Solo. "Pine Barrens," he offered.

Solo grunted. "That narrows it down," he said sarcastically.

Tuula held up a finger. "But the exact location will not be uttered until we pass the giveaway sign." She used the finger to poke Dennis hard in the arm. He was wearing a short-sleeved madras plaid, and her poke left a red mark.

"Ow, Tuula. What's the big deal?"

She made a face that clearly ordered him to shut up.

Solo sat up, wincing.

Illya's eyes were open again. He didn't say anything, but he watched his partner struggle to move.

Upright at last, Solo leaned back against the seat and gazed disinterestedly out the window. "As long as there's a luxury lodge at the end of this bus ride, I'll be happy." He sounded anything but.

It was Dennis' turn to make a face. The look he gave Tuula was full of dismay. She hadn't told Napoleon they were going camping.

"Don't worry, Polé. You will be luxuriating in comfort," said Tuula.

Illya rolled his eyes and looked grim. "Tuula." His warning tone made it unnecessary to finish the sentence.

"Oh, ye of little faith," said Tuula dramatically. She turned sideways so she could look at the duo in the back seat. "Did I not provide glovebox chocolate? Did I not pack sufficient clothes and toiletries for you both? Have I not requisitioned the most glorious land yacht in U.N.C.L.E.'s fleet? Do you not have pillows, my Doubting Tomasov?"

Solo made a sound that might have been a laugh.

Illya suppressed a smile. "Forgive me, Oh Princess of Provisions."

"That's better," said Tuula, mollified. She cast a worried glance at Napoleon, then turned to face front again.

Napoleon shifted his position and winced once more. Illya pulled a pill bottle out of his pocket, shook one into his hand, and held it out. Solo took it.

Dennis kept his left hand on the wheel as he stretched his right over the back of the seat to offer his bottle of Coke. Solo accepted it and took a swig with his pill.

"Thanks, Dennis." He handed it back.

Dennis' features lit with pleasure and he took a reverent post-Solo sip from the bottle.

"Twenty minutes," said Illya, before Solo could voice the question. The pill would take twenty minutes to work its way into his system.

Solo nodded and concentrated on holding still.

The lack of conversation weighed heavily on Tuula. She turned the radio dial to the Yankees game.

*"Pitching for the Yankees today is Mel Stottlemyre. Catching is twenty-two year old Thurman Munson. It's a great day for baseball here at Yankee Stadium."*

Tuula turned the sound down and let the baseball play-by-play serve as a salve for battered nerves. She glanced back and saw that Solo's eyes were closed again, his head propped against the seat back. He looked pale around the mouth. She hoped she hadn't made a huge mistake. They would know in a couple of hours.

At the campsite, Illya stayed in the car with the sleeping Solo.

Tuula and Dennis worked as quickly as they could to unload the trunk.

Illya kept a hand on the back of Napoleon's head, but his eyes were keeping track of Tuula and Dennis. They were stacking packages and boxes and duffels on the campsite. Illya frowned in confusion. He didn't know why they were even bothering to unload the car. As soon as Napoleon woke up, his displeasure would change all their rustic plans. Illya hoped that Tuula had investigated local resorts and made some reservations, just in case.

As if reading Illya's mind, Napoleon mumbled something, then awoke with a jerk. As soon as he felt Illya's presence, he relaxed. A moment later, he cleared his throat and pushed himself upright with a groan.

"Where are we?" He blinked as he looked around. His face drooped with dismay when he saw the clearing surrounded by pines. Tuula and Dennis were working feverishly to open the largest package. The box was stamped URL.

Napoleon frowned. "U.N.C.L.E. Research Labs? What are they up to?" He opened the car door and prepared to exit.

Illya got out on his side and made it around the car before Napoleon could angle himself out the door. Almost time for another pill.

Without protest, Napoleon accepted Illya's arm and managed to stand up.

Tuula and Dennis paused and exchanged wary looks. Then Tuula smiled brightly.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty awakes!" She spread her arms. "Welcome to the U.N.C.L.E. Hilton."

Napoleon glanced around at the stack of supplies and boxes, then shifted his gaze to the trees and to the pitched tents and picnic tables beyond them.

"You have got to be kidding me." He sounded miserable.

"Just let us finish," said Dennis. "Really. You woke up before the surprise was ready."

Napoleon waved his index finger in the vague direction of his surroundings. "This isn't it?"

Tuula laughed a little too loudly. "Of course not. I promised you comfort, right? Princess of Provisions, remember?"

Napoleon made a face. "Where's the men's room?"

"Come on," said Illya. "It's not far." He shot Tuula a warning glance. "Solve this," he said. "Napoleon is not walking through the dark woods at night to take a leak. *Ponyatno?*"

Tuula nodded. "Understood."

Once Illya and Napoleon were out of earshot, Dennis said, "How did I let you talk me into this. You know he hates this stuff!"

"No. He hates camping. And this is not about camping. If he hadn't been beaten up so bad, he'd have figured something out himself. But he's hurt, so we have to do it. You know he would be crushed if we did this and didn't include him. Get busy and open that box."

"Did you tell Illya?"

"No, but it's okay. He will be glad to be a part of it, too. Relax. It'll all work out."

"I don't like keeping secrets from Napoleon," groused Dennis.

"Don't worry. Just think how grateful he'll be later."

Dennis sighed and went to work with his box cutter.

Napoleon was washing his hands when Illya said, "When you have had enough of their little game, tell me. I will hot wire the car and take you to a nice clean hotel with door locks and room service."

Napoleon's expression softened. He looked into the dirty mirror and caught Illya's eye. "Really? You'd do that for me? Hot wire an U.N.C.L.E. car?"

Illya's brows rose a quarter of an inch as he realized what Napoleon was saying. Then he smiled. "Considering I helped design the security devices, I should be able to do it without getting killed."

Napoleon chuckled and pulled paper towels out of a metal box. "Well, don't worry. With all the budget constraints the old man is constantly talking about, they probably didn't install any of your brilliant ideas in the cars anyway." He dried his hands and tossed the wadded paper into the can by the door.

“Really? Well, that will entertain us for a while,” said Illya. “We shall have to investigate whether they are on this model or not. Surely they put them on Waverly’s car.”

Napoleon made a wry face. “That would be about right. Secure his vehicle, but none of the others.”

Illya patted Solo’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you out of that jacket. It is much too warm here to be wearing a suit coat.”

“No.” It was a flat syllable. Indisputable. Taking off the jacket meant taking off the gun.

Illya understood. “*Nye problem.*”

They left the concrete emporium and strolled toward the campsite. Illya took a deep breath. “I smell water. I think there is a lake nearby.”

Napoleon nodded. “Yeah. The air smells good.”

Illya shot him a sideways glance. Perhaps there was hope.

Napoleon added, “It’ll smell just as good from a hotel balcony.”

Hope dashed.

Illya tried again. “Why do they call this place Barrens? Sounds like naked people.”

Napoleon shrugged. “Pine Barrens. The soil is great for the pines but lousy for crops, so the first settlers called it barren.” He took a slow breath, testing his ribs, and let it out equally slowly. “You have the pills?”

“And a watch,” said Illya.

Napoleon nodded. Not until it was time.

“Are you having more pain?”

“Only when I breath.” He bumped his shoulder against Illya’s. “Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

They walked past a campsite with a bright blue tent and two young boys with fishing poles. One of them was jumping up and down with excitement. They’d caught an eight-inch fish.

Napoleon almost smiled. “Trout?” he asked Illya.

“I have no idea.”

“But you always know this stuff,” said Napoleon.

Illya lowered his head to hide a smile. “Let me tell you a secret, *moi droog*. When people ask questions, it’s because they do not know the answer. Sometimes I make stuff up. They seldom know the difference.”

Napoleon laughed out loud.

It was the first time in days.

Illya thought it was the best music he’d heard in a long while.

By the time they reached the camp site, Napoleon was glum again.

And curious.

Dennis and Tuula had been working hard. They now had strange looking cubes arranged like the foundation of some ancient archeological dig.

Napoleon’s brow creased in confusion. “Are those styrofoam blocks?”

Tuula jumped like someone had jabbed her with a stick. She whirled in the air to face Illya and Napoleon. “Oh! That was fast.”

Illya wagged a finger. “Tuula, what are you up to?”

Dennis looked bleak.

Napoleon crooked a finger at Dennis who moved closer almost against his will. “I know you, Dennis. Something is going on. Tell Uncle Napoleon what you two are up to.”

Dennis’ eyes widened with alarm. “It was all Tuula’s idea!”

Illya snorted. “Of that, we are certain. Tuula, these blocks look vaguely familiar to me.”

“Oh, really?” Tuula’s voice was much too animated. “Well, there’s a reason for that. And I’ll explain everything if you two would take the car and drive down to the camp store and pick us up some snacks. Make sure you include potato chips and Coca-Cola. Anything chocolate would also be appreciated.”

“How about real food?” asked Napoleon, sarcastically.

“Great idea! That, too. And if you eat something, Illya will feel better about giving you another pain pill a little early.” Her exaggerated cheerfulness gave way to concern. “You’re looking pinched around the eyes.” She took the car keys out of the pocket of her pedal pushers and tossed them to Illya.

“Food is a good idea,” he said. “We go.”

As the car pulled away, Dennis muttered, “That was too close for comfort. Did you cut Waverly off?”

“Well, he was just repeating himself. I’ll make up an excuse later.” Her communicator beeped.

Dennis looked away and tried not to grin. “He sounds angry.”

“Okay, I’ll make up an excuse *now*,” she said. “Open Channel D.”

Napoleon stared out the window as Illya drove slowly through the campground. The scene appeared surreal. Families engaged in camping activities. A couple of teenage boys setting up a telescope. A father barbecuing hot dogs for a table full of noisy kids.

All scenarios he thought he would never experience. Not very cheerful, watching others enjoy life.

“What were they thinking?” he asked bleakly.

Illya suppressed a sigh. “They are trying to cheer you up.”

Napoleon nodded. “It’s not working.”

“Food will help.”

Napoleon smiled.

Illya was alert as they moved up and down the aisles in the camp store. Napoleon seemed oblivious to his surroundings, a consequence of the pain medication. At the checkout, Illya made a point of asking about resorts and hotels in the area. He stuffed brochures into the grocery bag. Then he ordered eight hot dogs from the concession stand outside the store.

“Two apiece,” said Napoleon. “That was thoughtful of you.”

Illya blinked at him. “Oh. Do you think Tuula and Dennis will want some, too?”

Napoleon chuckled. “Let them eat lab containers.”

Illya grinned.

Back in the car, Napoleon shifted from side to side, trying to get comfortable. He played with the radio, searching for a clearer signal for the ball game. He settled on a station, then fidgeted with the sun visor.

“Eat a hotdog and I will give you this pill.” Illya held one up and waved it to and fro like a snake charmer.

“Deal.” Napoleon ate half heartedly. In between bites, he swallowed the pill. “I almost bought the farm, you know.”

Illya thought for a moment. Then, “Oh, I get it. Yes. But you did not. Let’s dwell on that part, if you don’t mind.”

Napoleon gazed at his partner’s profile as Illya drove. “It would not have happened if you had been there.”

“I know.”

Napoleon looked sad. “Don’t get me wrong. Mark and April were excellent backup. They saved my life. But it never should have happened. I wasn’t myself. I couldn’t sleep.” *Without you next to me.* “My reactions were off.”

“*Da, da.* I know.” He kept his eyes on the narrow lane.

“I’m lucky I didn’t get them killed.” Napoleon sounded miserable. “I’m going to have to tell Waverly.”

“I will tell him,” said Illya through gritted teeth. He turned off the ball game and twisted the knob, looking for music. He turned it up when he found strains of “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”

Napoleon forced down a bite of hot dog. “Troubled water. That’s how I feel today.”

Illya gave him a grim smile. “Bridge over. That’s me.”

Napoleon chuckled. “Okay. I’ll quit complaining. Except for this. It would have been nice to spend a couple of nights alone in our apartment.”

Illya cast him a sideways glance. “My constant presence by your bedside was not enough?”

Napoleon winked at him. “It was enough when I couldn’t move. And your periodic rants against the infirmary staff were delightful entertainment. But now I’m mobile. So, why are we in the woods instead of at home, celebrating my recovery?”

“Because we trust Tuula and Dennis almost as much as we trust each other. But it’s time for answers.”

The camp site was now a flurry of activity. Illya tensed immediately. Napoleon snapped off the radio. His hand moved to his shoulder holster and stayed there.

Dennis was pouring water on the archeological cubes. They crackled and popped, and the sound was like muted gunfire.

A dozen campers from surrounding sites were gathered to watch.

No. One of them had a bucket of water and was assisting.

Tuula was giving orders. “That one! To your right, Dennis. Great. Try to even it out. Chuck! Over here.”

“Chuck?” Napoleon squinted at the bucket carrier. “Illya, I think that’s Chuck Cornett! What the hell?”

Illya parked the car, but showed Napoleon a palm. “Please wait. I’ll see what’s going on.”

Napoleon began to object, but winced when he moved. “Okay. I’m no help until the pain pill kicks in.” He pulled his M-1911 from its holster and held it on his lap.

Illya got out and approached Tuula. She saw him coming, and her face brightened. "Illya! Great, you guys are just in time. Help Dennis and Chuck water the cubes." She handed him a bucket of water.

Illya ignored the bucket. "Answers, now."

Tuula waved a camper over. "Mark, take this bucket, please. Mr. Impatient needs answers."

Mark Slate lifted his fisherman's hat and swiped a hand through his shaggy blond locks. "Right-o." He nodded at Illya. "Glad to see Napoleon upright at last."

Illya's eyes widened in surprise. "What is going on here?"

"Time to let you guys in on the plan." Tuula touched Illya's arm and headed for the car. As Illya turned, he spotted Avery Bates coming out of the blue tent at the next campsite. Avery's pale complexion was starkly white where his bony legs emerged from Bermuda shorts. He was carrying a spiral bound book, thumbing through the pages, too busy to say hello.

Illya frowned and jogged after Tuula. She was helping Napoleon out of the car.

"Come on over here to the picnic table." She grabbed the grocery bag. "Avery has the assembly process under control."

Illya placed a firm hand around Napoleon's elbow. When his partner was settled, he turned to face Tuula. "Give me a reason to stay, or I am taking him out of this mad house."

Tuula's features settled in a grim pattern. "I thought it was obvious. We're laying a trap."

Illya wiggled two fingers at her. "More."

"Napoleon wasn't the only Third Level agent sent out without his partner. If our higher ups won't pay attention to us, we thought maybe we should take matters into our own hands."

Illya stiffened. "Misha! Where is he?"

"We got him out," said Tuula, "while you were pacing in the infirmary." She patted the air with her hands to stave off Illya's reaction. "You were busy," she said. "We didn't want to pull you away from your partner."

Illya relaxed. "Thank you."

Tuula nodded. "But Avery was pissed. He wanted revenge. And frankly, so did I. We came up with a plan."

"He looks okay today," said Napoleon, watching Bates in the distance as he pointed here and there among the growing cubes and gave directions in a drawl so soft they couldn't hear him from the picnic table. "What is that contraption you're growing over there?"

Illya raised a finger. "Now I recognize it." He lowered the finger and pointed it at Tuula. "You stole it from the lab, didn't you?"

Tuula looked innocent. "Who, me? I never touched it. And it wasn't in the lab. It was in a sub-basement of Headquarters, with no guards or anything around it. Just sitting there. Dennis said it looked lonely."

Napoleon chuckled. "So you took it camping."

Tuula wagged her brows and grinned. "It seemed the only decent thing to do."

"Um, what is it?" asked Solo, as a young brunette joined them. She was wearing a white camp shirt, perfectly pressed khaki shorts and tan Keds.

"Hello, April," greeted Illya.

She answered Napoleon's question. "It's a mousetrap. Hi, Illya."



“Pretty big mouse,” said Napoleon.

Tuula shrugged. “We’re after rats. The biggest kind.”

“I thought there was a cease fire going on.”

“Yes,” said Tuula. “I heard the same rumor before you and Misha were beaten to a pulp.”

Illya patted Napoleon’s shoulder. “I’m going to see how he is.”

Napoleon nodded. He watched Illya head for Avery’s tent. “Does Waverly have a clue about this little operation?”

“He sounded pretty calm earlier, before I hung up on him,” said Tuula. “So I don’t think he knows anything.”

Napoleon turned a palm up and waved vaguely in the direction of the construction crew. “What does it *do*, exactly?”

Tuula grinned. “You’ll see.” She peered into the grocery bag. “Hershey’s Kisses! I love these things!”

“Oh, me, too,” said April delicately.

“How many you want?” asked Tuula.

“Two. No, we’re on vacation. Throw caution to the wind. Four.”

Tuula rolled her eyes and dumped a third of the bag into April’s hands. “Four, my ass.”

Napoleon accepted a handful of Kisses and stood up with a groan. “I want to check on Misha.”

He found Illya inside Avery’s tent, squatting next to a cot where Misha was lying on his back. He had a cool cloth on his forehead and his right wrist was sporting a fresh cast. Illya was speaking to him in Russian, punctuating his conversation with finger wags and other hand gestures he never seemed to use in English. Misha was listening, watching Illya through lids still purple and puffed with bruising. Napoleon winced at the sight of him.

He approached and offered Misha the chocolates.

“*Spasibo.*” Misha tried to smile but his lip was stitched.

“What the hell happened to you?” asked Napoleon, as if he were talking about the weather.

“Same as you.” Misha’s dark curls were damp with perspiration.

Napoleon tilted his head to one side and grimaced in sympathy. “I was lucky. They didn’t touch my face.”

Misha waved at his old scar, the one that slashed from eyebrow to opposite cheekbone and took out a chunk of his nose as it went. “With this, who can tell?”

Napoleon offered an obligatory smile at Misha’s attempt at humor. But he reached over and squeezed the hand that was not trapped in plaster. “Sorry I was out of commission.”

Avery Bates’ drawl came from the tent flap. “You’n me both. Them sons o’ bitches done gone and pissed me off. This here cowboy’s setting up a rodeo they’ll never forget.” He came in close and started to give Napoleon a bear hug. Napoleon instinctively held up a hand.

“Sorry,” said Avery. Instead of a hug, he shook Napoleon’s hand. “The rest of you look as bad as his face?”

Illya stood up and shook hands with Bates. “It did a week ago.”

“Good to see you, too. I want to thank you both for coming.”

“Tuula could have told us in advance,” said Napoleon.

Avery shook his head. “Had to do it this way. Didn’t want the old man to hear about it, and who knows what you might have been saying in your sleep? I swear to God, them infirmary nurses have a hot line to the Old Man.”

Napoleon looked for a place to sit. Illya grabbed a folding chair and waited for his partner to lower himself carefully into it.

Illya swore softly. “The pills are not strong enough.”

Avery pulled a bottle out of his pocket. “Here. Take half a pill now, a whole one when you want to sleep. Misha’s not as high up on the top secret ladder, so I made sure he got the good stuff.” He handed the bottle to Illya. “You keep that one, you hear? I got more.”

“Thanks,” said Napoleon. “Why don’t you fill us in?”

Avery grabbed another folding chair and pulled it up close. Illya resumed his position next to Misha’s cot. Avery’s big frame dwarfed the chair. “You know that expression, the right hand don’t know what the left hand is doing? Well, sometimes that’s a good thing. Dang, it’s hot in here.” He picked up a file folder and fanned himself with it. “You remember that Ice Man affair, a couple of months ago?”

Napoleon curled a lip. “Oh, yes. Tea with dear old Edith Partridge. And the ghastly remains we found in her basement.” He held out a hand and accepted the half pill Illya offered.

“No doubt she intended to add you to her collection. But there was two of you, wasn’t there? And you’re a pretty unbeatable pair.

“Same thing last October in Cloverdale. That Hard Day’s Night affair. You were both scheduled for execution in that house on Dina Street. But instead Illya here gave Thrush a lesson in how to use a knife, as I recall.

“And last August, that Sweet Pea affair out in San Fran. No way you would have survived that trip if you hadn’t been working together.”

Napoleon rolled his eyes. “You can say that again.”

“And that she demon, Egret, she’s still on the loose, if I’m not mistaken.”

Napoleon looked uncomfortable. “Thanks for reminding me.” He played with the half pill, rolling it between his fingers.

“My point is,” said Avery, “Thrush keeps trying to take you out. Both of you. And they keep failing, thank God Almighty. But now they’ve got Waverly convinced things are lightening up, see? They got him to agree to this so-called truce in New York. No reason for him to send all his agents out in teams, is there? With a truce going on. Time for him to be frugal, save some money, impress them ink pissing desk jockeys on that damn governing board. So he starts sending us out one at a time, just little stuff. There’s a truce going on, you see. No big operations. No need to send teams. Not even his Third Level people need to go out in teams. This little crap is only an afternoon’s work.”

Napoleon’s eyes darkened with the realization of what Avery was getting at. “Mark and April came to my rescue because my afternoon’s work stretched into twenty-four hours.” He nodded somberly and added, “Meanwhile, Illya was ordered up to Vermont to handle *his* afternoon’s work.” Illya handed him a cup of water and he swallowed the half pill.

Illya said, “They’ve been setting traps for us.”

“Yep, they be beating us down. Literally,” said Avery. “I figure before this so-called truce is over, they plan to swoop in and finish off the weakened prey.”

Napoleon sat up a bit straighter. "But you want to strike first."

Avery grinned. "Bingo."

The smell of roasting hot dogs and hamburgers floated on the air. Misha insisted on getting upright. It turned out, he could move better than Napoleon once he was on his feet.

Napoleon said, "Those smell better than the ones you bought."

"Good," said Illya, "because I see Tuula handing ours out to her construction crew."

"Avery, who are all these people?"

"You mean, the ones you don't recognize? I called a few agents I knew from previous assignments."

Napoleon looked worried. "I don't know about setting traps for Thrush in a public campground."

"Who said anything about 'public'?" Avery waved an arm. "Nothing but U.N.C.L.E. as far as the eye can see."

"I'm impressed," said Napoleon. "And the Old Man doesn't know anything about this?"

"Don't know, don't care. Misha and me, we can fly choppers for anybody."

Misha and Illya were deep in conversation. Surrounded by U.N.C.L.E. personnel, Illya was able to relax a bit where his partner was concerned.

Napoleon shrugged his shoulders and shifted experimentally. "That pill is amazing."

Avery nodded. "I think they've been shorting your dosage because they didn't want you to say anything under the influence to the wrong people."

"And I can take my jacket off and not worry about my gun." Napoleon eased out of his jacket. As they strolled past the Imperial, he tossed it through the open window onto the back seat. Now that he was in on the surprise, he began counting familiar faces. "Who brought their kids?"

"Not kids. Little people. Floaters. They do special assignments. Real agile."

"And what does that contraption do?" He paused to watch as the construction crew stood back. Enough water had been applied. The cubes were groaning and stretching, reaching upward like very pale stalks of giant asparagus.

Avery chuckled darkly. "You'll see."

Illya's voice cut through the calm. "*Nyet, nyet, nyet!*" He was flushed and upset as he stepped into Avery's space. Avery took two steps back. "He is your friend! How can you do this?!"

Napoleon patted Illya's arm. "Easy, *tovarisch*. What's wrong?"

"He plans to use you as bait in his giant mousetrap."

Misha said something unintelligible to Avery. Russian-accented English with a heavy Texas drawl.

Avery spread his hands. "Not bait," he said calmly. "I told Misha him and Napoleon would get to *do the baiting* instead of *being the bait*." He smiled. "Look around you, Illya. We have a campground full of U.N.C.L.E. agents for protection. Don't tell me you wouldn't enjoy a little revenge for what they did to your partner."

Illya's demeanor transformed to one of interest. "Revenge?"

Avery let a slow smile spread across his heat flushed features.

Illya shifted his gaze from Napoleon to Misha to Avery. He relaxed and patted Avery's chest. "That's different. Okay. Good plan. But first we eat."

As his pain faded, Napoleon began to perk up. Every question he thought of, Avery had already addressed.

"Aerial attack?"

"Lookouts and snipers in the trees. Plus, we borrowed a portable radar unit. Not much use for it with these trees around, but I wanted to do it up right."

"Power?"

Illya set a paper plate in front of his partner. "Generators. I counted six so far." To Avery, "How many vehicles did you need to bring all that stuff in?"

"One big moving van, and a half dozen personal transports," said Avery. He bit into a fat, juicy hamburger.

Napoleon lifted a finger and whirled it in the air. "What kind of revenge do you have in mind with all these witnesses around?" The four of them were enjoying a leisurely meal but all around them, other agents were still working furiously. A team of four was maneuvering a thirty-foot Airstream into a large space across the way. The big silver travel trailer was shaded by the pines. It looked brand new.

"Witnesses?" Avery looked innocent. "Witnesses to what? No one is going to see anything. By the way, them's your digs over yonder. We're hooking you up to power and water. You get a shower and a soft bed. If Thrush doesn't take our bait, at least you'll have a relaxing weekend in the woods."

Napoleon exchanged looks with Illya. "Not bad."

Illya nodded. "Very impressive. Okay, you eat." He was already half way through his own burger.

Napoleon took a deep breath and was delighted when nothing hurt. He smiled and picked up his burger. "Dinner and a floor show," he said. "Nothing better than that."

As night fell, it began to look like Avery's prediction of a relaxing weekend in the woods might come true. Tuula and Dennis built a very small campfire. Mark Slate played his guitar and a homey group of adults and little people sang folk songs. Just a gathering of friends, camping in the Barrens. Two agents were fussing over a telescope. They had a very small window of sky to look at because of the trees, but they were having a good time, identifying everything they could see.

Napoleon had a private chuckle every time he caught them pointing the telescope along the ground at something in the distance. Up, down, up, down.

Out of a moving van came a set of sofas. Two burly young Section Three agents plopped them near the campfire.

Dennis thanked them, then came over to the picnic table. "Mr. Solo? Mr. Stalin? Your theater seats are ready." He bowed with a flourish.

The foursome relocated to the sofas.

Napoleon leaned close to Illya's ear and murmured, "I might get used to camping after all."

Illya laughed out loud.

“S’mores!” cried Tuula. “We need S’mores.” She began passing out sticks and marshmallows.

Dennis was armed with extras. “I’ll take care of you guys,” he said.

“Too sticky,” said Napoleon, waving him off.

Illya snorted. “I’ll feed you with my own hands.”

Napoleon’s lop-sided grin looked very healthy. “In that case, by all means.”

Illya blushed in the twilight. “Down, boy.”

After the S’mores, Tuula checked the progress of the styrofoam mousetrap. It had grown into a ten-foot cube. Avery began flipping through his spiral notebook, and a trio of Section Eight technicians began working with saws and latches. Avery gave instructions, then he and Tuula returned to the sofas.

Napoleon frowned. “Those guys work in Camouflage and Deception,” he said.

Avery nodded. “Yep. They couldn’t wait to be a part of this. And they have very handy construction skills.”

“Okay,” said Napoleon doubtfully. “But what about those two women over there, from Propaganda and Finance? They’re practically civilians.”

Tuula looked offended. “Section Seven has to qualify on the gun range, just like the rest of us. And those two ladies know how to handle themselves in and out of the office. Trust me. Besides, we needed the best to print the invitations, didn’t we?”

Illya and Napoleon exchanged puzzled glances. “Invitations?” they chorused.

“Not for our people,” said Tuula.

“For Thrush,” grinned Avery. He glanced at his watch. “Right about now, our Section Five people are hanging a big Thrush insignia on the front gate of the campground.”

Napoleon looked horrified. “Communications and Security are in on this? Are you crazy? You might as well print *Waverly* an invitation.”

“These guys owe me,” said Avery. “They ain’t gonna give nothing away. Besides, you and Illya saved their butts on a couple of occasions when Headquarters was under attack. They feel like they owe you, as well.”

Tuula nodded. “Besides, we all know the real snitches live in Section Six. Haven’t you ever wondered why infirm people are all Security and Personnel? They get to decide who’s fit to go back to work. Who talks in their sleep.”

Illya’s eyes narrowed. “Who gets full pain medication and who gets the weaker pills.” He took a breath and exhaled steam. “I will add them to my list of people to talk to when we get back.”

The Section Eight trio signaled to Avery. They opened and closed the handy door they had cut into the cubes. Less than ten minutes had passed and they already had hinges, latches and locks in place.

“That looks like a prison block made out of white bread,” said Napoleon.

Avery grinned. “Another bingo. It’s called a WiSPIR, a Windowless Soundproof Portable Interrogation Room. Them Thrush scientists are crafty devils, ain’t they? People inside can scream their lungs out, and it sounds like a whisper to people outside.”

Napoleon’s brows shot up. “That’s a Thrush invention?”

Illya grinned. "One of our teams captured it during a raid on Thrush San Francisco. They sent it to New York for evaluation. That's how I recognized it earlier. Once our people determined what it was, they put it in the basement for storage."

Napoleon did not look enlightened. "So, you're going to wait for your guests to arrive and toss them into a padded cell?"

Avery chuckled darkly. "There's more, son. Trust me." His communicator beeped. "Oh. Excuse me." He stepped away to take the call.

Dennis approached with a bottle of Coke for Napoleon.

Illya looked eager. "Tuula, please tell me I get to visit with the prisoners." He cracked his knuckles.

Tuula clapped Dennis on the back. "See? I told you Illya would be glad to be included." To Illya, "Avery has a slightly more complex plan in mind."

Napoleon took the Coke and gave Dennis a smile. "I know," he said. "The cube is a giant marshmallow and we are going to roast them inside it."

"Wow," said Tuula, "that was dark."

Napoleon lifted his Coke in a salute. "I have my moments."

Avery returned. "Our guests have arrived. Give the signal."

Communicators all around beeped in a "shave and a haircut" pattern. April Dancer finished applying tape to the back of a sign and rushed to attach it to the newly constructed door. The Thrush symbol caused an uneasy hush to fall on the group. But only for a moment. Then everyone went about their camping activities, trying to look like the scenery.

A wood-paneled station wagon with Thrush insignias on the doors drove up to the campsite. Inside were four Thrush agents. Two of them were all too familiar to Napoleon. The sight of the other two brought forth a stream of Russian curses from Misha Stalin. The driver was U.N.C.L.E. Riding shotgun was Chuck Cornett. He was backwards on the seat, pointing an U.N.C.L.E. special at the passengers.

Once the car stopped, a cadre of U.N.C.L.E. agents swarmed around it. Guns were drawn. Doors were opened. And four very confused Thrush agents were forcibly dragged from the car. They were sputtering questions. Napoleon recognized the four faces from past U.N.C.L.E. briefings.

"What is this?" Squeaky Parks, South Jersey.

"We have invitations from Thrush." Nickels Divine, Pittsburgh.

"Where is Candotti? He signed the invitations." Fred Borgia, doomed by his name.

"What have you done with Chief Candotti?" Antoine de Salle, third from the top of their Maryland offices.

Avery Bates raised his palms in the air in an appeal for silence. When he got it, he spread his hands. "Welcome to the U.N.C.L.E. Court of Justice."

The Thrush agents were realizing they had been had. "What? You sent these invitations?!"

"But they were signed by Candotti! I know his signature!"

Avery ignored them and spoke to Chuck. "Y'all searched'em for weapons?"

“Oh, yes,” nodded Chuck. “We had a really good time. Found some stuff you wouldn’t believe, considering they thought they were about to be honored by a Thrush satrap at a secret facility here in the Barrens. Nice invitations, too. My hat’s off to your Section Seven people.”

“All right, then. You four, sit down on the ground and put your hands under your butts.”

Twenty-seven loaded weapons reinforced Avery’s commands.

The Thrush agents did as they were told.

“Bring out the Secret Weapon!”

Tuula went to the Imperial and opened the trunk. She lifted a box with a camera lens and power cord and brought it to Avery.

“Take a good look,” said Avery. “This is going to be your undoing, you miserable pieces o’ crap. You think you can attack our agents during a ceasefire and get away with it? Who the hell do you think you’re dealing with here?”

Antoine de Salle sneered, “It’s a camera. So what? You plan to take our pictures?”

Avery grinned like he knew a secret and shook his head sadly. “Oh, no, that is not a camera. That lens does not gather light rays. There is no light in the cube. You should know. Your people invented it.”

Nickles Divine gasped. “It’s the WiSPER box!” He paled visibly.

“Damn right,” said Avery. “We’ve made some alterations I think you’ll find amusing. Oh, sorry. *We* will find them amusing. You might have a different word for it.” He nodded at Tuula and she carried the box to the port created by the Section Eight trio. They began installing it. Tuula plugged the power cord into a generator.

The Thrush agents were looking decidedly nervous.

Avery continued. “The four of you are going to spend the night in the box. We even installed a slop bucket for you so you don’t have to piss on yourselves, and there are a couple of flashlights inside so you can aim real good. Mr. Solo and Mr. Stalin are going to have the pleasure of switching on U.N.C.L.E.’s DUO weapon. You’ll know when they do it, because you will hear it humming inside the box.”

Squeaky Parks squeaked, “What’s it do?”

De Salle growled, “Shut up, idiot.”

Avery looked feral in the campfire light. “We call it the DUO weapon for Do Unto Others. It uses a special combination of gamma rays and microwaves to read your emotional and mental states for the preceding month. You know, your brain never really forgets anything. Everything is stored up here in our gray matter. And you do know that all thoughts are electrical energy, right? Everything you’ve done, everything you felt, loved, hated, tortured, killed, everything is stored in your brains. And this DUO weapon reads all of that.” Avery was really getting into it.

The Thrush agents exchanged uneasy looks.

Avery continued. “And once it reads it all, it magnifies it and turns it around and sprays it back out at the four of you. Every bad thing you done in the last month will come back ten-fold and invade your brains. And guess what? You ain’t gonna have no U.N.C.L.E. agents in there to beat up on this time. All you’re gonna have is each other.” He let a sly smile spread across his features. “Yes sir-ree, Bob. Nobody in there but you Thrushies. Now get off your butts and march inside.”

Twenty-seven loaded weapons gestured toward the the door of the box. Chuck Cornett was holding it open.

“And if we don’t?” De Salle mustered all the defiance he could find.

“If you don’t, we shoot you out here and bring the hearse in to carry you away. Your choice.”

De Salle snorted in derision. “Come on, you guys. It’s a stupid joke. There ain’t no such thing as a DUO weapon. Thrush would know about it if there was.”

Napoleon laughed out loud.

The sound startled De Salle.

Napoleon pushed himself up off the sofa and only swayed an inch as he faced one of his tormenters. “Did they tell you about Egret’s Sweet Pea machine? Did they tell you about the Party Time drug? No? What’s wrong, Antoine? Don’t they trust you with those secrets? If they didn’t tell you about any of that stuff, why would they tell you about the DUO weapon?”

De Salle looked shaken.

Illya stood up and stepped in front of Napoleon, one arm blocking him in a protective gesture. He spoke to De Salle. “I would strongly suggest you take your chances in the box,” he said grimly. “They will only shoot you *after* I have a turn at you. The choice is yours.”

The four Thrush agents began moving toward the open door.

Before Chuck closed it, De Salle turned and asked, “What are you going to do with us in the morning?”

Avery said, “Scrape you off the walls.” He raised his U.N.C.L.E. special and aimed it at De Salle. “Inside.”

De Salle did not look well as he backed into the box.

Chuck Cornett closed the door and latched it in three places.

There was a moment of silence. Then the surrounding U.N.C.L.E. agents whooped with adrenaline-spiced glee.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged puzzled looks.

Avery called for quiet.

“Okay, y’all, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Napoleon, would you like to do the honors?” He walked over to the DUO weapon and tapped the toggle switch on the back. “There are actually two of these switches, one for you and one for Misha. C’mon over here, pardner. Time to flip the switch.”

Napoleon looked concerned. “Um, Avery, does this DUO weapon really work?”

The surrounding agents fell silent.

Avery cleared his throat and looked around at the group. “Well, let’s just say it does what it was designed to do.”

“What exactly is that?” asked Illya.

Avery looked from Illya to Napoleon and back. “I knew Napoleon would never turn this thing on just for revenge,” he said softly. “At least, not to avenge himself.” He paused. “This toggle here turns on the hummer. And this one turns on the recording camera. Anything else that happens inside that box is the result of gullible minds. In the morning, some of our friends will be escorting these thugs to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters where people with fewer scruples than you, son, will do the questioning.”



Napoleon suppressed a smile. “Which one is the hum switch?” he asked. “I want to drive them crazy.”

Guards were posted around the WiSPER. Then others joined them, just to help out and be a part of the plan. By eleven p.m., Napoleon was drooping. Illya tapped him on the arm and waved him toward the Airstream.

The trailer was pristine and deluxe. The small refrigerator was supplied with an array of snacks. A bottle of Smirnoff’s vodka and a one of Johnny Walker sat on the night table next to two glasses. Illya frowned. Not their brands.

Napoleon shrugged. “We’re roughing it,” he said.

Illya went through the trailer, out of habit more than anything else, checking for bugs and making sure all the windows were covered. Then he joined Napoleon in the bedroom and helped him undress. His torso and arms were several different shades of purple, green and yellow. He helped his partner into pajamas.

“Tuula did a good job,” said Illya, digging through their bags. “She will make some woman a great wife one day.”

Napoleon laughed in spite of himself.

“Pill or whiskey?” asked Illya.

“Both.”

Illya softened. “*Konyecho.*” Of course.

Illya poured Johnny Walker in a glass for Napoleon and opened the bottle of vodka for himself. They raised a toast and drank.

“You know,” said Napoleon, “five years ago, I could have beaten them both and walked away.”

“I know.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but I’m beginning to understand why they make us retire from the field at forty.” He refilled his glass and raised it again. “Here’s to two more years.”

Illya raised his vodka bottle. “One year, four months, and nineteen days.”

They drank.

Illya set the vodka down and took the empty glass out of Napoleon’s hand. Very gently he pulled Napoleon close and pulled his mouth into a warm kiss.

When Napoleon was forced to come up for air, he panted, “I will definitely rethink my opinion about camping.”

End

