

(angst)
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The Spies Like Us Affair

by

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The Chicago mission was over. They'd been back for an hour. Solo had the cabby drop Kuryakin at his apartment. "Just take a shower, change your clothes, and get a taxi to my place," said Napoleon. "I can't start drinking till you get there, so hurry." Illya half smiled. "You are too disciplined for your own good," he said, getting out of the cab. "See you in an hour."

Kuryakin stood on the sidewalk and watched the cab turn the corner at the end of the block. Then he descended the eight steps to the door of his basement apartment. One room, a kitchenette against the street wall, a bathroom built in the corner as an afterthought, and a murphy bed in the north wall. His second-hand army-green sofa sat in the middle of the room, facing the black and white t.v. and the stereo on the south wall. The space between the back of the sofa and the north wall would be filled with bed when he pulled the murphy down. The east wall was filled with shelves and cupboards and drawers. Illya glanced around the room, locked the door, then headed for the refrigerator. The shelves were discouragingly empty, except for an old cube of butter and some American beer. He opened the small freezer compartment and took out the liter of Stolychnaya. There were only two fingers of vodka left in the bottom. The sight of the reduced supply filled him with anxiety. He had been looking forward to a healthy glass of vodka before heading for his partner's place. It was always good to arrive at Solo's apartment partially anesthetized. It helped him deal with the disappointment he inevitably experienced there. Out of the blue, he wondered why he kept going? Today, as usual, Solo had said it would be just the two of them, drinking away the mission, having a bite to eat. That was how it used to be. Illya loved coming down from a mission like that. Just him and his partner, talking or not saying a word, staring at the t.v. and listening to the stereo. He had even learned to appreciate Elvis Presley, Solo's secret vice.

When did it change?

Stupid question. It changed after that sleepless night on the mountain. The two of them in the car, being chased by Thrush. Solo on the back seat, Illya in front, keeping a vigil over his partner. And then telling him how he felt. Telling him he was gay. Solo was nice about it, he even said he loved Illya back. Like a brother.

After that, every time Illya would go over to Solo's apartment, someone else would just happen to be there as well. Kuryakin pulled a glass from the drainer by the sink and poured the

vodka into it. He would have to nurse it. He wanted more than was in the bottle, but he needed to shower and change and... Why did he still go? Why did he fall for it every time?

At first, he thought Solo was being honest when he said he forgot about making a "date" for the night they were supposed to get together. That first Saturday after they came down the mountain. When the same thing happened the next weekend, Illya began to wonder. The third time, it was just the two of them again, but Solo seemed antsy, unable to unwind, and Kuryakin left early, stopping at a liquor store on the way home for more vodka.

Illya shuddered. That was a miserable weekend. He sipped at the glass in his hand. Maybe it was good that he only had a little left in the freezer. Drying out on a mission and then binging when he got home was a stupid thing to do. The fourth weekend after the mountain, February 4, Solo didn't bother to lie about "forgetting" a date. He just told Illya he was thinking "the more, the merrier." There were two women at Solo's apartment that time. Illya wondered what was going on. They worked together on two brief missions during the last half of January and shared hotel rooms with no problem. Solo never gave any indication that he was uncomfortable with Illya in the room. They always had some of their deepest conversations while on a mission. And more than a few harsh words had been exchanged, as well, especially when things got tense. But they came through it. They wrote all the bad things off to the stress of the mission, and they remembered the good things. But on those two missions, their conversations felt forced. Napoleon was avoiding the one topic that Illya wanted to discuss.

Then they returned to New York, to Headquarters, to the bureaucratic portion of their lives, expense reports, paperwork, accounting for ammunition, all the humdrum ordinariness that made the job so surreal... and the closeness stopped. It was as if they were only friends when their lives were in danger.

That made Kuryakin very sad. He didn't have a lot of friends in New York. He didn't necessarily want a lot of friends. He couldn't seek out the friends he'd like to have. There was too much of a chance that he would be seen with the wrong people. And he didn't find straight people relaxing. He was always on his guard, always playing a part. Just like he did at work. Solo was the exception. From the early days of their partnership, he and Solo had hit it off. An unlikely pairing, but it worked for them. They were fiercely devoted to each other in the field, and quietly independent during off-rotation. But those end-of-mission evenings when they got together and drank and came down off the stress were so good. They rapidly became Kuryakin's anchor in a hostile, foreign society. Thank God for that Partytime affair. Just when Illya was going to give up his friendship with Solo in despair, they plunged into a case that involved a gay private detective who tried to pick up Napoleon in a gay bar. And when it was all over, they went back to Solo's apartment, and they kissed, and their passion exploded in a sequence that sped by so fast, Illya barely knew it was happening before it was over. Afterward was rough. Solo was so broken up over learning he was gay. He didn't want to accept it, and Illya knew even then that their few moments together might be all that ever happened between them. Wednesday, February 8. The night he kissed Napoleon.

Illya realized he had been standing in the same spot next to the sink for five minutes, staring into space. He took another drink of vodka, then set the glass on the counter. Better save it for after the shower. He rummaged through a drawer in the east wall and pulled out clean underwear. He pushed the wall next to the Murphy bed, and a magnetic latch released the knobless door of

his closet. Fashion decisions were kept to a minimum. Half his wardrobe was black. He ignored the more official part of his wardrobe, two ties, two white shirts, and a burgundy sport coat. He selected a black turtleneck and black chinos. The February cold outside demanded the leather flight jacket with the sheepskin lining. He pulled it off the hanger and draped it over the back of the sofa. Five dollars at the army-navy surplus store. Crazy Americans will sell anything.

He headed for the bathroom, but stopped at the door and battled with himself for a few seconds. At last, he swore softly and detoured to the kitchen counter. He swallowed the last of the vodka. It wasn't enough. He would need more before he got to Napoleon's apartment. The weekend after the Partytime affair, February 11, Solo left town and didn't even tell Illya he was going. Mark Slate had to call and let Illya know that Solo was all right, he'd gone skiing with some woman. He wasn't surprised that Napoleon was trying to plunge back into the straight life. It wasn't like people figured out they were gay and ran dancing in the street. But he hadn't even told Illya that he was leaving town. That was a dark weekend. Funny that he couldn't remember the woman's name, but the exact dates of each individual joy and agony were forever imprinted in his mind.

On Monday, Solo's face was sunburned and his thighs were sore. It was his first ski trip of the year. He muttered something about spending too much time on the slopes. Illya pretended not to hear. He didn't want any details. He wanted to pretend that Partytime had never happened. He wanted to go back to the mountain and relive that night without telling Napoleon he was gay. But it was too late now.

On Tuesday, February 14 -- Valentine's Day -- Waverly sent them to Chicago. A dirty city full of dirty people. But maybe Illya's opinion was colored by the mission he pulled there. He and Solo were dismayed at the mess they uncovered, and they almost died in the aftermath. But the physical danger wasn't the worst. It was the psychological stuff. All the betrayals they discovered in the Chicago office, all the pseudo-philosophy the enemy spouted at them. It hit Solo hard. But they survived. They saved each other, like they always did, but now that it was over, Illya felt empty and cold. He needed something to fill that space, and he doubted that his evening would be filled with enough friendly companionship to do the trick. He would have to stop at a liquor store.

Once he made the decision, he hurried through his shower. Afterward, he towed his hair as dry as he could get it and dressed in a rush. The apartment had been empty for ten days. It felt like a year. The place was stuffy and musty and chilly all at the same time.

During the early years, he would go to Napoleon's after a mission thinking, This will be the night. Tonight he will give me a sign. Tonight he will say I'm the best friend he ever had.

That was all he asked for. Acknowledgement of his friendship. He knew there would never be more. He knew that before he left Russia. His life was dark with secrets. But he could have a friend. He never expected the friendship to be a life-saving partnership. Or perhaps he should turn that around. He never thought the life-saving partnership would turn into friendship. Yes, that was it. He was, after all, an UNCLE agent, and he would save the lives of the other agents who worked with him whenever he could. Napoleon was his partner, so of course they looked out for each other.

Of course.

He pushed his arms into the sleeves of the flight jacket and wondered if he had imagined the whole friendship scenario. He might have. It would be in keeping with his secret nature, to have a friend that only he knew about. Not even his “friend” knew they were friends. How fitting.

Somewhere in the center of his being, he really wanted a drink. Several drinks. He checked his wallet, counted his money, zipped his automatic in one jacket pocket, slid his stockinged feet into black loafers, and headed for the door. He stopped there and looked around the apartment again. The room. The cubicle that contained what little he possessed. As he often did when leaving the place, he reminded himself, *If I die today, I will leave little behind.* That seemed appropriate, somehow, and it suited his Russian sensibilities. When he was a very small boy, his mother used to tell him stories of her childhood, stories about numerous cousins and aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents, both hers and his father’s, till he couldn’t remember their names. There was never any documented evidence of such a family. Maybe she made it all up to entertain him. It didn’t matter. But she was killed in the Great Patriotic War, and his father died at the Front, and with them, all those relatives and ancestors died. And now, he was all that was left, and it seemed fitting that he should occupy as small a space as possible and leave nothing at all behind. No possessions, no offspring. For he was not attracted to women at all. It was as if he were not even a person on his own, but merely the frozen memory of his mother’s breath lingering in the wintry air of recollection. Illya was convinced that this was the reason he longed to be with men. His mother’s soul was snuffed out so early, and little Illya was there, watching it happen. He never thought about sex before she died. But after she died, he became suddenly and dramatically aware of his sexuality, and the fact that it did not behave the way it was supposed to. Illya found comfort for years in the belief that his mother’s soul refused to rise to heaven. He could not believe that she would ever leave him. No, she would never do that. He adored her. She was the center of his universe. So when she died, his young mind found it easy to accept the idea of her soul taking refuge inside him as he lay beneath the floorboards of the tiny dacha where they hid from the Germans. She concealed him there, knowing the enemy was near. He was small for his age. It was an easy fit. She made him promise to lie still and not come out until the soldiers had gone. No matter what. You are all that is left of your father and me, she told him. They took your father. They will take me. But you must survive.

He wept and begged her to squeeze in beside him between the floor joists, but she grew stern and shook him and told him to be strong. *Budt krutoi! As long as you are alive, I shall live.*

When he emerged, he saw his mother lying where they tossed her body. He knew they raped her before she died. He heard them making noises, straining over her, calling her names, making comments about her body. And he knew they shot her. The report of the pistol rang in his young ears for hours (and in his dreams, the sound echoed forever). But he was not prepared for the sight that greeted him when he turned her body over. He no longer tried to remember her face. He avoided thinking about her as much as possible, because all he could remember was the hole in her forehead. (And he would cry out in his dream and wake up, his heart pounding and his chest aching again with the loss of her.)

Yes, thinking of her sharing his body, squeezed in between his corporeal joists, made him feel less lonely. And it was easy to believe that her presence inside him was the influence that turned him to men. Before she died, he wasn’t sexual. After she died, it seemed almost immediately, he

became aware of his feelings for men. But he was not promiscuous. That, too, he felt was a sign that she was with him. She had loved only one man her entire life.

And Illya, too, loved only one man.

He opened the door and left his room. He locked it automatically behind him and headed for the nearest liquor store. He returned half an hour later with a brown sack full of bottles and a box of crackers and a jar of caviar. He glanced at his watch. He was supposed to be at Napoleon's by now. No matter. Disappointment was easy to postpone. He put the bottles in the refrigerator, all but one. That one he opened, fingers trembling, and poured himself a glassful of vodka. Even warm, it was good. He forced himself to breathe between swallows. He could have drunk it like water. But Solo would smell it on his breath, he would know he'd started drinking before he arrived, and he would feel left out.

Just a little more. There. Half a glass. He was taking too long. He ran water in the top half of the glass and drank the potion like medicine. His insides had stopped shaking, and his hands were steady now. Time for the taxi. He caressed the bottle as he set it in the refrigerator, almost promised it he would be home early. They would have time together later. He and his vodka would share together the passion that Solo had no use for.

For the second time, he left his room.

Napoleon Solo stood in the shower and let the hot water pound against his chest. When the steam made breathing difficult, he turned around and let it pound against his back. He shut out every thought except the water and the heat. Illya would arrive soon. He could think about things then, after their first drink. But the water only held these thoughts at bay for a short while. His muscles began to relax, and he let down his guard, and the thoughts flooded back, full force. The faces of the three men he'd killed on this mission floated in front of him, just as they had every time he'd closed his eyes since. They were not innocent men. They were firing their weapons at Solo and at Kuryakin. But he could have used sleep darts. He even thought about it at the time. He just didn't do it.

Kuryakin tried three times on the plane ride home to convince him that sleep darts would not have guaranteed their safety. Solo nodded in agreement, but the Russian knew Solo was bothered

And he was still bothered, not so much by what he'd done -- life and death decisions in the field were part of the job -- but by his reason for doing it. Solo walked a fine line. UNCLE agents were licensed to kill when the need arose. He had the authority to make the call, to decide if an enemy was going to live or die. And he knew about killing. He fought in Korea, he was trained as a soldier before joining UNCLE. He knew the only difference between himself and the men they called murderers lay in his reasons for killing, in the slippery conviction that he only killed in the line of duty, when his life or the lives of innocent citizens were at stake.

He wondered if he'd crossed that line on this mission. There was so much betrayal in Chicago, so many lines crossed by so many people. He shot those three men because they threatened his partner. No, not because they threatened him. Because of the way they did it, the cruelty of their threats, the anticipation in their faces as they talked about what they would do to him.

Solo aimed his weapon and very clearly thought to himself, *You have time to use the sleep darts*. But he didn't. Their threats had roused a rage within him that he still could not trace to origin, and he shot them dead.

He towed his hair and slipped into gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt. No underwear. He wanted to hang loose, feel the weight of himself moving under the sweatpants. He wanted to feel his own manhood, let it take over. He paused by the telephone, wondering what his hand was doing on the receiver. He was going to call someone. Some woman? He blinked at his hand, then let go of the phone. Instead, he opened the drawer of the little phone table and pulled out his rosary. He twined it around the fingers of his left hand and used his right to towel more dampness out of his hair. He should be sorry for killing those men. But he wasn't. He should be sorry for firing in a rage. But he wasn't.

He looked down at the cross and beads in his hand and replaced them reverently in the drawer. He'd pick it up when he was sorry. Not now. Now it was lie.

He padded barefoot through his apartment, moving from room to room, getting the feel for it again. Ten days. It felt like years. He went to the kitchen, put water on for tea. Russians and their tea. He checked the cupboard for the necessary supplies. He put a bottle of vodka in the freezer for Illya, and poured himself a stiff shot of Glenlivet, tossed it back, and poured another. Illya would start drinking the moment he entered his one-room apartment. Solo tried to get him to wait, but he knew it was fruitless. Kuryakin drank too much. Solo knew the truth was worse than that, but he couldn't bring himself to say the word. Besides, Illya was young. If they lived another ten years, he would learn to say the word. But for now, he could write it off to youthful indulgence brought on by the stresses of the job.

He moved silently into the living room, used the remote control to turn on the color TV. Out of habit, he turned the sound off. Only the picture rolled across the screen. He glanced at his watch. No Illya yet. He used to be on time for everything with Solo. But lately, ever since the night on the mountain, in fact, he was arriving later and later. And he was drinking more. A lot more. Solo wondered what was going on. A disgusted voice sounded in his head. You know what's going on, you idiot. You invite him over and then lose your nerve. You call some woman at the last minute, to put a buffer between you and your partner. Ever since he told you he was gay. Ever since he told you he loved you. The tea kettle whistled. Solo padded into the kitchen and took it off the burner. He glanced at his watch again. What would he do if Illya never came? It was taking all his remaining nerve to stay off the phone, to go ahead with his plan for the evening. *Why am I such a coward about this?* He brewed tea. No point in waiting. The water was boiling now. He made it the same way he'd seen Illya make it so many times before. The Russian would take tea and an electric kettle on their missions. Some of their closest moments had been shared while drinking Illya's tea out of hotel bathroom glasses.

I enjoyed what happened after Partytime, he thought. *I can't lie about that.*

He never knew his body could get so excited, so fast. He tried to tell himself it was the mission, the strangeness of it all, that incident in the gay bar. He was just so glad to be home and safe with his partner. That was it. That was all it was.

The voice said, *Liar*.

The weeks after their night on the mountain were troubling for Solo. Ever since Illya told him how he felt, Solo had dreamed strange, heated dreams about things he hadn't thought of in

years. Sometimes Illya was in his dreams, and sometimes they were filled with other people. Boys he knew in school. Isolated moments he pushed aside and tried to forget, like the face of his closest high school friend watching him dance with his prom date. Solo had forgotten how strange it was that night, how sad he was that his friend did not have a date. He'd forgotten how he'd found him in the boys' bathroom, crying. And the things they said to each other. Solo was too young to deal with feelings that deep. He was too frightened to even contemplate that his best friend could be *one of those*.

There were other dreams, as well. All disturbing. And Illya would appear in them at the oddest moments. Being near him was so hard. Napoleon wanted to talk, to ask him questions, to find out what the hell was going on, but he couldn't. He just couldn't say the words out loud.

Instead, he invited friends to run interference. And since he couldn't chance any of this slipping out in front of UNCLE people, his list of friends was limited to civilian women. And Dennis. Illya told him during the Partytime affair that Dennis was gay.

Napoleon's cowardice about facing Illya, about being alone with him, was tearing him apart. He wondered how he found enough backbone to pull himself through the Chicago mission? He knew the truth about himself. Why couldn't he face it? Take it like man?

He laughed out loud in the empty apartment, a bitter laugh, full of irony. Right. Take it like a man.

Solo could not deny it any longer. He was definitely gay. On that Thursday before the Chicago assignment, the day after he kissed his partner for the first time, he bought himself some magazines. Three girly magazines, Playboy, Hustler, and a sleazy pornographic publication called Cheri. He took them home and looked at them. He hoped he could find a female image in them that would stir him the way Illya had the night before in his apartment. But they were just glossy paper.

Friday, he took the experiment one step further. He slipped out on his lunch hour to visit an adult bookstore. He bought two other magazines. There were no women in these publications. He was in and out as fast as he could, and he took the magazines home to his apartment before he returned to work. He didn't dare look at them. After work, he went home, put his telephone in a drawer, and turned off his communicator. Then he went into the guest room -- he couldn't open the male magazines in his bedroom -- and he laid all the magazines out on the bed. He flipped through the girlie magazines again, just to get a feel for his reaction. It was strange. He always told himself he never indulged in that kind of reading because it was in poor taste. As he turned the pages, he couldn't find any reason to ever buy them again, either. He went into the living room then, and poured himself a drink. Maybe he suspected what was going to happen. But he didn't think so. It came as such a shock. It hit him right between the eyes. He opened the first men's magazine and gazed down on a trio of smooth-chested well-muscled men holding combat rifles and wearing nothing but army boots.

His heart pounded wildly in his chest, and he was definitely turned on. He remembered thinking, *Jesus, no, this can't be happening to me*. But he was tired of being afraid, and he forced himself to open the second magazine.

The centerfold spread was a close-up of a lean light-skinned man fucking a tight tanned ass. It was like Illya had kissed him all over again. He was so turned on, his balls twisted in knots. He fumbled with his fly, stroked himself four times and came all over the bed spread.

He didn't want to remember what he did after that, but there was no sense avoiding it. He shut himself in the bathroom and cried. He prayed for a long time that things would go back the way they were before. But he knew they wouldn't. He never felt that kind of passion with his female lovers. And now that he knew what he was missing, he wasn't even interested. Life would never be the same.

But he didn't give up that easily. He tried once more. He called women listed in his little black book, one after another, until he found one willing to go skiing for the weekend. He didn't even tell Illya he was leaving town. He felt so guilty about running away, he just couldn't call his partner and say, I'm spending the weekend with a woman and trying to forget you. How could he do that? No. He just went.

The irony, of course, was that he couldn't do anything. That scared him most of all. He knew he was just too wound up, too confused, all twisted in different directions. But it only made his mood fouler than ever. Poor Marla had no idea they would wind up spending the whole weekend on the slopes. But then, neither did he. He nearly killed himself trying to keep skiing so he wouldn't have to go back to the lodge and fail with her.

Monday, he wanted to talk to Illya, but there was no opportunity at the office. And Illya was avoiding him. He was hurt, he was angry. Solo knew it. He could feel it every time their paths crossed. He spent hours Monday night, wrestling with himself about what to do. And in the guest room on the bed lay that disturbing centerfold. Solo couldn't even go in the room and close the damn magazine. He finally drank himself to sleep.

Then Tuesday Waverly sent them to Chicago.

Amazing, how years of experience could click in during a personal crisis and allow him to function on a mission. Solo was impressed with the depth of his training. It had saved both their lives in Chicago. God knew it wasn't his rational brain deciding what to do and when to do it. Thank heaven for UNCLE programming.

Someone knocked on the door, and Solo jumped. He glanced at his watch and prayed that it was Illya.

It was.

Solo couldn't hold Illya's gaze. "I'm glad you came," he said softly. "I started to worry. I thought maybe you wouldn't show up."

Illya entered the apartment and let Solo close the door.

"I almost didn't," he said. He shifted to Russian. "My apartment is so empty." Then he blushed. He hadn't meant to say anything about being lonely.

Solo nodded. "Yeah. Mine, too." He crossed his arms over his chest and suddenly felt very awkward. "I made you some tea," he said.

"Good. I'm cold." Illya took off his flight jacket and lay it over the back of one of Solo's three couches. He moved to the center sofa and dropped himself onto the cushions. He waited silently for Solo to bring tea. "You brewed it yourself?" One blond brow rose in a question.

Solo shrugged. "I've been watching you for years. I should be able to imitate the process by now." He tried for a smile, but he was too nervous.

Illya took the mug Solo gave him and warmed his hands around the outside of it. "Jam?" he asked.

"Coming up."

Less than a minute later, Solo was back with a spoon and a jar of strawberry jam. Illya spooned jam into his tea.

Solo stood next to him for a few seconds. Then he sat down on Illya's left.

Kuryakin looked at him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Sure. Fine."

"Hmmm." Illya sipped his tea. "Oh, that's very good. Nice job."

"Thanks."

"So."

Napoleon stared at his hands, clasped and unclasped his fingers. "So," he echoed. "Here were are."

Illya played with the spoon. After several seconds he exhaled sadly. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No. Please." Solo reached out and touched Illya's arm, then pulled his hand away.

Illya pretended not to notice. Napoleon started to put his hand back, but decided it was too late. Instead, he rubbed his forehead.

"Look, Illya, I need to talk to you about something."

Kuryakin grunted something unintelligible.

"What?"

"I said, talk fast before the woman gets here." He sipped tea.

Napoleon worked his jaw but no sound came out. He rubbed his face and tried again.

"Okay, I deserved that. I've been a jerk. That's what I wanted to talk about." Solo's voice was so subdued, it made Illya look.

Napoleon turned his face away. For a couple of seconds, he concentrated on breathing.

Illya leaned back on the sofa, tea mug still in hand. "All right. I'm listening."

Solo nodded. Seconds passed.

Illya tilted his head forward and angled it sideways to peek at Solo's face. He repeated softly, "I really am listening."

Solo nodded again. "Sorry," he rasped. "It's hard to say these things."

"Then I will ask a question. Ever since I told you I'm gay, you've been afraid to be alone with me. But neither of us can really sleep unless the other one is nearby. How are we going to survive without sleep?"

"Good question," said Solo. "I may have an answer."

Illya waited.

Solo waited, too. At last he half chuckled. "You know, if you could read my mind, this would be a lot easier."

Kuryakin smiled at his tea. Then he reached for one of Solo's hands and squeezed his fingers. "Nothing you say will shock me. So let's hear it."

Napoleon stared gratefully at Illya's hand. "Okay," he said. He took a breath and let it out. "After that night on the mountain, I, uh... I don't know, I started thinking about things. Not on purpose." He tried to laugh. "Things just popped into my head. You know? I mean, I never thought about these things before. I used to see gay guys on the street, they'd come on to me in the men's room, and I never gave it a thought. Just, No thanks, not for me. You know? And then, you tell me you're gay and... and the rest of what you told me, and all of a sudden I'm... I'm

having these weird dreams. Not about you,” he rushed to add. Then he came clean. “Well, at first, anyway. Later, you sort of moved in and out.”

Illya patted Solo’s knee. “I think I need a drink. How about you?”

Solo nodded. Illya went for vodka and whiskey. When he returned, Solo took a long drink of Glenlivet before he began again.

“Strange scenes from my childhood would show up in these dreams,” said Napoleon. “Just fragments.”

Illya took another drink. He was sitting cross-legged now, one knee nudging Solo’s thigh. Napoleon did not move away.

“Who’s in your dreams?” he asked. “Besides me, that is.”

Solo took another drink. “One night it was my best friend in high school.” He rubbed his eyes. “Jesus, we were so close and I can’t even remember his name. Can you believe that? The last time I saw him was the night of the senior prom. I forgot all about that night. About what he said to me. In the john. He was...upset.” *Crying like a baby, asking why, why, why?* “I didn’t get it. Until the dream. All of a sudden, I got it.” He took another drink.

“How many of these hauntings have you had?” asked Illya.

“Hauntings?”

Kuryakin grinned. “Ghosts from the past.”

“Oh. Right. Three. Maybe four. Then they started turning into my partner.” He looked away.

“Confusing,” said Illya.

“Very.”

“And after the Partytime affair? That did not clarify things?”

“Oh, some things became very clear. But I freaked out, remember?” He turned his brown eyes on Illya, his face looking for help.

Kuryakin could not look at that face without softening. He reached out and touched the stubble on Solo’s chin. “Everyone freaks out some time in their life,” he said gently.

“Considering some of the things we have been through, you have a few freaks out coming.”

Solo smiled fondly and corrected softly, “Freak outs coming.”

Illya smiled back at him.

Napoleon’s eyes flicked to Illya’s mouth and back to his eyes. Then he leaned forward and kissed his partner softly on the lips.

Illya let the kiss happen, but he didn’t escalate it. When Napoleon pulled away, he said, “This represents a change of heart?”

Solo dropped his eyes. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened that night. After Partytime. I wanted to talk to you sooner, but the damn job got in the way.” He flicked a sideways glance at Illya. “That, and my own lack of nerve.”

Illya snorted softly. “You have more nerve than any man I ever met,” he said. “We are here now, talking about it, aren’t we? That took nerve.”

“Yeah, well, after I ran away for a ski weekend and couldn’t get it up with Marla, I figured I had to make a choice. I can either give sex up all together or I can stare this thing in the face and try to accept what I am.”

Illya tried to sip his tea nonchalantly, but his hands shook and the tea sloshed on his chinos. “Sorry,” he said. He tried to lean forward for a paper napkin and inhaled sharply. Bending forward at that angle was not a good thing to do with an erection.

Napoleon reached for the napkin and handed it to his partner, his eyes settling on the bulge in Illya’s trousers.

“I can see,” he said casually, “that you’re taking this well.”

Illya started to laugh, a silent amusement that made his chest vibrate. “It is exciting news,” he smiled, trying not to look as thrilled as he felt. He didn’t want to scare Solo off. “What exactly was it that changed your mind? The dreams?”

Napoleon felt heat rise to his cheekbones. “Uh, they were part of it.”

Illya was intrigued. “And the failure with Marla?”

Solo nodded. “Unh-huh, yes, that was a part of it, too.” He glanced at Illya’s face. “I wanted to talk to you that Monday, but Waverly sent us to Chicago.”

“Yes, I know. I was there.” Kuryakin’s blue eyes twinkled madly.

“Right. Okay, look, Illya, this is really hard for me to talk about. I sort of, uh, conducted an experiment.” Solo paused and poured more whiskey in his glass. Wordlessly, he offered Illya more vodka, and Kuryakin accepted. They drank for a few seconds in silence.

At last Illya prompted, “An experiment?”

Solo nodded. He was spending a lot of time looking at his glass and very little looking at his partner.

Illya was finally able to move his legs. He swung them off the couch and scooted closer to Napoleon. He leaned close to Solo’s ear and murmured, “Aren’t you going to tell me about it?”

Napoleon’s sudden intake of breath was exactly what Illya was hoping to hear. When Solo turned to look at him, Illya’s mouth was right next to him. This time Illya reached up to hold the back of his head as he ran his tongue over Napoleon’s lips before claiming them with his own.

Solo moaned hungrily and leaned into the kiss. Neither of them pulled away. Their tongues caressed each other, and they fed leisurely on each other’s mouths. When they broke for air, they were both flushed, their lips full and warm with desire.

Illya whispered once more, “Experiment?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Solo. He held up an index finger. “I have to show you. I can’t... say it out loud.” He looked away. “Wait here.” He stood up, slowly and carefully. At last, he was able to head for the guest room.

Illya crossed himself in the Orthodox fashion, lifted his face to heaven, and murmured, “*Spasibo!*”

Napoleon returned a moment later carrying a magazine.

Illya wagged his eyebrows at him. “You are going to read to me?”

Solo smiled wanly. “Not exactly. More like...” He didn’t know what to say, so he sat back down and opened the magazine to the centerfold. The light-skinned man and the tan one.

Illya’s eyes widened dramatically and his expression was a mixture of surprise and delight. But when he spoke, he said evenly, “Nice photography.”

Napoleon shoved him over sideways. “Illya!?”

Kuryakin laughed. "All right, all right. The photography means nothing. What does this have to do with your experiment?" Suddenly, he grew serious. "You didn't do this with some other man, did you?"

"Jesus, no!" Napoleon tossed the centerfold on the coffee table.

"Good," said Illya somberly. "Because if you asked me here to tell me you are accepting your gayness so you can be with another man, I will have to kill you."

Solo started to laugh, then thought better of it. "You're serious."

Illya shrugged and lifted his vodka. "I have been crazy about you for years, Napoleon. I have slept alone and thought of no one but you. I do not know what I would do if you told me you wanted some other man."

Solo nodded. "I can understand that. Of course, you realize, if I turn my life completely inside out and..." He swallowed hard and pointed at the magazine. "If I do that and you jilt me, you understand that your life could also be in danger."

They might have been talking about the weather.

"Completely," said Illya. The smile he was suppressing won the battle and lit up his face. "But I will not do that to you."

Napoleon looked relieved. "Oh. Good." Then disappointed. "Why not?"

Illya chuckled. "That picture turns you on?"

Solo rolled his eyes. "You could say that, yes."

"Some men do that all the time. But they are not relying on their physical well being and their reflexes to stay alive every day. Maybe some day when you retire from the field..."

"Oh." Solo leaned back on the couch, his right arm pressed against Illya's left. "So, we'll still be together then?"

"One way or another," said Illya softly.

Napoleon understood. Above the ground or beneath it. He turned to look Illya seriously in the eye. "But it's okay to like the picture?"

"Oh, yes. Very okay. *Ochen, ochen* okay." He nodded vigorously.

Solo grinned. "I like the idea of being together." He sipped whiskey. "It feels like we're cheating, though. None of the other field agents can maintain a relationship with anyone."

"They are like you were with women."

Solo looked thoughtful. "Exactly," he said at last. Then he gave a little shrug. "So, what do we do now?"

Illya tossed his head just enough to let the light shimmer off his hair. "Oh, I can think of a few things," he murmured. He set his glass on the coffee table and took Solo's whiskey out of his hand. Then he laid a palm on the bulge in Solo's sweatpants and paused. "Do you mind?"

Napoleon smiled uncertainly. "What should I do?" he asked.

Illya's eyes were warm with affection. He reached carefully around Solo's waist and pulled the sweatpants down around his thighs to free his erection. "Well, I suppose," he said softly, sliding onto the floor in front of Napoleon, "while I'm busy here..." he enclosed the base of Napoleon's dick in his right hand and licked the glistening head. "...that you could..." He paused and closed his mouth over the burgundy flesh and sucked until Solo whimpered and squirmed. Then he lifted his mouth for a moment to finish, "...you could look at the centerfold."

Solo cried out and arched off the couch, and Illya opened his mouth and took his flesh as far as it would go. It didn't take long before Napoleon came in his throat. Illya sucked and swallowed until Solo could no longer stand it and shoved him gently away.

Illya pushed himself to his feet then and unfastened his trousers and let them drop to the floor. His cock was rigid, the head glistening and pointing straight at Solo's face like a squinting eye.

"Hurry," groaned Illya.

Solo blinked up at him for a second, but finally got the message. He shook off his lassitude and reached for Illya's hips to pull the Russian's aching erection toward his mouth. When his lips and tongue took it prisoner, Illya moaned and pushed Solo back against the couch. Solo's head came up against the cushion and Illya's pulsing cock rammed against the back of his throat. Illya leaned over him, his hands on the back of the couch keeping most of his weight off Solo's face. But he was too hot to be gentle. He grabbed Solo's hair with one fist and held him still while he pumped into his throat. He growled with every push, and when he came, he cried out like a wounded bear and clutched Solo's face tight against his crotch.

Then he released Napoleon and dropped beside him on the couch. Solo was breathing hard. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and slipped his other arm around Illya's shoulders. A second later he turned and pressed a hot, wet kiss on him. Illya's tongue trembled in his mouth and strained to caress every centimeter of Solo's palate.

They turned their heads like swimmers for air, then locked their mouths together again. Sometime in the middle of kissing, they arranged themselves horizontally on the couch. During a consequent break for air, Solo realized he was on his back and Kuryakin was on top of him. Their flaccid cocks echoed their dancing tongues. "Oh, God," Solo groaned, "I want more but it's too soon."

Illya sighed and conceded momentary defeat. "Maybe we should get up and eat something."

Solo grinned. He started to comment, then noticed something odd. "Hey, partner, I thought you were shorter than me."

Illya squirmed on top of him, rubbing their cocks together and licking Solo's lips at the same time. "I'm only shorter from the thighs down," he rumbled. Solo smiled. "Lucky me."

Kuryakin grinned. Then he planted a kiss on Napoleon's forehead, levered himself off the couch and pulled his trousers up. Zipping and buttoning, he announced, "Food."

Solo's refrigerator was in no better shape than Kuryakin's, so they ordered take-out. Egg rolls and rice and Chinese beer.

Illya sighed happily when it was gone and leaned back on the sofa with a bottle of beer in one hand and the remote control in the other. He flicked from channel to channel, but never turned the sound up.

Solo collected the take-out cartons and paper plates and stuffed them into the kitchen trash. He returned with a beer of his own and settled on the couch by Illya.

"You can turn up the sound if you want."

Illya shrugged. "Not necessary." He glanced sideways at Solo. "When the sound is on--"

"--you can't hear what's coming up behind you," finished Solo. They clinked beer bottles and drank.

Napoleon rubbed his finger around the mouth of the bottle.

“What?” asked Illya.

“Just thinking.”

Illya reached for Napoleon’s free hand and laced their fingers together. “Sometimes it’s not a good idea to think too much,” he murmured in Russian.

Solo nodded. He stared sleepily at their hands, the way they fit together. “I never thought my life would turn out like this.”

Illya’s face relaxed into almost-a-smile. “This good or this bad?”

Solo grinned. “Surprisingly good, actually.” He squeezed Illya’s hand. “I never knew, you know,” he added quietly.

“Yes, I figured that out.”

Solo drank beer. “I never really thought about it, though. The rest of it, I mean. I never tried to picture myself with a wife and kids. I just figured it was something that would turn up eventually.” He nudged Illya with his thigh. “What about you?”

“I knew I was different from the beginning,” said Illya matter-of-factly, his eyes on the silent television. “Right after my mother died.” He tapped his chest with the beer bottle. “She’s right here, you know? When she died, I felt her soul slip inside me. The next feeling I remember was getting turned on by a teenage soldier in uniform. I knew then, that mama was inside me. She would see a uniform and think of papa, and bam, I would get hard.”

Napoleon leaned forward and tilted his head to look in Illya’s eyes. “You really believe that?”

Illya gazed blearily at Napoleon. “Sure. Why not? At least I don’t have to hate myself because I’m gay. I don’t have to wonder why I turned out this way. After mama’s soul slipped inside me, I had no choice.”

Solo nodded thoughtfully. “Actually, that’s a beautiful story. Why didn’t she go to heaven?”

“She was afraid to leave me alone in the world. Papa died at the Front. And she knew the Nazis were going to kill her. She hid me under the floor boards, and when she died, she dropped on top of where I was hidden, so the soldiers would not notice the boards were loose. Her blood came through the cracks, and her soul came, too. Down instead of up, because I was right there. Later, they moved her. But it didn’t matter. It was over by then.”

Solo pulled Illya’s hand to his lips and kissed the back of it softly. Then he said, “Let me know when you figure out why *I’m* gay, okay?”

“That one’s easy,” said Illya, straight-faced.

“Oh, yeah? Why?”

“Straighter men than you have come on to me.”

Solo laughed. “I wondered why your head is so big. All that ego.”

Illya grinned. “Get me another beer?”

“No more beer,” said Napoleon. He took Illya’s empty bottle and set it on the floor.

Illya sighed exaggeratedly. “We are lovers for an hour and already you are nagging me about my drinking.”

Solo punched him in the arm.

Illya laughed softly, then reached out and grabbed a fistful of Solo’s hair. “Come here.”

They kissed for a long time, and when they weren’t kissing, they took inventory of each other’s faces. A touch here, a nuzzle there.

“Kiss me again,” whispered Solo.

And Illya obliged.

When the kiss ended, Napoleon groaned.

Illya made a sound in his chest, a contented rumble. He lay a hand gently on Solo's crotch. "Bedtime," he murmured.

"Oh, yeah," agreed Solo.

The phone rang.

Napoleon said, "Let it ring."

"What if it's your sister?"

"Did you have to say that?" He tried to stand up. "Oh, God."

Illya smiled. "I'll get it."

Solo worked on straightening up while Illya went for the phone.

"Hello?... Oh, Avery. Hello.... No, you dialed the correct number. He's here. Just a moment."

Illya carried the phone as close to the couch as it would go, then set it on the floor and stretched the cord to hand the receiver to Napoleon. Illya mouthed, "Bathroom." Solo nodded and sat back down with the phone.

"Avery, what's up?"

When Illya returned from the bathroom, Solo was sitting in the same spot, his head in his hands. The phone was back on its table, receiver in the cradle. Illya sat down next to his partner.

"Somehow, I sense that the romantic moment we were sharing has passed," he said softly.

Solo took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He lifted his head long enough to peek sideways at his partner. That glimpse was all it took to tell Illya Avery's call had not been good news.

"What is it?"

Solo didn't speak right away. When he did, he struggled to get the words out. "Avery says he got a call from a friend in Chicago about us. About... the way we treat each other."

Kuryakin frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," said Solo darkly. He took a healthy sip of Glenlivet. "He's coming over. He said he's got some things to tell us." Napoleon wiped his face with one hand. "Shit. How could anyone know?"

Illya's jaw worked furiously. "Who called him? Did he say?"

"Chuck Cornett."

"Cornett?! He's in Colorado."

Solo nodded. "They called him in yesterday. He arrived after we got on the plane today. They've called guys in from all over to help clean up that mess. But Chuck.... I always thought he was a friend."

Kuryakin leaned back on the couch and reached for Solo's hand. He squeezed it once before Napoleon pulled it away.

"I can't," said Solo. He turned his face away. "It's too much right now. I can't--"

"*Ponyal*," said Illya, more curtly than he'd intended. "I understand. Really."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." It wasn't, but Illya didn't want to add to the pressure. His blue eyes darkened. "There's more, isn't there? I know when you are holding something back."

Solo nodded. "Chuck told Avery some of the guys in Chicago were making jokes about us. About sharing a room at the hotel. Stuff like that."

“What?! What does that mean?”

Solo was suddenly very tired. “Isn’t it obvious? They know we’re gay.” His voice was barely audible.

Illya erupted off the couch and began pacing. “How can they know such a thing? You didn’t even know for certain! Which of those Chicago bastards told jokes about us?”

“Avery didn’t know. Chuck didn’t say. Chuck didn’t even want Avery to tell us about the call. He just wanted him to warn us. To tell us that... some things were becoming... obvious to other people.”

Illya bent low in front of Napoleon, and looked his partner in the eye. “*Na kher* with this *zhopa!* I will be glad to make some things obvious to him!”

Solo almost smiled. He ran a hand through Illya’s blond mane and kissed him on the forehead. But when Illya tried to reciprocate, Napoleon turned away, his dark eyes troubled.

Kuryakin’s gaze turned inward, putting emotional space between himself and Solo. He stood up stiffly and walked to the wall that separated the guest room from the living room. Once there, he roared with rage and threw himself at the wall, punching and kicking, until his fury was spent. He stood there, breathing hard, examining the damage, for several seconds.

Solo poured more vodka in Illya’s glass and waited for him to return to the couch. When Kuryakin staggered back to the sofa, Solo handed him the glass.

Illya drank half of it in three swallows, like it was water. Then he pointed to the battered wall. He had punched or kicked through it in two different places, and caved the wall board in a man-sized section.

“That was not for you,” he said thickly, the aftermath of his rage taking its toll on his body. “That was for this-- this--” and he let loose a string of Russian expletives that Napoleon only half understood. At last, Illya turned and sat down hard on the sofa next to his partner. “And for how he is making you feel. I hate him. I hate him like I hate the Nazis who killed my mother.” He finished off the vodka.

Napoleon poured more Stoly in the glass. “All done?”

“No. I want to kill him.”

“Somehow, I don’t think killing Chuck will convince those guys in Chicago that we are not gay.”

Illya’s face was flushed and his eyes were losing their focus. “Perhaps not. First we will clear this up, and then we will kill him.”

“Chuck’s not the problem,” said Napoleon. “He’s just the messenger. I don’t understand how those guys could think we’re gay? We never touch each other on a mission. Hell, we never touched each other at all in Chicago or anywhere else. Just that once after Partytime, and then--” He paused and looked around the apartment. “--then here, tonight.”

Illya looked at Solo just as Solo looked at Illya. As if on cue, they both stood up and began searching the apartment. Half an hour later, they agreed that if they were being watched, the technology was too advanced to be detected.

“Well,” said Illya, sober again, “I suppose you would be more comfortable if I return home to sleep.”

Napoleon held up a finger as awareness dawned. “Sleep,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Bjorgum, that nervous skinny guy who met us at the airport? I’ll bet the rumors started with him. He took us to the hotel where we registered for one room. And he insisted on helping us take our luggage upstairs, remember?”

“We always share a room. Lots of Section Two people share hotel rooms.”

He didn’t add the obvious, that staying in separate rooms meant trying to sleep with no partner present, jumping at every little sound, and getting no rest at all. Solo was very aware of that problem, and the longer they worked together, the worse it got.

Napoleon dropped his finger. “So, if we explain that we share a room so we can get some sleep?”

Illya rubbed his stomach and headed for the kitchen. The Chinese food had worn off. “If we tell Waverly we can’t sleep unless we are in a room together, what do you think he will do?”

Solo followed Illya and watched him open cupboard after cupboard, looking for something to eat. “I don’t know,” he shrugged. “We can’t be the only agents who prefer to sleep with backup.”

The rice and egg rolls were long gone, but Illya found two cans of Spanish olives and a tin of sardines in tomato sauce. He shook one of the cans at Solo. “Dessert,” he said simply. “All this emotional wear and tear is not good for the stomach. You should eat something. Get plates.”

Solo complied. “You know, when *you’re* upset, you tell me you *can’t* eat.”

“Yes, but you get those pains.” He touched himself under his breast bone. “Some problem with your stomach. You eat.” He found a can opener and freed the olives.

Napoleon picked up three olives and popped them in his mouth. “Do you think,” he began when he had room for talking, “maybe somebody saw you do this--” He waved a finger between Illya and the food. “--and thought it was...”

“Thought it was what?” asked Illya, forking sardines onto the second plate.

Napoleon tilted his head to one side and shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know... domestic, maybe?” He carefully left his eyes on the olives.

Illya made an irritated noise. “So what? Am I supposed to let you get pains? Right when you are trying to shoot some bastard who is holding a gun to my head? And then you miss and hit me? Or worse yet, you miss all together and he shoots me while you watch?” He wagged the fork at Solo like a warning finger. “Someone has to think about your health. You never do.”

Napoleon looked thoughtful. “Oh.” He ate another olive. “I wondered about that.” He nodded slowly. “It makes sense, actually.”

Illya’s eyes were bright with conviction. “*Da, da*, it makes *bolshoi* sense.”

Napoleon smiled at the mixture of Russian and English. Illya was getting tired. And so was Solo.

Kuryakin continued, “And the way you eat anything some waiter puts in front of you. How many times has Thrush tried to poison you? You make me crazy, *mili moi*.”

Solo levered himself up on the counter next to the olives and let his feet dangle. “Maybe one of those Chicago agents caught you tasting my food in that restaurant,” he said quietly. “Maybe he thought that was too personal or something.”

Illya’s cheekbones burned and he concentrated on slicing a piece of sardine to fit on the crackers he found in a cupboard. “I didn’t know you knew I did that.”

Napoleon leaned toward his partner and brushed his cheek with his nose as he took the loaded cracker out of Illya’s hand. “Why do you think I’m so relaxed about eating anything some

waiter puts in front of me? And the answer is six times in the last three years. They would have killed me, too, if you hadn't been watching my food every second."

Illya was pleased. His features relaxed in a half-smile. "I should keep checking, then?"

"Definitely," said Napoleon. "I hate stomach pumps. Besides, I worry about your health, too," he added quietly.

Illya thought for a moment, then said, "Oh, yes. The vodka." He nibbled at sardine-and-cracker.

They ate in companionable silence, Solo sitting on the counter and Illya standing next to him, so close that Solo's calf would bump his thigh every time Solo twisted to reach for another olive. They weren't really hungry, but they often did this after a mission. They were home and alive and the eating was partly celebratory, partly social, and partly an animal reaction to long hours in the field with no idea when they would get a chance for a meal.

The doorbell rang. The sound startled Solo and he clutched his abdomen for a second, as if the sound had wounded him. Illya took it all in, and met his eyes with a look that was equal to several paragraphs of what-have-I-been-saying. Then he patted Solo's leg and said, "I'll get it."

But Napoleon was already off the counter. "We made some new enemies in Chicago," he said softly. "We do not separate."

Kuryakin thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. They approached the door as they would on a mission, guns in hand, Solo on one side, Illya on the other.

"Who is it?" asked Solo.

"Bates and Stalin," drawled Avery Bates.

Illya opened the door as far as the chain would allow.

"What'samatter, son? Ya'll don't know my voice yet?"

Illya nodded a greeting, then closed the door to undo the locks. Solo switched the perimeter alarms off. Bates and Stalin entered and spent a few seconds removing their coats as Illya refastened the door and Napoleon reset the perimeters.

Avery Bates was a lanky five-eleven beginning to show the inevitable broadening of middle age, with gray-blond hair that had been thinning since his days in Korea but refused to give up the struggle. He had gray eyes and freckles on his burnable skin, and blond hair everywhere, even on his knuckles. Misha Stalin was his counterpoint, a dark-eyed, black-haired Russian. He was the same height as his partner but was solidly built and gave the impression of being bigger. Bates was a chopper pilot in Korea, where he met Solo. But in his youth, he was a hotdogger, and one too many stunts had drawn a reprimand, and he was sent to Germany to finish out his tour. Germany was where he met Misha, a long story he seldom told. Solo didn't blame him, considering he met Stalin there at a time when the Russians were still at war with the Germans.

Misha was a taciturn man, partly because English was not his first language, and partly because he was always in pain. The vivid pink scar tissue that ran like a fat slug from the center of his left cheekbone through the bridge of his nose to replace his right eyebrow made his right eye look like it was always half-closed. There was scarring on his right cheekbone, too. Misha claimed he had his eyes closed so tight waiting to be executed that his cheek and his eyebrow were scarred by the same shot. The surgeons had managed to piece his nose together and insert tubes so he could keep breathing through it, but a big chunk was missing, carried away by a Thrush bullet, and sometimes he snuffled when he laughed or exercised. Bates had been Solo's

friend for years, a friendship they renewed when Bates started flying for UNCLE. Misha was his shotgun, and the quiet Russian had quickly taken to Illya. Coworkers who never saw them socially thought the two Russians were cut from the same Soviet cloth. But their friends knew they were very different.

Illya was quiet and antisocial in English-speaking situations, but in his native tongue, he was as talkative as Solo and became intensely involved in the lives of his friends. Solo liked that about Russian culture, but seldom wasted breath trying to explain it to people who wondered how he could get along with the moody Russian.

Stalin was just as retiring in Russian as he was in English, and in fact was sometimes more exuberant in English, even though his grasp of the language was barely acceptable. Bates covered for him, often apologizing for having corrupted Stalin's textbook English in favor of teaching him Texan. And it was true that Bates sometimes repeated what people said to Stalin in his Texas drawl before Misha seemed to comprehend.

Solo decided early on that it was all an act, but he enjoyed it, and he was pleased that Illya had a countryman he could talk to on occasion.

"It's good to see you," said Napoleon. Two vertical lines creased the skin between his eyebrows. "Will I still think that when you leave?"

"Shit." When Bates said it, it was a two-syllable word. "You hear me good, son. Nothing nobody says in Chicago, Illinois is going to hurt our friendship. Besides, them guys is full of crap."

The coats were dealt with.

"Can I get you a drink?" asked Napoleon.

"Yessirree," said Avery. "And some water for my pardner here. He needs to take some pills."

Soon, they settled at the dining table with drinks and olives and sardines.

Illya folded one leg underneath himself and leaned forward on the table. "Now tell us, what are these stories they are spreading in Chicago?"

"Well, hell," Bates began, "this here Cornett fella calls me and says I should talk to you. Me and Misha met him last year when he was out here for extra training, remember?"

Misha nodded silently, rubbing his nose right below the scar, his eyes closed.

"It seems some of these Chicago agents decided you two were awfully good looking for straight guys. Well, shit, you can't help what you look like. But one of 'em... What was that name? Byorn?"

"Bjorgum," supplied Solo.

"Yeah, that was it. He got his knickers in a knot because you two shared a hotel room. And he saw a few other things he thought were strange. And the next thing you know," said Bates, sipping a beer, "the lousy little pissant is saying you guys are queer." He shook his head at the ludicrous charge. "Fucking little creep."

Napoleon stared at his glass, not sure what to say.

Illya, too, was at a loss.

The silence stretched for several seconds. Bates looked from Solo to Kuryakin and back again. They did not meet his gaze.

It was Stalin who broke the silence. "We already knew that, of course," he said casually. "Illya Nikolaevich cannot keep his eyes off you," he said to Solo. "But that is none of Bjorgum's business. Right, Avery?"

"Huh? Oh, damn right. None o' his goddamn bidness. He be way outta line on this here accusation. Got no right bringing up such a thing, far as I'm concerned." He nodded vigorously and sipped his beer.

Napoleon and Illya relaxed visibly.

"When he says you are homosexual," continued Stalin, "what he really means is that he has seen you do things that he doesn't understand. It makes him nervous. So he labels you."

Illya and Napoleon caught each other's eye, then quickly looked away.

Bates finished his beer. "Hey, Misha, y'all gwine 'a get me 'nother cold'un?"

Illya's brow puzzled over the unintelligible string of Texas syllables that Bates pronounced, but Stalin nodded and took his partner's empty beer bottle to the kitchen.

Bates's accent nearly disappeared as he said, "Hell, fellas, lookit. You guys do a lot of the same things me and Misha do. You gotta sleep in the same room in order to get any real rest. You worry about each other's health. Illya here tests your damn food, for Christ's sake. And you let him do it. That's as much a part of it as anything else. If we don't let 'em do it, they get crazy. I know, 'cause Misha's the same way with me. Bjorgum didn't see anything queer about your behavior. What he saw was Third Level."

Stalin returned with two more beers. He nodded at Bates's last remark. "*Da*. Third Level."

Napoleon leaned back in his chair and laughed nervously. "Oh, wonderful. First I find out I'm gay, and now you're telling me I'm a psycho? Well, this has been a perfect year so far." His sarcasm was deep and bitter.

"You're not a psycho," said Bates. "No more than any other UNCLE agent has to be crazy to do this job. Didn't I just say me and Misha have the same problem? Do you think *we're* nuts?"

Napoleon dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just..." He got up and spread his hands. "I'm having a little trouble dealing with--"

"Napoleon, sit, please," said Illya.

"No!" It came out with an edge. "Jesus! Why is this happening to me?! A year ago, I was no different than anyone else, and now--"

Bates seized Solo's wrist and cut him off. "Napoleon, that's a load of bullshit and you know it. You were never like other people. Back in Korea, you already had that spark. And after you joined UNCLE, you left them regular folks way behind, and you know it. A year ago, you were headed in this direction, but the symptoms were less advanced, that's all. How long has it been since you slept clear through the night without a bad dream or waking up listening for the enemy?"

Aside from Illya, Bates was the only man in the world who could grab hold of him without worrying about losing an arm. Solo never forgot the things Bates did for him in Korea. Avery was the closest Napoleon ever had to a big brother. But hearing Bates enumerate his darkest secrets as if he could read them on his face was humiliating and painful, and Solo looked away.

But Bates cut him no slack. "No way, son, you sit down and think about it. You've never been the kind of man who runs away from shit. Now, this ain't easy, but it don't have to be all that hard. You learn to live with it."

Napoleon sat down.

“Now ask yourself how long it’s been since you could strip naked with a strange woman and keep it up long enough to do the deed?”

Solo stared at his lap, unable to speak around his embarrassment.

“And as for Illya, how long has he been quietly making sure you eat hot food and bundle up in the cold weather? Has he started with the vitamins yet?”

Illya looked a question at Misha.

Stalin replied, “Three a day. Just in case.” He shrugged elaborately, like it was no big deal.

Napoleon propped his forehead up with one hand. “I thought Third Level was some kind of code word for loony-tunes,” he said. “When people say it, they almost whisper it.” *Like “leper” or “terminal”*. “And they’re always talking about dead agents, or suicides. Or one of those poor bastards at The Home.” He lifted his eyes to the ceiling and blinked hard. “Why us?”

Bates examined the label on his beer to give Solo some privacy. “It’s because you’re damn good at what you do,” he said. “No one knows exactly what causes it, but it never happens to regular agents. You know, the guys who do the job and collect their pay and count the days until they retire. Those guys never go Third Level.”

Illya exhaled noisily. “I thought it was all my fault,” he confessed. “I thought this was happening to us because I am gay. Because I want to be with Napoleon all the time.”

Misha offered, “I want to be with Avery all the time, too, and believe me, it is not a sexual attraction.” His pain pills were working, helped along by the beer. He was talking more. “I just need to know he’s alive. Breathing. Able to grab his gun and hit a target. You know?”

Napoleon nodded. “All right,” he said, rubbing his face with one hand. “How many of us are there?”

Avery shook his head. “No way to know for sure. But me and Misha have done some unofficial surveys. We come up with about ten percent of Section Two. Not just New York, but everywhere.”

Stalin added, “All have been together as partners for three years or more, and all have been agents for six years or more. Mostly more.”

Napoleon took a breath and asked the question that was nagging at him the hardest. “Is it--? Are we going to, uh,--? Does it always end in suicide?”

“Oh, shit, no, pardner!” Bates took hold of Solo’s shoulder and squeezed and shook at the same time. “Hell, no. Those guys who killed themselves? They didn’t know what the hell was going on, man. They thought they were nuts. Nobody explained it to them.”

Stalin nodded. “That is why we are here.”

“Right,” said Bates. “As long as you know what’s going on, as long as you know how to deal with it, you can live with this thing. It’s like having a rash or something. We talked to a couple of guys in the London office, they been around the block a few times, and they said once they left the field, it only took a couple of years before they were able to function like regular guys. Right, Misha?”

“*Da*. Regular guys.”

Solo began to relax. “So, we’re not going to eat our guns or anything?”

“Nosirree,” said Bates. “But you are going to do some other things.”

“Yes,” said Stalin. “You might as well move in together now and save money on rent, because the sleeping problem gets worse. And have you started--?”

Bates cut him off. “Don’t plant seeds, son. Just because we do certain things don’t mean they will.”

Stalin nodded.

But Napoleon wanted to know. “Just tell us,” he said bleakly. “Otherwise, how will we know when we do something really crazy?”

Bates shook his head and laughed softly. “Shit, son, we’re all crazy already. Ain’t you ever read your psych file? Them shrinks they make us talk to? They think we’re all nuts, and that’s based on the vanilla version of crap we shovel for their benefit. Personally, I think if they label somebody sane, Waverly moves him to a desk job. Not cut out for the field anymore.”

Misha frowned at Avery. “You are not making him feel better,” he scolded. “All right, Napoleon, you have the Sleep Problem. Then there is the Food Fetish.”

“Illya, you already check his food.” Bates shrugged. “That one’s real common.” He looked at Solo. “Does it drive you crazy?”

Napoleon’s eyes widened, and he glanced quickly at Illya. “I don’t think I should answer that question.”

Kuryakin slugged him in the arm.

Stalin laughed, a snuffling sound that reddened his high cheekbones.

Bates nodded. “Yep, it drives you crazy. But get over it. You gotta let him do it. You don’t want to know what happens if you don’t.”

Solo looked from Bates to Stalin. “Bad?”

“Very bad.”

Stalin made a cautionary sound.

“Don’t worry, pardner, I ain’t telling him. I’m just saying it’s bad, that’s all.”

Stalin nodded. “Bad,” he agreed.

“Great,” said Solo. “Just great. How many other symptoms can we look forward to?”

“It varies,” said Bates.

Misha nodded. “We’ve got our own set, and every now and then something new pops up.”

“But the symptoms you’ve got will get worse. That’s why you gotta know how to deal with it.”

Stalin ticked points off on his fingers. “First, to hell with everybody else. What they think doesn’t matter. Second, if you start to fight or argue a lot, come talk to us and we’ll help you figure out what is going on.”

“Yeah,” said Bates. “Because you don’t want to get so mad you shoot each other. Third, you have to set limits. Living together is not always easy. Set limits before you get mad.”

“Limits on what?” asked Solo.

Bates looked uncomfortable. “You know. Limits. Like, if we get ticked off, we never hit each other in the face or the nuts, and never with a fist. That kind of stuff.” His eyes shifted to the damaged wall and he nodded at it. “Them kind of limits over there.”

Napoleon and Illya exchanged guilty glances. Illya said, “We have already set them.”

Stalin continued. “Four, never let the presence of other agents or civilians alter the way you handle your problem. They don’t know what it’s like, and they usually have no clue what Third

Level really is. Just tell them you do what you have to do to stay alive. No one argues with that. And no one tells you to get help for it, either. A desire to survive is an illness everyone understands.”

“All right,” said Solo. “Now what do we do about these rumors in Chicago? About us being gay?”

“Yes,” said Illya. “We would prefer to keep that between us.”

“No shit,” drawled Avery. Then his face split into a lazy grin. “Well, y’all don’t worry. I told this Cornett fella a few things about Third Level. And some of it was even true. He’s doing a little rumor spreading of his own right about now.” Bates winked at Solo and Kuryakin. “This gay talk will die right down, I guarantee.”

Misha nodded and smiled conspiratorially. “We told him some things,” he confirmed.

“Such as?” prompted Solo.

Misha’s dark eyes sparkled. “Such as Third Level partners depend on each other to stay alive, even when they’re not on a mission.”

“Yeah,” added Bates. “They get a little freaky about details like who’s making fun of’em behind their backs. You go overboard to protect each other’s reputations, and men who bad-mouthed you before are dead now. And if they call you queers, the Third Levels in Chicago will not be pleased, and a man won’t know who they are until he’s alone with’em, and at their mercy. And Third Level means you’re so twisted that even Section One is afraid of you.” He winked.

“And other stuff,” said Misha.

“What other stuff?” asked Illya hesitantly.

Bates sucked on his beer. “Oh, stuff like when somebody fucks up real bad, the oldest trick in the book is to try and divert attention from himself by picking a target and screaming ‘Fairy alert!’ all over the place.”

Napoleon looked pained. “Please don’t say ‘fairy’.”

Illya added calmly, “He doesn’t like faggot either.”

“Sorry,” said Bates. “Just a figure of speech.” He snorted. “Besides, you’re the deadliest fucking fairies that ever walked the planet. If more guys found out about you two, they’d think twice before they bashed another queer sumbitch coming out of a bar.”

The sick expression on Solo’s face started out as a smile but got twisted somewhere along the way.

“Thanks, Avery,” he said. “I think.”

“Hey, what you worried about?” Bates shoved Solo amiably. “You got the perfect cover. Somebody screams queer, and you guys just tell’em you’re Third Level.”

“But you two,” said Solo, moving his index finger back and forth from one to the other, “are straight, right?”

Bates nodded. “Most Third Levels are. And believe me, that comes with its own set of problems.”

Misha remained darkly silent.

By midnight, they had moved to the couches. The alcohol levels were high enough that no one wanted to talk anymore. They turned on the late show, with the sound barely audible, and got comfortable. Napoleon pulled blankets out of a closet, and noted with satisfaction that Bates and Stalin were curled like spoons on one sofa while he and Illya did the same on another. Four

weapons were within reach, and when Napoleon reached up to turn on the lamp at the end of the middle sofa, four voices chorussed, "The light stays on."

It was the last thing they said before they fell asleep.

End