

## **The Two Birds, One Stone Affair**

by

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*Dear Diary,*

*Today is so full of first times, I can hardly stand it! It was the first time I ever flew across country on an airplane. Oh, that was silly. Of course it was on a plane. I didn't grow wings. But I got to fly in first class! I am totally spoiled now, because I'll never be able to do that again on my salary.*

*And it was the first time I ever attended a conference as an U.N.C.L.E. employee, so everything was paid for.*

*And it was the first time I ever had two of the handsomest men in the whole organization escort me for the entire trip!*

*We are just about to land in Reno. The conference is at Lake Tahoe, but Napoleon, he's one of my escorts (as if you didn't know all about him, Dear Diary), he said he hates flying into Tahoe in some little tin can plane, so we are renting a car and driving up to the lake.*

*I am writing down every detail of this trip, because it is once in a lifetime. Napoleon gave me a window seat. He is right next to me, sound asleep. And Illya Kuryakin is across the aisle, also sound asleep. These two can sleep anywhere at the drop of a hat. So impressive. I haven't been able to close my eyes for a minute. There's so much to see and all that safety stuff to read. Goodness gracious. They fly a lot, so they probably have it memorized.*

*I don't want to think about it. Crashing, I mean. Napoleon said everything would be all right, that a plane crash should be the least of my worries. He knows how nervous I am about reading a paper at this conference. My nails are bitten down to the quick.*

*More later,*

*Peggy*

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Napoleon Solo tossed the rental car keys to his partner. "I'll help Peggy with her bags. You drive."

Illya nodded. "Good plan." He headed off to retrieve their car.

Peggy Wells pushed her straight dark hair behind her ears and paced back and forth by the luggage conveyor.

"Don't worry, Peggy, they almost never lose any first class luggage." Napoleon looked completely relaxed. He stood, hands in pockets, looking freshly pressed in his gray business suit and tie.

Peggy felt rumpled next to him. Her lemon colored A-line dress had looked so cute in the store. But after six hours on a plane, it looked and felt more like a Z-line. She straightened her red cat's eye glasses and glanced around the luggage area, unconsciously comparing herself to the other women.

Napoleon leaned toward her and said softly, "You look fine."

She jumped. "How did--? Oh, you are so sweet. I feel like a wrinkled bed sheet. How do you manage to look so perfect after a long flight?"

Napoleon smiled. "Lots of practice. That's why men carry those big garment bags. It keeps our suit coats looking stylish. I changed in the men's room before we landed."

"Oh! Aren't you clever." She bit her lip and cast an anxious glance at the hole in the wall where the luggage was supposed to emerge. A loud buzzer sounded and the conveyor began to move.

"Here it comes," said Napoleon.

Silence as they waited. But Peggy was not good at silence. "I just don't understand why Mr. Waverly thought he needed to send his two best agents to take care of me on this trip," she said. "I'm just a translator."

"He's killing two birds with one stone," said Napoleon. "Not that Illya and I have any regrets. It's a bonus for us to have such a lovely traveling companion."

Peggy wagged a finger at him. "The girls at the office warned me about your sweet talk, Mr. Solo."

"Oh, now it's Mr. Solo? When we were taking off, you gripped my hand and called me Napoleon."

Peggy blushed. "Sorry. I was scared."

Napoleon patted her shoulder. "I know. I didn't mind, really. I can't even remember what it was like to fly for the first time."

"Oh, that's my bag over there. And the other one, too, they have green ribbons on the handles so I can tell them apart from the others."

Napoleon stepped to the conveyor belt and lifted the two bags with the ease of a practiced traveller. Peggy reached for them. He let her take the smaller one. "I'll carry this one." He hefted it in his left hand, leaving his right hand free if he needed it. His eyes swept the room, but his words were aimed at Peggy. "Let's go see if my partner has found our rental car." He gestured toward the front of the building where the glass doors showed a line of cars out front waiting for passengers.

Out on the sidewalk, Napoleon spotted Illya right away. Illya hopped out of the car and put Peggy's luggage into the trunk. Peggy was surprised to find their bags already in the car. She hadn't even noticed Illya come back for them. Napoleon held the back door open for her and she slid into the car.

"I love rental cars," said Peggy. "They are always so new."

Napoleon and Illya shared the front seat. As Illya pulled into traffic, Napoleon half turned to speak to Peggy.

"There are a couple of things I need to tell you, Peggy, just routine, but as an U.N.C.L.E. employee, you need to hear them. First of all, Illya and I promised Mr. Waverly we would bring you back safe and sound from this conference. So you must not go anywhere without us, and you must not let anyone but us in your hotel room. Understood?"

Peggy nodded. His serious tone alarmed her a bit, but she had been warned by the girls at the office that Section Two agents were extremely security conscious.

"Secondly, if either Illya or I tell you to do something, no matter how silly or crazy or scary, you have to do it, without hesitation. Got that?"

Peggy felt her insides tumble, like a tray of ice cubes dumped upside down. Her discomfort showed on her face.

Napoleon smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, we would never ask you to do anything inappropriate. I just mean, if we say 'Get down' or 'Hide under your bed' or 'Don't eat that,' I need to know you will take us seriously. We want to keep you safe."

"Gosh, Napoleon, I didn't realize that U.N.C.L.E. personnel were in so much danger all the time."

Illya pulled onto Plumb Lane and headed west for Highway 395. “Napoleon is being overly dramatic,” he said without taking his eyes off the road. “You are not in constant danger. But Mr. Waverly sent us along for a reason, so he might know something we do not. If we think you are in danger, we may bark out some command. You are not Section Two. We need to--”

Napoleon took over, moderating his tone to soften the hard edge of Illya’s words. “We need to make sure you understand that we are just trying to keep you safe. We won’t be bossing you around unless we need to get you into a hiding place quickly.”

Peggy nodded. “Okay.” She shivered with excitement. “Boy, oh boy, this is going to be some story around the water cooler.”

Napoleon laughed and turned to face front.

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*Dear Diary,*

*At last I’m alone in my hotel room! It’s got two big beds in it, and a table and chair and a TV. Everything is color-coordinated. The air conditioner is going full blast. It’s warm outside, but I couldn’t believe it when Napoleon said it was eighty-five degrees! Illya said the dry air made it feel cooler.*

*Napoleon and Illya are in the room next door. They made sure the door between our rooms would open if they needed it to. I just have to trust them. And I do. They are on the job, after all, and whatever happens to us will have to be reported to Mr. Waverly, so I feel real secure. They said we’ll go to dinner in an hour, so I am writing down my memories now while they are still fresh.*

*The drive from Reno was a little peculiar, but I guess life is strange when you are a Section Two agent. Illya hardly talks at all. Napoleon didn’t talk much either. The girls said he really likes to chat up the ladies, but I’ll have to tell them that he only does that when he is not working in the field. Out here he is all business.*

*Illya is a crazy driver! But then, they do call him the Crazy Russian. We were coming up the mountain highway, Mount Rose I think they called it, and all of a sudden he started passing big trucks and cars on those mountain curves! Napoleon just braced himself in the passenger seat and didn’t say a word. Lord knows I wanted to tell him to slow down, but maybe Napoleon stays quiet because talking would distract Illya from driving. I was shaking by the time he slowed down when we got near the hotel. Goodness! I wonder if this how he got his Crazy Russian reputation?*

*They drive crazy in Italy, I know that much. When I was on that cruise ship studying in Europe, we stopped at many ports of call. Italy had the craziest drivers. I wonder if they drive crazy in Russia, too?*

*Napoleon said he was surprised I had never been on a plane before because he had read my file and knew I did that European tour. But I explained that the cruise ship was owned by an American college and it stopped in New York and picked up a bunch of us students for our year of study. I never had to get on a plane that whole trip.*

*I think I'll ask Napoleon to drive us back down the mountain. I'm not sure I could survive another trip with Illya at the wheel.*

*More later. I want to freshen up before dinner.  
Peggy*

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Napoleon hung his clothes in the closet while Illya finished his security sweep of the room.

“You had Peggy white-knuckled during the drive up, you know.”

“Sorry.” He got down on all fours and waved his bug finder under each of the beds. “I suppose I could have slowed down and let that Thrush boon catch us.”

“Goon,” said Solo softly. “Thrush goon. And no, that would not have been my first choice. Were they after us or Peggy?”

Illya stood up and put the bug finder away. “All clear. And that is the sixty thousand ruble question, isn't it? Were they after her or after us?”

Napoleon hung his suit coat in the closet and loosened his tie, then flopped on the bed closest to the bathroom. “She's a sweet kid. I can't believe that Waverly suspects her of anything.”

“Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he has a completely ulterior motive in sending us along.”

“Or in sending her along with us,” said Napoleon, frowning. “That's an angle we hadn't considered.”

Illya opened the little refrigerator and held up a tiny bottle of scotch.

“No, thanks. Our ride up the hill makes me want to stay sharp.”

With a wistful sigh, Illya put the scotch back and fondled the little vodka bottle. “Oh, well, it’s not Stoly, so I don’t care.” He grabbed two Coke bottles instead, popped the caps off on the bottle opener attached to the fridge and passed one to Napoleon. He settled on the other bed. “So you think the Old Man sent Peggy along to help us out? Now, there is a vote of confidence for you. Two big strong field agents like us cannot possibly hope to complete a mission without a fragile flower like Peggy along.”

Napoleon snorted. “That fragile flower has an I.Q. that rivals your own, my friend.”

Illya cocked his head an inch to the right. “Really?”

“Down, boy. The girls at the office warned her about us, remember?”

Illya chuckled. “Very amusing. But they warned her about you, not about me. I am the harmless one.” He wagged his brows up and down.

Napoleon nearly spewed a mouthful of cola all over the bed. “If they only knew.”

Illya winked at him. “So what do we do next?”

“Follow the plan. Escort her to the conference registration desk, let her pick up her packet, then accompany her to the conference welcome dinner and see what transpires. You know, it’s pretty cold of the Old Man to hang her out there as bait.”

“If that is what he is doing.”

“Right. Some day he’s going to overestimate our ability to second guess his desires.”

Illya shrugged. His eyes wandered to the door between rooms, then back to Napoleon. “Is Russian on her list of languages?”

Napoleon squeezed his eyes shut, willing his brain to call up the image of her file. “Nope. No Russian.”

“She studied in Europe? She can’t be that important. As bait, I mean. Translators for European languages are a dime a dozen.”

Napoleon kicked his shoes off and wiggled his toes. “Naughty boy. You didn’t finish your homework. Peggy Wells is not a low cost item. Her language is Mandarin.”

“Chinese?! But she studied in Europe!”

“She learned Mandarin at her grandmother’s knee,” said Napoleon. “Personnel file, page three. How you disappoint me, comrade.”

“Smart ash.”

“Ass,” said Napoleon, punching a pillow. “Wake me in an hour, would you?”

Peggy was ready for them, right on time. She had changed clothes and was wearing a demur white blouse with a blue and red scarf and a straight blue skirt with red piping. Her shoes were red flats.

Napoleon suppressed a smile. She had a style all her own. He couldn’t imagine some of the more sophisticated U.N.C.L.E. ladies in such an outfit, but Peggy made it work. The red accents matched her glasses, and one’s gaze was drawn to her face.

Illya examined her more closely, looking for evidence of the Chinese grandmother. There it was, in the slight epicanthic fold of her eyes, hidden behind her glasses. And now that he knew what he was looking for, he could see her heritage in her smooth skin and her straight dark hair. But not in her demeanor. Peggy was an all American girl. He pulled his horn rims out of his jacket pocket and put them on.

“Oh, Illya, I didn’t know you wore glasses,” said Peggy.

“Only for seeing.” He flashed a tiny smile.

Peggy thought she might swoon.

Napoleon interceded. “Enough charm, Illya. Girls have to take you in tiny doses. Miss Wells?” He offered Peggy his arm.

“Thank you. Do you think this outfit is okay?”

“This conference is full of academics,” said Illya. “You look delightful. You will be the prettiest scholar in the place.”

“Oh, you two are way too nice. I like your jacket, Illya. Maroon looks good on you.”

Napoleon cleared his throat and straightened his tie.

Peggy laughed softly. “Oh, Napoleon, you always look gorgeous. Is that a different suit?”

Illya grunted, “No. He just changed his tie. He’s a chameleon.”

While Peggy chatted with other attendees in line at the registration table, Napoleon and Illya kept their eyes open, scanning the group for faces that might ring alarm bells. Peggy seemed oblivious to their activities, and very comfortable in the conference environment.

By the time Peggy was registered, Napoleon and Illya had reversed their planned roles. It was decided that Illya would escort her to dinner and Napoleon would hang back and play the bodyguard.

“Don’t worry,” said Illya, patting Napoleon’s arm. “I’ll have the kitchen send you some soup.”

Napoleon made a face. In actuality, he did not mind the trade at all. Peggy was much more comfortable with Illya, and Illya knew a lot more languages than Napoleon. He might pick up something useful at the dinner table where Peggy was seated with Russian translators, Arabic interpreters, and a small Asian man who looked like he might have accidentally stumbled into the wrong dinner.

As the salad dishes were being removed, Napoleon spotted three other bodyguards in the room. One looked British but his face was unfamiliar. One was Soviet. Napoleon thought he looked familiar but the name wouldn’t come. The third was Thrush. Napoleon recognized his face from last week’s personnel briefing. No one knew the Thrush’s nationality, but he worked out of the Montreal office. Rudy somebody. Napoleon suspected that several of the conference attendees worked for Uncle Sam, but the Americans never bothered to protect their language specialists. He exchanged civil nods with the Brit and the Soviet, but reserved a cold stare for the Thrush.

As dessert was being served, Napoleon ambled casually by the table and had a quiet word with Illya. “Anything interesting happening over here?”

Illya dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “Peggy has decided to study Russian. The Soviet delegates and I have convinced her it would be a good language to know.” He dropped his voice. “The Arabic interpreters are very intense, but it is my experience that this is their natural state. The Asian gentleman speaks very little, he just smiles and nods.”

“Chinese? Japanese? Vietnamese?”

“No clue yet. Peggy can’t talk to him without shouting across the table. He seems harmless, but then, so do I.”

“Good point. Keep an eye on him. Did you spot my counterparts?”

“Yes, very interesting. I recognize Vasily from--” He paused, glanced at Peggy, then continued, “--other conferences I have attended.”



Solo grinned. That's why the Soviet was familiar. He had met him through Illya.

A waiter maneuvered around Napoleon to set chocolate cheesecake in front of the diners. Illya took one bite, then handed it to Napoleon. "Make your counterparts jealous. Go eat this in front of them."

Still smiling, Napoleon took the cheesecake and retreated to his spot against the wall.

The most difficult part of the evening was the opening speech delivered in heavily accented English by a portly, balding man in his sixties. He droned on for thirty-five minutes about the need for better communication in the modern world, and about his own obscure contributions to the art of translating ancient Hebrew.

By the end of the speech, Napoleon found his attention wandering. He reprimanded himself and was silently grateful that their mission was such an innocuous one when Illya appeared, breathless, at his elbow.

"She's gone!"

Napoleon blinked his lack of comprehension.

Illya repeated, "She's gone! She went to the rest room, and I followed her." He was heading toward the big double doors at the back of the room. Napoleon trotted to keep up. Illya kept talking. "At the door, a group of people crowded around and pushed to get into the room. Almost knocked me down. I went to the ladies' room door, but I thought she had already gone inside. A few minutes later I grew nervous and called out to her. When I finally went in, she was not there." He pointed at the offending door. "There was a middle aged lady in there. She called me a pervert." He ran a hand through his hair.

Napoleon's senses were on alert again. He did a quick glance around the lobby and even peeked into the ladies' room. "They must have grabbed her while the crowd was shoving you around. They didn't have a lot of options about where to take her." He frowned. The only doors in sight were the double doors to the conference ball room, the two restroom doors, and a third marked "Authorized Personnel Only."

"Check the men's room," said Napoleon.

Illya did so. "Nothing." He swore in Russian. "I didn't even think of that."

"They would have removed her as soon as you came to get me anyway, so don't feel too bad." He went to the last door, with the sign on it, and tried the knob. It turned. He expected an array of power switches or janitorial supplies, anything but what he found: a long corridor with doors off either side and a glass door to the exterior at the far end. His forehead scrunched in anger as he

pulled the sign off the door. It came away easily. On the back, three pieces of adhesive tape clung desperately to the cardboard.

“They had a plan,” said Illya.

Napoleon swore in English. “Let’s go.” He headed down the corridor, checking doors left and right, while Illya ran to the other end and looked in vain for a familiar figure outside.

“Nothing! They could be anywhere!” His face darkened with emotion. “I am idiot! Biggest idiot!”

Napoleon finished checking the rooms off the corridor. Most of them were smaller meeting rooms. A middle-aged worker dressed in blue coveralls was setting up tables for the next day’s break-out sessions. He didn’t even glance at Solo. The next room was being used for storage. None of them contained Peggy Wells.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself yet,” said Napoleon. “Maybe she got sidetracked by a friend or a colleague and they stepped outside for a view of the lake. Let’s go out the front and see what we can find.”

They double-timed it back through the lobby and out the main doors of the conference center. The two-lane highway was only a few feet away. If someone had grabbed Peggy, Napoleon knew they could be on their way to Timbuktu for all he knew. They ran around the hotel to the lake side and peered up and down the beach. In the twilight, the air was beginning to cool, but there were still several people in beach attire lounging along the shore. No sign of Peggy.

Illya was furious with himself. “Idiot!”

Napoleon did a slow turn for another look at the beach and something caught his eye. “Here comes something that might make you feel better,” he said, mildly.

Illya followed his gaze and saw Vasily, the Russian bodyguard, pounding up the sidewalk toward them. He called out in Russian as soon as he saw Kuryakin. “My translator has disappeared! Have you seen him?” He pulled up, out of breath from the high altitude and the unfiltered Russian cigarettes that peeked out of his shirt pocket.

Napoleon responded in Russian, surprising Vasily. “Sorry, we haven’t seen anyone in the Russian party.”

“Oh, he’s not Russian,” panted the bodyguard. “I mean, he doesn’t *look* Russian. He is Xie Xiaohua. He’s Chinese with Russian papers.”

Illya's eyes grew big. "The elderly Asian man at our dinner table! He got up and left just a minute or two before Peggy did."

"*Da, da*, he was sitting at your table, Kuryakin. That is why I let my guard down. Stupid! Stupid!"

Napoleon waved a hand. "Stupid, meet Idiot. Idiot, Stupid. Now let's go find our people."

The three of them decided that if their charges had been whisked off the property, they would need more than luck to find them. Meanwhile, there were still areas of the resort they had not checked.

"They both speak Chinese," said Napoleon. "Maybe they went to the bar for a quiet conversation."

They kept their eyes peeled through the casino portion of the resort, to no avail. No sign of Peggy Wells or Xie Xiaohua. They weren't in the bar either.

The room was dark, though, so Illya insisted they check every booth and table. Still no luck. They regrouped at the bar and Vasily ordered a vodka. After a second's hesitation, Illya did the same, and he added a scotch for Napoleon.

"Gee, do you think we should?" Napoleon sniffed the shot glass, then answered his own question by downing the drink in one gulp.

Illya lifted his glass to Vasily. "Na zdoroviye." They drank.

"Okay," said Napoleon, "what have we got? The Thrush agent never left the room, right?"

"Correct," said Vasily. "He was still there when I came out. And so were the people he arrived with. But you know they never work alone."

"If Thrush had been perceived as a threat to Peggy, surely our people would have said something," said Illya. "So we can hope that she did not fall into their hands."

Napoleon nodded. "And Vasily here is practically family so he wouldn't have any reason to deceive us."

Vasily grunted an affirmative. "Correct. And reverse also true."

"Correct," said Illya.

Vasily spread his beefy arms in frustration. "So where are they?"

Napoleon tapped his upper lip. "Have you checked Mr. Xie's room?"

Illya groaned. He said something to the bartender who reached under the bar and set a house phone in front of Illya. Illya waved to Vasily who dialed Xie's room number. He let it ring fifteen times.

"Nichevo. Nothing."

It was Illya's turn. He dialed Peggy's room number. A moment later, a bright cheery voice answered.

"Hello?"

Illya's relief was palpable. "Peggy? Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm great, Illya. I'm just talking with--"

Napoleon was leaning in to listen, and he cut her off. "Don't move. We're on our way up."

Vasily headed for the elevators, but Solo and Kuryakin ran up the fire stairs. At the top, Illya muttered, "Aren't you glad you quit smoking?"

Napoleon winked at him.

A moment later they were at Peggy's door, knocking in unison.

She opened it wide.

Seated at the table by the window was Mr. Xie Xiaohua.

Illya greeted him. "Ni hao."

Xie's face lit up, and he rattled off a greeting and more information than Illya could keep up with at such a fast pace.

Illya patted the air. "Forgive me. I speak survivor Mandarin. Only a little."

Peggy jumped in. "Oh, he's says he so glad to meet you, any friend of mine is also his friend."

At that moment, Vasily clumbered down the hallway and appeared in the doorway that Napoleon had kept open for him. He wagged a sturdy finger at Mr. Xie and spoke sternly to him in Russian. "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

A moment later, the room was filled with a curious melange of sounds. Russian-accented English, Chinese-accented English, Chinese-accented Russian, and various snippets of native English, native Russian and native Chinese.

Napoleon lifted his hands and spoke over them all. “Enough, please! Enough. One at a time. Peggy, what’s this all about?”

Peggy took a moment to translate Napoleon’s words for Mr. Xie. Then she replied in English. “Oh, Napoleon, life can be so strange sometimes! You won’t believe this, but Mr. Xie thinks he is my grandfather!”

“Huh?” Napoleon’s whole face was a question.

Peggy turned a hand over. “You know my grandmother taught me Chinese. Well, she left China when my mother was only five years old, and Mr. Xie’s wife and daughter left China that same year. Did you know there were American horse marines in China from 1912 to 1938? They were there to protect the American population, especially in Peking. My grandmother worked for one of the ladies, and because things were getting very difficult for China then, the American family managed to bring my grandmother and mother to the U.S. when they came home in 1925. Mr. Xie thinks it was his wife and daughter. He thought she went to Russia because one of the ladies in the house spoke Russian, but it turned out the American lady’s mother was a Russian immigrant to the U.S. so naturally--”

“Stop, stop, stop,” begged Vasily. He turned a pleading glance to Illya, who quickly gave him a summary in Russian.

Vasily rolled his eyes. “Bozhe moi.”

Napoleon crinkled one eye. “So Mr. Xie went looking for them in Russia?”

“Yes!” Peggy was delighted. “Mr. Solo, you are so smart. Anyway, after many years, he gave up on ever finding them and he made a career for himself as a translator and interpreter in the Soviet Union. But he always pined for them.”

Vasily took a seat at the table and offered Xie a cigarette. Soon the two were polluting the atmosphere in joyful abandon.

Illya put a hand on Peggy’s shoulder. “But Peggy, what makes you think he might be your grandfather? That is quite a stretch of the imagination.”

“He has a picture of them. He still carries it,” she said softly. She spoke to Xie, and he nodded eagerly, pulling the cherished photo from an inside pocket. Peggy returned to Illya with the photo. “Remember how he was staring at me over the dinner table? Well, this is why.”

Illya and Napoleon studied the photo. A slender Chinese woman stood in a park-like setting, holding the hand of a delicate child. The photo was small and sepia-toned with age, but the similarities between Peggy and the woman in the photo were stunning.

Napoleon searched for the right words. “Peggy, I know this is exciting, the idea of finding a long-lost relative, but this is a very tiny photograph, and really, this could be anyone.”

Peggy nodded, her smile threatening to split her face in two. “Yes, Napoleon. It could be anyone who looks just like me wearing a polka-dotted dress with a little girl wearing a matching dress. And my grandmother has one photo from her life in China, and it is this exact photo. And she has kept the two dresses her whole life.”

“Wow,” said Napoleon softly. “So, the chances that he is really your grandfather are pretty good, then.”

“Yes. Isn’t it wonderful? And I have a huge favor to ask.”

Napoleon raised his brows.

“I want to bring my grandmother and my mother here to Tahoe to meet Mr. Xie and reunite them.”

“Well, wouldn’t it be easier to take Mr. Xie to New York?”

Peggy shook her head. “No, not really. My mother and grandmother live in San Francisco.”

Illya shrugged. “Shall I call Mr. Waverly?”

Napoleon frowned. “Not yet. Something’s off.”

Illya’s face was a question.

Napoleon chewed on his bottom lip. “Remember the fake sign on the door to the hallway?”

Illya’s expression darkened. “You said they had a plan. Who?”

“That would be the question, wouldn’t it?”

A moment later there was a knock at the door. Without a word, Vasily herded Peggy and Mr. Xie into the bathroom. Napoleon and Illya moved to either side of the door. Napoleon called out, "Who is it?"

"I say, can you lend a fellow a hand?"

Napoleon leaned toward the peephole, then opened the door.

The British bodyguard looked none too pleased. "May I come in?"

"Please do," said Illya.

"Let me guess," said Napoleon. "Someone has gone missing."

"Yes! How did you know?"

Illya quipped, "He's psycho."

"Psychic," said Napoleon. "He means I'm psychic."

Illya turned away to hide a smile.

"I'm Napoleon Solo and this is my partner--"

"Yes, quite, Illya Kuryakin. My name is Brian. Brian Waverly. I work for--"

"Waverly?!"

Brian looked long suffering. He was taller than Napoleon, had thinning sandy hair and large gray eyes. "Did Uncle Alex send you here to check up on me?"

"Not at all," said Napoleon.

"He never even mentioned you to us," said Illya.

"Not a word," said Napoleon. "He sent us out here bird hunting."

Vasily peeked out of the bathroom. "All clear?"

"All clear," said Napoleon. "I think we found out who's really missing."

Vasily nodded a greeting at Brian. "Mr. Oxford."

“Waverly.”

“*Da*. You talk like Oxford.”

“Oh, quite.”

“Who were you sent to guard?” asked Illya.

Brian pulled a photo out of his jacket. “The whole thing’s a bloody mess, really. His name is William Weatherby. He’s a genius with languages and a master cryptographer. I’m afraid he’s been taken by Thrush. Ordinarily I’d have access to back up, but over here, I’m out of my element. Would you mind awfully giving me a hand?”

“Not at all,” said Napoleon. He glanced at the photo. Fortyish, slim, glasses, light brown hair starting to gray. He handed the photo to Vasily who looked at it shrugged, and passed it to Illya. Peggy and Mr. Xie peeked at it from either side. Mr. Xie recognized the photo right away, and began speaking excitedly to Peggy.

“What is it?” asked Illya.

Mr. Xie reached into his pocket and withdrew a napkin covered with symbols. He handed it to Napoleon as Peggy began to explain.

“He says that he was sitting in the lobby before dinner with a British man who spoke to him in Russian. They began to get acquainted, and then the doors opened for seating. The other man was the one in the photo. He asked Mr. Xie to take this note. When grandfather asked him what to do with it, he said, ‘You will know.’ Then he went into the dining room. He was seated at a different table. Grandfather says the man seemed nervous and fidgety.”

Napoleon unfolded the napkin. “It’s covered in gibberish.”

Illya took the napkin to the table. Soon they were all crowded around as he spread it out on the table. “It would appear to be gibberish, but obviously it is not. Otherwise, why give it to Xie?”

Napoleon turned to Brian. “You have any idea what might be on the napkin?”

Brian looked bleak. “Not at all. Probably something about the end of my career.”

Napoleon blinked at his dead pan delivery. “Oh,” he said at last. “British humor.”

Illya pulled a pen out of his pocket and sat down at the table. He began talking to Xie in Russian, pointing at this symbol and that. The napkin was covered with a hodgepodge of different scripts and even included a few Chinese characters and what looked like hieroglyphics.



Napoleon pulled Brian and Vasily aside. “The big question here is whether that napkin can tell us where Weatherby is. If Thrush took him, it is unlikely he had time to code a plea for help. Why not just write HELP on the damn thing?”

Brian nodded. “Exactly. While they puzzle over this enigma, shall we take our pursuit elsewhere?”

Napoleon filled him in on the fake door sign they had encountered, and the handy crowd that had blocked Illya’s path when he tried to follow Peggy out of the banquet hall. “Maybe those obstructions were not intended for us, but for you instead?”

“Quite. That makes excellent sense. But you didn’t find anyone in those rooms that looked like Weatherby?”

“No, no one. I--” He stopped himself. “Just a second. There was a man setting up tables in one of those rooms.” He closed his eyes and concentrated. “Not Weatherby. But...” He willed his memory to recreate the scene. “Oh, for the love of... He was wearing very expensive Italian loafers with his blue coveralls.”

Vasily grunted. “Not a casino worker.”

“Illya, any luck?”

Illya did not look up. “We have some ideas, but nothing definite yet.”

“I’m going to help Brian look for Weatherby. Vasily, you stay here. Two people to guard, two guards, okay?” Besides, Illya was poring over the napkin, seemingly oblivious to everything else. “Peggy, come lock the door after us. No one gets in, do you understand?”

Peggy nodded, her eyes bright with excitement. “Yes, of course.”

Napoleon headed for the stairs. Brian followed.

“I do hope you have some idea of where to look next,” said Brian.

Napoleon did not even spare him a glance. Down another flight.

“Are you upset with me about something?”

Napoleon pounded even faster down the stairs.

“You might give me a hint here.” Brian’s irritation was growing.

At the bottom of the stairs, Napoleon swung around and blocked Brian from exiting through the door to the lobby. "You want to know what's wrong? I'll tell you." His words were clipped and sharp. "I'm tired of being sent out on rescue missions. Every time Waverly has a relative in trouble, he picks me and Illya to risk our lives as babysitters."

Brian brushed it off. He straightened his shoulders and replied evenly, "If that's why he sent you, then I am as chuffed with the old man as you are, and I'll be sure to tell him so. Meanwhile, you should know that I worked my way up, first as an officer in the RAF and then into MI5. I'm highly trained, rather experienced, and damned competent. If we're dealing with Thrush here, I prefer you focus your anger on them and not worry about me."

Napoleon took a slow breath, and some of the tension drained away. He nodded. "Well said. Sorry I lost my temper."

Brian adjusted his jacket on his shoulders. "Quite all right. If you think Uncle Alex is hard to work with, try growing up in that family."

Napoleon smiled. "Truce?"

"Truce. Let's go find Weatherby."

They entered the lobby carefully, eyes left and right. "Might as well try the obvious," Napoleon muttered under his breath. He strode to the registration desk. "Excuse me, miss?" He turned on his best boy scout smile. "I was supposed to meet Mr. Weatherby here in the lobby, but I'm a little late. Did you see him here earlier?"

"Weatherby? One of the translators?" She was thirtyish, and her ample bosom strained the buttons on her blouse.

"Yes."

She frowned. "Is he about so tall, middle-aged, sandy hair and glasses?"

Brian nodded. "That could be him, yes."

She held up a finger. "I saw him with two other men just a short while ago. They went into the business copy center. It's right this way." She turned and headed through a door at the end of the registration desk.

Napoleon and Brian exchanged wary looks as they followed her. Napoleon's hand moved slowly under his jacket to his shoulder holster. When Brian glanced in his direction, he patted it, as if to signal his readiness.

Brian nodded and went through the door first. The employee was waiting at the other end of what looked like a mail room. She waved them on.

Napoleon slid past Brian. "My turn," he murmured, and he took point through the next door. The hairs on the back of his neck rose in warning a split second before Brian shoved him hard into the room.

Two men grabbed Solo's arms before he could reach his weapon.

Brian closed the door behind him.

Napoleon quipped, "Well, now, isn't this a cozy copy center? A British imposter, two thugs, a female Thrush, and a hostage."

"Shut up," said Brian.

The venetian blinds were drawn shut on the glass windows. A row of mimeograph machines and typewriters lined one wall. The two thugs, including the one Solo had spotted in the banquet hall, had been guarding a third man. He was fortyish but trim, light brown hair going gray at the temples, wearing glasses. He was gagged with a hotel napkin and his hands were tied behind his back.

The woman lifted a plastic cover off an IBM Selectric and picked up a Luger. It was wearing a silencer. She pointed it at Solo. "Sit down on the floor over there, Mr. Solo. Rudy, tape his hands." One of the thugs did as she order. The other retrieved his own weapon and stationed himself near the hostage.

Brian carefully relieved Solo of his gun before shoving him to the floor.

"I told you it would work," said Brian blithely. "All I had to do was pretend to be Waverly there, and the U.N.C.L.E. agents fawned all over themselves to come help me." He slipped Solo's gun into his jacket pocket.

Napoleon made a face. "I wouldn't call it fawning."

The woman spoke. "If they were so eager, where's the Russian? He's more dangerous than this one."

Napoleon looked hurt. "Hey, let's not get nasty. Ow! Careful with that duct tape. You'll pull the hair off my wrists."

He lifted his chin in the direction of the real Brian Waverly. "Are you all right?"

The gray eyes showed concern but he nodded once.

“He won’t be for long if we don’t find that napkin he was scribbling on,” snapped the woman.

Napoleon’s eyebrows arched. “Oh, you mean the one my dangerous partner is decoding as we speak? The one your fake Brian saw upstairs a few minutes ago?”

The woman’s expression darkened. “You saw it and you did nothing?! Why didn’t you take it?!”

Because there were three armed men in the room,” he snapped. “I’m not bloody suicidal. Now that we have Solo, they’ll turn over the napkin.”

The woman’s voice became a screeching whisper. “You fool! You left sensitive Thrush secrets in the hands of Illya Kuryakin?!”

Fake Brian backed away, suddenly uncomfortable. “We’ll get it back, Dr. Egret.” He lifted a hand to ward her off.

Egret fired the Luger twice, pop, pop. A small bloom of blood stained Fake Brian’s shirt front, but only a small one. His heart had already stopped pumping. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Napoleon remained calm. “Egret. I’ve heard your name before, Doctor. Quite an impressive resume.”

Egret was flushed and excited from the kill. Her eyes were wild. She drew a deep breath and imposed self-control like a tight-fitting dress. “Why, thank you, Mr. Solo. We’ve heard your name as well. Too bad you and your colleagues will not live long enough to watch my meteoric rise through the ranks of Thrush.”

“Oh, I could be an appreciative audience if you give me the chance,” he said.

Egret laughed. Then she clenched her jaw. “Not bad, Solo. Nice technique, stalling for time. These two gentlemen are going to go upstairs to the room where little Peggy Wells is staying. They are going to commit a small massacre, but don’t expect it to show up in the papers. We have a very efficient clean-up crew.”

“And we will wait here for their return?” asked Solo.

Egret snorted. “Don’t be absurd. We’re going to do what that fool should have done. Too bad your partner is so bright. If I thought he was incapable of deciphering that napkin, I might let

those people live.” She held the gun on Solo and used her other hand to wave her henchmen toward the door. “Go. Kill them all. Silencers. I’ll be right behind you.”

Rudy and his partner in thugdom unlocked the door and left the room.

“Now, as for you two--”

The door exploded inward. Illya Kuryakin did a forward roll into the room. At that moment a smoke screen erupted with a poof.

“She’s got a gun,” coughed Solo.

Vasily blocked the door. Illya tackled the only human body not sitting on the floor. “Not her,” he coughed back. He dragged the man out of his chair and helped him out of the room. Vasily squinted through the smoke, his eyes watering badly. He grabbed Solo’s arm and lifted him to his feet. Together they left the room and closed the door behind them.

In the mail room, two Thrush thugs lay sleeping quietly in one corner.

“I didn’t see any woman in there,” choked Illya, wiping at his eyes.

“Untie me,” coughed Solo. Vasily found scissors and cut through the duct tape. “She’ll go after Peggy!”

Illya removed Brian Waverly’s gag and duct tape. “Don’t worry, Napoleon. Peggy and Mr. Xie are safe and sound. That’s what took me so long. I heard everything from the moment you turned on your communicator before you went into the room. But I had to make sure they were hidden away first. Sorry.”

Napoleon wiped the last remnants of the smoke and gas from his face. “No need to apologize, my friend. As always, your timing was impeccable.” He held a hand out to Vasily. “As was yours.”

Vasily shook it and grunted his thank you. “What about the body on the floor?”

“The fake Brian? He was dead before the smoke screen, so we’ll let someone else deal with it.” Napoleon turned to the real Brian. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Hard to believe, but I am.”

“All that RAF and MI5 stuff the fake Brian told me about. Was that your background?”

“No. I dare say it was the background of the poor fellow he must have replaced. A man named Weatherby who was supposed to be my escort to this conference.”

Napoleon took out his communicator and turned it off, then replaced it in his pocket. “Are you a translator, then?”

“No, I work for U.N.C.L.E.”

“U.N.C.L.E.? Or uncle?” asked Napoleon.

The real Brian smiled. “Both, actually.”

“Of course.”

“I say, do you have the napkin?”

Illya brought it forth from a pants pocket. “Here it is.”

“Thank you.” Brian took out a lighter and set it ablaze.

Napoleon and Illya reached for it instinctively.

“Don’t worry,” said Brian. “It’s committed to memory.” He tapped his forehead. “That copy was in case the lovely Dr. Egret happened to kill me.” He straightened his tie. “Shall we go? I’m looking forward to thanking Mr. Xie and meeting the rest of your party.”

He exited the mail room as if he owned the hotel. Vasily shrugged and followed him. Napoleon and Illya exchanged a look.

Illya asked, “Is everything all right?”

Napoleon straightened his cuffs. “Actually, everything is hunky dory.”

“Hung key doory?”

Napoleon grinned, then leaned close. “Let’s just say, I’m glad the real Brian didn’t hear what I told the fake one in the stair well. Otherwise, we might be out of a job.”

“Ah. And what about Egret?”

“I would rather get back to our charges and be watching them than running around looking for an escape artist like Egret. Not much in her file yet, but that part was underlined. We’ll call the police on these two sleeping beauties.”

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*Dear diary,*

*What a wonderful trip this has been! Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin have been so kind to me. They arranged with the San Francisco U.N.C.L.E. office to have my mother and grandmother escorted to Lake Tahoe to meet Mr. Xie. It was so emotional for us all. Illya says now I must learn to speak Russian, and I think he is right.*

*My presentation at the conference was a success, but my mind was elsewhere. There was a big crowd! I thought I would be speaking to six or seven interpreters from other agencies, but word got out about my grandfather, and before you knew it, the room was full of well wishers and others who had heard about our reunion.*

*Fortunately, all the flubs and mistakes of my presentation were in English so my grandparents hardly noticed. Illya said I was brilliant and I am much too hard on myself. Napoleon said there were only three people in the room who even understood what I was talking about, so I shouldn't worry. I guess that was his way of saying I was brilliant.*

*Grandfather asked Vasily to take him to the Russian embassy in San Francisco tomorrow to see if he can get a tourist visa for a while in San Francisco. I think it might work out. If it doesn't, I promised I would start studying Russian right away so I can escort my mother and grandmother on trips to the Soviet Union to visit Mr. Xie. It is still too soon for me to feel comfortable calling him grandfather, but he is such a sweet and wonderful man. I totally understand how my grandmother fell in love with him. She never married again after coming to America. She finally decided that something had happened to her husband, that he must have died in an accident or in some of the difficulties in China.*

*Tomorrow Napoleon and Illya will take me to San Francisco because Mr. Waverly has a job for them there. They did say Mr. Waverly was killing two birds with one stone. I guess I was just lucky to be flying in the same direction. They talked to Mr. Waverly and told him what happened here and got permission for me to spend a week with my family, so I will be going to San Francisco with them. And Illya gave me the name of a bookstore there that will have the perfect Russian language textbook for me.*

*Love,  
Peggy*

*End*

