

Author's Note: This vignette was originally written for the **HODOWE: Groundhog Day Challenge** and evokes the idea of "the awakening of the earth".

*It is actually an aftertake on my fanfic story **THE STICKING IN MUD AFFAIR**, which has not yet been publicly posted. However, the vignette can stand on its own. So read and let this little tale whet your mental appetite (I hope) for the longer story to come.*



A woodland in full color is awesome as a forest fire, in magnitude at least, but a single tree is like a dancing tongue of flame to warm the heart.

Hal Borland

A SINGLE BLUE TONGUE OF FLAME

BY [LAH](#)

Midwinter 1970

Outside a shutdown Thrush science facility in rural New Jersey

Six months. That was all it had taken Thrush's Microorganism Ubiquity Depredator, aka MUD, to desolate the ecology of this once life-teaming streambed. In the fresh waters, few species of fauna any longer made their natural home. And the banks of the babbling brook displayed dull brown soil essentially inhospitable to flora. The area looked sadly deserted by the better things

of the earth all because of an unrestrained avarice for power within a lethally organized group of self-imagined “superior” human beings.

Illya Kuryakin let out a long, slow sigh. He found this vista intensely depressing, perhaps even more so because here in the end U.N.C.L.E. had indeed done its job in safeguarding the core of humanity. In the summer of the previous year the “good guys” had shut down the Thrush facility producing the MUD and incarcerated that concoction’s mentally brilliant but emotionally skewed creator and most of her cohorts. Yet they hadn’t been able to save this locale Thrush had utilized for the illicit testing of its MUD.

Today a team of U.N.C.L.E. specialists were ensconced in the erstwhile Thrush satrapy nearby. Those experts were finishing up the necessities for insuring the stockpile of MUD, stored in man-made tunnels under the compound, was rendered inert. The holding channels had been effectively sealed last summer, but neutralizing the MUD required exposing it to high doses of concentrated ultraviolet light. Singular equipment had needed to be built for such purpose, and currently U.N.C.L.E. personnel were installing and activating that now completed machinery in a two-week operation.

Illya’s field partner, Napoleon Solo, was assigned as the lead in the security phase of this Command business, providing protection for the engineers, technicians and scientists handling the MUD deactivation. Along with a dozen other enforcement agents, Illya was part of the assigned Section II contingent employing experienced ears and well-trained eyes in an effort to curtail any potential Thrush retaliatory strike or other external peril. The internal spaces of the main building meanwhile were being continually patrolled by a combined team of more than two-score Section III and Section V personnel. Mr. Waverly was taking no chances with this venture. The MUD was just too dangerous to ever again fall into the hands of the supra-nation, even if its hold wound up only tight enough for the current stockpile to be released into the nearby environment as a vengeance scheme.

Illya crouched near the streambed and lifted a handful of dirt into his palm. From a distance down the course of the brook Napoleon now came into view. “It’s nitrogen depleted,” Kuryakin commented to Solo as the other man drew near enough to hear him easily. “The whole natural cycle of life has been interrupted here.”

Napoleon nodded as he walked up directly beside Illya. “That was Thrush’s goal.”

“Yes,” agreed Illya bitterly, “to use the threat of releasing the MUD into the fresh water systems of any nation that didn’t accede to their demands.”

“Typical Thrush tactic.”

“A vile tactic formulated by an immoral gang of truly depraved thugs,” Illya conceded gloomily as he let the barren soil sift through his fingers.

Napoleon eyed his partner assessingly. “You’re in one hell of a black mood, tovarisch. We did ultimately save the world from that malevolent Thrush machination, do remember.”

“We didn’t save this streambed,” countered Illya a bit hostilely as he rose once more to his feet, dusting his hands together to remove the last of the dirt as he did so.

“No, we didn’t,” conceded Solo. “Our endeavors weren’t perfect, but we certainly didn’t do too badly. Thrush wound up on the losing end, after all.”

Illya knew only too well that he had far less personal justification to be upset about the details of the original MUD mission than did Napoleon. It hadn’t been him who U.N.C.L.E. had ordered to play the role of shill and allow himself to be captured by the enemy. It hadn’t been him who had been subjected to the private physical control fetishes of the female Thrush biochemist who had invented the MUD. It hadn’t been him whose wholesale exposure to the MUD had resulted in a life-threatening hypersensitivity to chlorine that only now was substantially subsiding under an intensive exposure therapy regimen instituted for Solo by the Command medical section. Still, something about that past mission, about the lost natural abundance of this streambed, about the unmentioned indignities his friend had suffered as part of that particular undertaking, left him heart-sore and spirit-weary.

Solo tilted his head as he eyed his partner once more. Illya’s present ill humor was not just a frame of mind predicated on his characteristic pragmatism. Napoleon bit his lip as he ruminated on the other man’s current despondency. This was something he simply could not ignore. His friend needed a means to “pull himself up by his bootstraps” out of the dark glumness in which he was currently mired as firmly as any living organism had ever been stuck in that Thrush MUD.

Quickly Napoleon formed a strategic plan, one he was at least reasonably certain would work.

“Come with me, Illya.”

Kuryakin didn’t question, simply nodded and followed Solo along the course of the stream until they came to a spot that had, from his former location, been completely out of Illya’s line of sight. And there on the banks of the little brook a fluffy cloud of white and green and blue fronds, a solitary flare in life’s communal blaze, had struggled up from the worn-out soil. The Russian’s jaw dropped, halfway to his knees Napoleon would have sworn if asked.

“Blue love grass,” noted Napoleon with a nod toward the persistent clump of vegetation.

“*Eragrostis elliottii*,” Illya automatically provided the correct scientific name. “But what is it doing here? It’s not native to this area. It is very chlorine tolerant, so I will grant that remainder of the MUD wouldn’t affect it overmuch. Yet how is it managing to thrive in this nitrogen-starved soil?”

Napoleon shrugged. “How the hell should I know? I’m no botanist. Perhaps a few seeds from someone’s garden got carried here by the wind or by the current of the stream. Perhaps it rooted itself deep enough in the earth to eke out sufficient minerals to get by. Perhaps it has mutated to perform some kind of nutrient conversion on the abundant chlorine. Who can say anything for certain except that it is here and surviving?”

Illya turned toward Napoleon and squinted suspiciously. “You have a point to make with this, don’t you?”

Solo laughed lightly. “You know what day today is, I.K.?”

“Monday, February 2nd, 1970.”

Solo laughed even more heartily at his friend's very factual response. "Detail-oriented much, Kuryakin?"

"You did ask a rather literal question." Illya's tone was just a tad affronted.

"Okay, okay, I give. But what I was aiming at is that today is Groundhog Day."

"And that relates to the current situation how?"

"Illya, Groundhog Day is really about taking stock and moving forward. You know: Will winter persist? Or will spring achieve its yearly takeover?"

"I understand the concept," Illya interjected. "Its origins, you know, are in the European idea of the ground awakening at Candlemas—"

"You can provide me an in-depth history another time," interrupted Napoleon in turn, "but for now what I am trying to get at, Illya, is that Mother Nature is one stubborn lady. She doesn't give up easily. She perseveres, she endures, and she pulls off more successful coups than all the generals in all the military-run governments that have ever existed. And thus, in the end, life usually finds a way. No matter the odds against it doing so, with nature as its driving force, life eventually triumphs."

Illya blinked. For a long moment he stayed silent as he pondered what his friend had said. Of course Solo's fundamental optimism played a large part in the point the man was making, but Illya couldn't deny that it was a valid point nonetheless. And a good point. In fact, it was a wonderful point.

Illya's face erupted into a totally ingenuous broad grin. "Nature is the mother and Possibility is the father and the resulting infant is Life itself."

Now it was Solo who blinked. "That's one profoundly positive statement, tovarisch."

"I have my upbeat moments."

"Guess I've have to tell everyone from now on you're a sanguine Russian."

"Let's not go overboard, Napoleon. I do have a professional reputation to maintain."

Which characteristically pragmatic assertion by the Russian amused the fundamentally optimistic American no end.

—THE END—

