

Author's Note: This story was created for the **HODOWE: International Left-handers Day Challenge** and focuses on the concept of "left-handedness" related to a morganatic marriage.



The dream is his real life; the world around him is the dream.

Michel de Montaigne

THE CINDERFELLA AFFAIR

BY [LAH](#)

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U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York City

There was an undeniable spring in the step of Napoleon Solo as he walked down one of the many gunmetal-hued corridors in the North American headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Life for him was currently good, actually much better than good. He had recently started on a career as an enforcement agent, a career that provided him in its philosophical concepts an outlet for his most altruistic and humanitarian tendencies while giving him in the form of physical action the kick of ready adrenaline he unthinkingly craved. And that profession also made full use of his quite uncanny ability to strategize in often unconventional ways. What more could a man honestly ask of the vocation he had chosen for himself?

Now to top it all off there was Clara Richards, the young woman who had taken a firm grip on his heart. The two of them had been friends since childhood, but the heady emotional intoxicant of romance had recently entered into that already secure relationship. Today was the first Valentine's Day they were going to spend as a "couple", and he had definite plans in the works. He had even managed to land a half-day off and thus would be on his way to pick up Clara for their tryst in just a couple more hours. His mood was so upbeat; it was all he could do to keep from whistling as he walked toward the office of Alexander Waverly, the Continental Chief of U.N.C.L.E.'s North American division.

And that was another thing for him to be pleased about: he had been summoned to Mr. Waverly's office for a mission briefing. This was in no way, shape or form usual. Though he was Section II, he was just getting his feet wet in the espionage business, having been an agent for less than two months. He had graduated from Survival School top of his class; in fact top of any class to date. His commission into Section II had been immediate and his assignment into the New York main office had been an added mark of achievement. But of course he was yet "low on the totem pole" and his duties thus far had been as back-up to men more experienced in the vagaries of keeping world order. Yet today he had been especially sent for by Mr. Waverly himself. That could only mean a more sensitive and thus important task was being assigned him. Something to employ all his many talents, both those naturally come by and those rigorously learned within the confines of the Command's tough training school. And he was ready for the challenge; he was more than ready. Yes, life at this moment was downright grand!

"Ah, Mr. Solo," Mr. Waverly greeted him as he entered through the auto-pneumatic doors into the confines of the chief's private domain. "Please take a seat."

"Sir," acknowledged Napoleon respectfully as he sat down in an available chair before the round desk-cum-conference table, nodding a silent hail to the other man already seated, Jake Sterrelis, the current head of Section II and his own direct supervisor.

"It has come to my attention, Mr. Solo, that your grandfather on your mother's side was none other than Franklin Milbourne, one of this country's most honored diplomats," Waverly commenced the briefing.

"Yes sir," responded Napoleon perfunctorily. This fact was no secret. It was indeed a matter of record in his personnel file, the entirety of which even the greenstick agent had no doubt the extraordinarily well-informed head of Section I knew backwards as well as forwards.

"And that he did at one time serve as U.S. Ambassador to Italy," Waverly went on.

"Yes sir, until he was recalled home when the tensions between the United States and Italy became too pronounced during World War II."

"Just so, just so," Waverly agreed with a nod. "And that, during the timeframe of his ambassadorship, you were a member of the embassy household."

"Sir," interjected Napoleon in some confusion, "my grandfather was my legal guardian from just a few months after my birth. Thus wherever his diplomatic career took him, I was a member of that household. This is, I'm sure, not unknown to you, so I fail to understand—"

"You know of the nation of Nascoste I take it, Mr. Solo?" Waverly interrupted.

"An island sovereignty between Italy and Albania in the Adriatic Sea."

"Yes, a sovereignty, Mr. Solo, recently coming under the rule of Grand Princess Abriana."

"So I heard on the news."

"You are acquainted with the Grand Princess, Mr. Solo."

It wasn't a question and thus it puzzled Napoleon. "Sir?" he found himself querying in return.

“When you were eight years old and residing as part of your grandfather’s household in the U.S. Embassy in Rome, you escorted the then seven-year-old Crown Princess, who had lost her way in the huge compound, back to the apartments where her father, Grand Prince Adalfieri, was being temporarily housed during a weeklong diplomatic conference.”

Napoleon blinked. The specific memory did indeed come back to him, but how in the world had Waverly known about such an insignificant incident in his past?

“I... uh... Yes sir,” was all he could manage to stumble out.

“The Grand Princess remembers you fondly,” put in Sterrelis now.

“She... What?” questioned a now completely nonplussed Napoleon as he glanced back-and-forth between the faces of his boss and his boss’ boss.

Act I: Once upon a time...

“Let me explain it all to you in more detail, Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly submitted easily as he reached for his favorite pipe.

“That would be appreciated, sir.”

Napoleon watched in quiet anxiety as the Continental Chief leisurely packed his preferred pipe with his personal blend of Isle of Dogs 22 tobacco and, once it was filled to his liking, lit the contents of the bowl. The Number 1 in Section I then took a long and unhurried puff before he began his explanation.

“We have reason to believe that Thrush is in Nascoste at this time attempting an extension of influence, shall we call it, through the royal family itself.”

“Ah. So you’re hoping to somehow counter-influence the Grand Princess into seeing the ultimate negative of Thrush’s machinations? The hollowness of any splendid promises they may make?”

Waverly put up a hand in warning as he took another though much shorter draw on his pipe. “Do not attempt to get ahead of me, young man.”

“Sorry, sir,” apologized the chastened Napoleon.

“It is not the Grand Princess whose loyalty Thrush is attempting to woo. That young woman has been bred in the intricacies of ruling politics and is not easily cajoled into releasing a sure hand on any reins of government. But the Grand Princess has a younger sister...”

“The Princess Adjuvant Donjeta,” Jake supplied readily when it appeared Mr. Waverly might be at a bit of a loss regarding the name and official title of the royal in question.

“Not quite nineteen and wayward as a wild mare,” continued Waverly, skillfully weaving in the timely interjection of his Number 1 in Section II as if it was but a planned part of his own discourse. “And it is this young woman in whom the circling Thrush is sinking its claws.”

“She has taken as a close political mentor one Zamir Continetti,” Sterrelis took up the account. “His connections to Thrush are a bit vague, but nonetheless very much traceable. Of course, since the Grand Princess is not yet wed and therefore has no legitimate offspring, the Princess Adjuvant is next in line to the throne.”

“Correct me if I am misstating the obvious,” put in Napoleon, “but didn’t Grand Princess Abriana just turn twenty-one earlier this month? She has plenty of time to settle down and produce a slew of royal progeny.”

“No doubt, Mr. Solo,” agreed Mr. Waverly, “but Thrush would undoubtedly prefer Princess Adjuvant Donjeta remain the heir apparent.”

“You think they will make an attempt on the life of the Grand Princess?”

“Not at this time, Mr. Solo. It would smack of... being too suspiciously auspicious a turn in events. It would put all Thrush’s cards face up on the table, so to speak.”

Napoleon pinched the bridge of his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand hoping to combat the onset symptoms of a headache. Just what he didn’t need with all the special plans he had for tonight.

“What has any of this to do with me, Mr. Waverly?” Napoleon finally demanded a bit testily. “If I may be so bold as to ask,” he then tempered the bluntness of his inquiry.

Waverly turned his gaze toward Sterrelis and nodded shortly. Jake took a deep breath and then revealed with deliberate emphasis, “Princess Adjuvant Donjeta would be officially recognized as the Crown Princess if her older sister was to marry against the succession laws of Nascoste.”

Napoleon simply stared blankly at the Chief Enforcement Agent. He still had no inkling where any of this was going.

“If she married a commoner, Nascoste’s royal inheritance laws would declare such a marriage morganatic with any offspring of the union ineligible for ascension to the throne. Thus leaving the path to future governance of the country clear for Donjeta and the behind-the-scenes manipulations of her bird-affiliated advisor,” concluded Jake in a bit of a rush, as if he had suddenly run out of sufficient oxygen to speak in measured confidence as the head of Section II.

“I still don’t see—”

“Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly forwarded in the tone of a teacher who had hoped the pupil would himself have picked up on the gist of the lesson before now, “as you are an American, you are very much a commoner in the eyes of Nascosten law. The Grand Princess has, we know, spoken fondly of that long-ago encounter between you as children. If you were to renew your acquaintance now as young adults, perhaps a spark could be ignited.”

Napoleon’s mouth dropped open. He couldn’t help it; this was completely astonishing, a startlingly unwelcome bolt from the blue.

“You want me to romance the Grand Princess?” he sought to be told outright.

Mr. Waverly waved his hand dismissively at this logical but limited assumption. “Mr. Solo, we want you to **marry** the Grand Princess.”

Funny how life could turn on a dime. Little more than an hour ago he had been happily contemplating on his upcoming tryst with Clara while making his way to the office of the Number 1 in Section I, cheerfully anticipating his first truly significant assignment as an enforcement agent for U.N.C.L.E. Well, he'd gotten that “significant assignment” all right. And now Napoleon Solo sat in the office of one of the organization's etiquette coaches being briefed on specifics regarding how to address and act around members of Nascosten royalty.

He felt like he had been hit by the mental equivalent of a Mack truck. Of course Mr. Waverly and Jake Sterrelis had ultimately explained both the logic and logistics of the plan. Continetti had been making his advice indispensable to the Princess Adjuvant no doubt under Thrush orders, but why exactly remained a mystery. Why did the supra-nation want a foothold in Nascoste via the royal family itself? What was their ultimate goal? Nascoste wasn't a mineral or monetarily rich principality. It wasn't any seat of world power. It was extremely small and politically insignificant. It sheltered no great natural resources. It was just a pleasant little island in the Adriatic where the main financial boost came from tourism. So why was it of such interest to Thrush?

...“We need answers, Mr. Solo,” the Continental Chief had informed his agent bluntly, “and we need them in a hurry. If Thrush sees its connection to Princess Donjeta paying off more immediately than even they could have hoped, if they see her right now as the unquestioned heir to the Nascosten throne and thus as placing the future securely within their grasp, they may well slip up and make apparent the reasons for embroiling themselves in the lives of that country's reigning family.”

“I'm assuming the Grand Princess is privy to this... uhm... deep-sea fishing expedition?” Napoleon had asked, uniquely confident that this would all just be a matter of ‘dress-up’ for the benefit of Thrush.

Jake had looked very uncomfortable with Solo's inquiring pursuit of this information, squirming a bit in his chair and sitting up somewhat straighter.

“You would be assuming wrongly, Mr. Solo,” Waverly had himself directly answered the question.

“I don't understand.”

“This is a somewhat delicate situation. Nascoste is not a charter member of the Command. Oh, we have a standing agreement of cooperation with the current government, and that government has never been anything less than accommodating regarding U.N.C.L.E. investigations involving possible Thrush activity within its borders,” Waverly expounded on present particulars. “But this matter is decidedly different as it touches upon the honor of the royal family itself. Therefore, before we make any accusations against Continetti that could lead to some form of allegation against the activities of the Princess Adjuvant herself, we need to be on much more solid ground.”

“And you provide us the perfect means to attain a failsafe foothold upon that solid ground, Napoleon,” Jake had confirmed to the raw operative. “You have an advantageous background in diplomatic folderol. You have a passing acquaintance with Princess Abriana. You're good-

looking enough to turn the head of the lady-in-question and know well how to employ personal charm to such purpose. And you're still new to the ranks of U.N.C.L.E.; thus Thrush will not yet have compiled a dossier on you that could easily defeat us in springing this trap fully undetected."

"So this marriage is to be real?" Napoleon had inquired, recognizing with some embarrassment that his voice had taken on an unusual higher register.

"Unquestionably real, Mr. Solo," Waverly had guaranteed without so much as an apologetic pang of conscience. "But of course the Command will authorize the necessary arrangements for a legal annulment once we have our answers and the Grand Princess can be brought in on the details..."

"Your mind is wandering again, Napoleon," Helen Raquesse, the protocol specialist, chided her trainee with a little half-smile.

"I'm sorry, Helen," Solo readily apologized with a half-smile of his own. "It's just all rather overwhelming. One minute I'm about to take a half-day off to go on a Valentines' outing with my girl, and the next minute I'm booked on a midnight flight to Rome with orders to summarily take a princess as a bride."

"It doesn't matter, Napoleon," Helen dismissed his mental meandering. "I've already gotten enough feedback from you to determine there really is no need for me to instruct you in any of this material."

"It's like riding a bicycle," Solo revealed unenthusiastically. "Once you've mastered the skill, you never truly forget."

Helen eyed him with an assessing tilt of her head. "Don't be so glum, Napoleon. By all accounts the Grand Princess is an agreeable sort of young woman: intelligent of mind, engaging of personality, athletic of body and rather pretty of face."

"She could be the equivalent of Venus herself and it wouldn't matter to me," Napoleon thought unhappily. *"She's not my Clara; thus I don't want to make any kind of commitment to her!"*

"I'm okay, Helen," he lied smoothly. "Just never expected my keystone mission would require so much involvement of a singularly personal nature."

That produced a light laugh from Helen. "You really are a greenstick, aren't you, Napoleon?" she teased him easily. "Don't worry though; all of your superiors judge you an incredibly fast learner."

Napoleon gazed at her for a long moment with a query forming on his lips. But he wisely decided this question was one better left unasked.

"The coronation of Grand Princess Abriana is to be take place in a little more than four months," the member of Thrush Central duly reminded Zamir Continetti, their covert man within the royal inner circle of Nascoste. "I understand there is no progress in convincing her toward backing her stepbrother's revolutionary movement in Albania."

“The pivot of this effort,” Continetti in turn reminded the man from Central on this private communications line, “lies with the Princess Adjuvant Donjeta. The Grand Princess is too astutely aware of Nascoste’s tenuous status as a small independent nation lying so close to the borders of the Communist Bloc. She will do nothing that might in the end serve to endanger Nascosten autonomy. But Donjeta? Ah, that young lady is more intemperate in such matters. She has a naiveté regarding international politics that Abriana displays only in what one would call personal matters of the heart. The Grand Princess is a romantic in that sense, but the Princess Adjuvant is a romantic in the larger sense of political practicalities.”

“Yet she is but Princess Adjuvant; thus her power is limited.”

“True enough,” conceded Continetti. “Still, once her sister is coronated, her place in the governmental scenario is secure. The Adjuvant, as supposed representative of the country’s citizenry in governmental matters, has a rather unique position within the framework of the Nascosten absolute monarchy.”

“Well, you are our expert on that aspect,” allowed the man of Central. “Thus I will accept your supposition that Donjeta will have power enough to suit our purposes.”

“Her unacknowledged stepbrother Mergim is her emotional weak spot,” Zamir put forth certainly, “and his insurgency is a matter close to the aspirations of her own heart because of the past trials of her deceased stepmother. While Mergim himself is too engrossed in his unrealistic struggle for Albanian self-determination to thoroughly vet the wherewithal of any assistance he receives.”

“These young idealists never cease to amaze me with the sheer depth of their foolishness.”

“Something upon which we of Thrush can readily capitalize.”

“Indeed. Realize though, Continetti, we need all done rightly to meet our ultimate goal. When we arrange to ‘place a bug in the ear’, so to speak, of the Soviets with regard to the Albanian rebels receiving a boost in weaponry and monetary support from an outside source, it has to be completely provable that outside source is the Nascosten royal family. None of it can be in any way traceable back to Thrush.”

“I have the ties to guarantee this,” pledged Zamir. “Not only my place as advisor to the Princess Adjuvant of Nascoste, but my former position in the Albanian revolutionary forces.”

“Hard to believe you were yourself once one of those foolish idealists, Zamir.”

“That was long ago and far away. Now I realize there is no hope concerning these wildly optimistic yearnings for the weakling human race as a whole. Now I know that power should be in the hands of those unafraid to use it. Now I understand the philosophy of Thrush and acknowledge it is the way that things must be, for in the end only the strong survive.”

“You are a wiser man now, Zamir, no question. And when Thrush gains ready access to the ear of the Soviet government because of this good turn we will do them with regard to the Albanian insurgent Mergim Hajdari, Central will find a suitable way to reward you. Perhaps with the throne of Nascoste itself,” the man from Central joked half-seriously. “Yet in the meanwhile it would do no harm and undoubtedly much good if a way could be found to further ensure the political clout of Princess Adjuvant Donjeta.”

“Mr. Solo? Mr. Napoleon Solo?” the impeccably dressed middle-aged man repeated a second time before it registered with Napoleon that he was being addressed.

He had been thinking of Clara: constantly every minute on the long jetliner trip between New York and Rome, and then on the short commuter flight between Rome and Diamant-Grezzo, the capital city of Nascoste, and now as he stood in the small airport being hailed by this stranger. He had been permitted to send his sweetheart a formally-worded message by special courier that had stated he could not keep their date and that he would be away on business likely for a good while. Nothing more personal to shield her from the shock that was to come. However, on a last minute impulse he had scrawled across the very bottom of the paper:

Please forgive me. I swear I will make it up to you.

Solo focused his attention on the man who had already twice inquired for confirmation of his identity. “Yes, I’m Napoleon Solo.”

“I am John Davies, Mr. Solo, Executive Assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to Nascoste.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Napoleon paid heed to polite formalities as he extended his hand to the other man.

“Oh, it is I who am most pleased to meet you, Mr. Solo,” responded Davies as he respectfully shook the agent’s hand. “Both Ambassador Tilerstein and myself have been briefed in the main about your undertaking. Since we are quite fond of the Grand Princess, may I say how incredibly relieved we are that Mr. Waverly was able to assign this delicate commission to someone already favorably known to her. Her Gracious Highness has turned in recent weeks a bit nostalgic regarding her childhood. No doubt, as her coronation looms closer, she feels even more strongly the non-compromising weight of her responsibilities as a reigning monarch. She is so very young,” Davies punctuated his declaration with an indulgent sigh. “Thus I think perhaps she makes of the time of her more unencumbered youth something of a charming fairytale.”

“That should make it easier for me to win her affection,” Napoleon conceded, though in his heart he much begrudged the admission.

“Indeed, Mr. Solo, I much suspect it will. Shall we attend to your luggage? I have a chauffeured car waiting at the side entrance.”

As they sped along the mid-morning bustling streets toward the American Embassy, Davies continued his easy chatter. Napoleon entered into the conversation only occasionally and in but scant-worded spurts.

“Ambassador Tilerstein was, I believe, friends with your grandfather, Franklin Milbourne.”

“Yes, I remember Mr. Tilerstein. He served as legal attaché to my grandfather in Greece.”

“Indeed. And what a perfect cover that has provided for having you housed within the embassy walls! The grandson of an old friend come visiting, as it were. And the grandson of such an esteemed diplomat as well. The Ambassador has always credited Mr. Milbourne for providing the bulk of his on-the-job training in diplomatic policy.”

“My grandfather would be flattered.”

“No flattery at all, Mr. Solo, from what I know of Franklin Milbourne. An extraordinary example of a high-level civil servant if ever there was one. And it seems you share his dedication in that regard, at least in some respect, what with your own career in U.N.C.L.E.”

Napoleon looked bemusedly at the obsequious official. “Somewhat different dedications I think.”

“Oh, to be sure. The Command’s involvement in physically risky situations and its stated non-partisanship and all that. But nationally-centered international politics is no picnic, Mr. Solo. It has its own share of pitfalls. One wouldn’t want to chance possibly starting World War III with an errant word or gesture.”

“No, one wouldn’t,” agreed Napoleon, as he attempted to hide his amusement.

“So I hope you won’t take it in wrong part when I say to you, please do be mindful of the tangled national-centric politics involved in this particular task. Nascoste may be of no great world prominence; still accidentally incurring its enmity is not something to which United States governmental policymakers would take kindly.”

“Are you giving me an official warning, Mr. Davies?” Napoleon unexpectedly challenged the other man.

“Merely a friendly caution, Mr. Solo, no more than a friendly caution.”

“You can rest assured that proceeding with caution is exactly what both I as an individual and U.N.C.L.E. as an organization will without question do.”

That marked a rather uneasy end to the admittedly mostly one-sided conversation. Fortunately they arrived but shortly thereafter at the American Embassy in Nascoste.

Napoleon, understandably weary from the many hours of his journey (and the multiple pangs of his secret heartache), was escorted to his rooms with only a brief obligatory greeting from Ambassador Tilerstein.

Once Solo was safely out of earshot, Davies – with a disapproving shake of his head – remarked to his superior, “I’m afraid this enterprise is doomed to failure from the outset. For how so aloof a young man can hope to capture the amorous notice of the Grand Princess remains very much a mystery to me.”

That evening as Napoleon stood before the full-length mirror in his suite at the American Embassy, inspecting his appearance in his set of elegant formal clothes, he took stock of his current attitude.

“Well, Solo,” he chided his reflected image, “are you going to make moon eyes and sigh dejectedly like a lovesick puppy? Or rightly do the job you were sent here to do? You’re an U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agent, dammit! You have responsibilities, serious responsibilities. You can’t expect those responsibilities to conform to the shape of your personal life. That personal life of yours has to fit in around those responsibilities. You’ve known that from the first moment you signed on to attend Survival School. So buck up and take that leap of faith into the deep waters of absolute conviction in the methods and motives of the Command. You trust in the savvy of Waverly’s judgment; now rely on the fullness of your own dedication.”

He took a deep breath, ensured the taming of his wayward forelock with a final dab of Brylcreem, and headed toward the door. Descending the steps with a decided jauntiness, he was subsequently directed into the Ambassador's private study by a household servant and entered those premises with a completely confident air.

"Ambassador Tilerstein," he enthusiastically greeted the older man with an extended hand and a truly brilliant smile. "You must forgive my seemingly taciturn disposition earlier. I plead exhaustion from the long journey."

"Perfectly understandable, Mr. Solo," Tilerstein accepted Solo's hand in a firm clasp. "I trust you are more yourself after this afternoon's nap?"

"Much more so," agreed Napoleon with yet another dazzling smile, "thank you. I find myself now quite ready to take on the pleasurable commotion of this evening's festivities."

A reception for Grand Princess Abriana was being hosted that night in the U.S. Embassy. It was but one of a round of such soirées successively taking place over the preceding and subsequent few weeks in celebration of said royal's twenty-first birthday, as well as recognition of her upcoming coronation. Though Abriana's sovereignty had informally commenced with her father's death more than a year before, official acknowledgement of her as the reigning monarch of Nascoste had needed to wait upon her legal coming-of-age. With that event now past, the coronation could take place at last. It was scheduled for the 21st of June. The 21st had been decided upon to reflect the age of the Grand Princess at this major milestone in her life. June had been chosen because Abriana had herself described the ceremony of coronation as a "solemn yet celebratory union between myself and my country, very much akin to that between a loving bride and a steadfast groom". And tradition, after all, did account June a "lucky month" for brides.

"And a commotion it has indeed been, Mr. Solo," Tilerstein chatted on amiably, 'with every representative embassy in Diamant-Grezzo making a play for a palace-sanctioned function of one kind or another in order to mark Her Gracious Highness' passport into legal maturity."

Napoleon chuckled easily. "I do vividly recall that kind of diplomatic one-upmanship from my grandfather's stints in various international posts. Do you remember, Mr. Tilerstein," Solo went on as he readily accepted a small glass of Campari wordlessly offered him by the other man, "the supposed peace-conference luncheon in Athens that turned into a food-fight between the Russian and British delegations?"

"I do, I do!" chimed in Tilerstein with an amused smile as he poured himself an aperitif. "The sight of all those generally stoic bureaucrats with the lapels of their fine suits dripping moussaka is one I will never forget!"

"And my grandfather lifting his glass of ouzo afterwards and toasting unabashedly: Here's to the awarding of new governmental decorations born of old recipes! Wear them with the distinction their provisional history deserves, gentlemen."

Tilerstein laughed heartily at that memory. "I also recall," then put in the Ambassador a bit slyly, "a certain 15-year-old youth who took advantage of the ruckus to spirit away a certain pretty serving girl from the kitchen, the pair later discovered kissing ardently in the car of a Russian diplomat. Gave the already disgruntled fellow quite a shock," he finalized with a quick wink at Solo.

Napoleon cleared his throat. “That vehicle did contain such a nicely roomy and ingeniously concealed backseat,” he forwarded as he returned Tilerstein’s wink. “A particular plus I tried to explain to my grandfather, but he just wouldn’t see reason.”

“Age seldom assigns emotional sense to the zeal of youth,” Tilerstein commiserated with a wide grin.

“And so tonight we are left to hope that coming of age has not yet resulted in emotional sense wholly replacing the zeal of youth,” espoused Napoleon gamely as he raised his glass in an informal toast.

Tilerstein raised his own glass in response. “And that no mental food-fights break out as a result of such youthful zeal.”

Napoleon smiled again, knowing full well this was another “friendly caution” being made him by his own government. He knew the hazards, but he also knew the necessities. And for the first time he realized he was totally prepared to blend all the sundry ingredients together smoothly to produce an agreeably palatable international dish.

As Grand Princess Abriana walked the receiving line during the reception being given in her honor at the U.S. Embassy in Diamant-Grezzo that night, she found her mind wandering to recollections of attending such events as a teenager with her father. And now her father, Grand Prince Adalfieri, was dead and gone, his body buried in the state crypt for more than a year, and she stood in his place as ruler of Nascoste. It was a place she always knew would be hers one day; still that “one day” had come much too soon for her liking. She missed her father and, even more, she missed the effortlessness of that time when she had not yet been expected to make decisions that would impact, whether positively or negatively, the present and future of her entire nation. She longed to be a child again. Yet that was simply impossible and she had dutifully learned to accept the reality of that. Though the daydreams still came at moments when she least could predict them taking hold of her mental landscape, like now at this official function.

She stopped before Ambassador Tilerstein and accepted his bow with a warm smile. She liked both the man and his laughing-eyed wife. As she moved onward as was customary, a dark-haired young man – quite a handsome dark-haired young man she noted – standing to Tilerstein’s right bowed most elegantly and greeted her with a richly-voiced “Your Gracious Highness”.

Abriana stopped before the young man and remarked casually to Tilerstein, “Ah, your guest is well-versed in the nuances of Nascosten etiquette, I see. He did not make the common mistake of addressing me as a Serene Highness.”

“Mia nonna sarebbe lieto di sapere che ho conservato abbastanza del suo insegnamento nella protocollo diplomatico di raccogliere un tale complimento, Signora,¹” Napoleon urbanely observed.

Abriana set her gaze once more upon the young man. “Tu sei italiano?²” she inquired of him.

¹ My grandmother would be pleased to know I have retained enough of her teaching in diplomatic protocol to collect such a compliment, Madam.

“Americano,” supplied Napoleon. “Eppure l'italiano è la lingua nativa di Nascoste, non è vero? E mia nonna anche insegnato che l'eventuale avvio di conversazione con un sovrano dovrebbe essere fatta nella lingua nativa del paese sovrano.³”

“Tua nonna è una donna molto perspicace,⁴” conceded Abriana. “But, as we are currently standing in the Embassy of the United States here in Nascoste, and thus on what is considered American soil under the rules of international diplomacy, I believe speaking in English to be quite acceptable procedure. Anche se il tuo italiano è impeccabile, signore.⁵”

“Grazie, Gracious Highness.”

“Mr. Tilerstein,” the Grand Princess once more addressed the American ambassador, “will you introduce me to your guest?”

“With pleasure, Madam,” Tilerstein took up the requested task. “May I present to you, Gracious Highness, Mr. Napoleon Solo. He is the grandson of a sadly deceased diplomatic colleague of mine: Mr. Franklin Milbourne.”

Abriana extended her hand to Solo and he took hold of that hand with an enticing mixture of proper gentility and perhaps improper boldness, kissing it as proscribed by international courtesy.

“Wait...,” a look of some past association with the mentioned names flashed in the blue eyes of the princess. Then she broke out in a completely natural and very broad grin: no proper protocol in that particular smile. “You’re him!”

“Him?” Napoleon pretended bewilderment. “I am most assuredly a him; yet I presume Your Gracious Highness means something more unique by her declaration than such a generality?”

“The boy in Rome! The one who gallantly escorted a very lost and rather teary-eyed little girl back into her father’s arms!”

A responsive sparkle lit in Napoleon’s hazel eyes. “Ah, I do remember a somewhat independent little girl who, despite her obvious upset, betrayed a certain self-sufficient pride in having given her bodyguard the slip.”

“So self-sufficient, she broke down crying the minute she realized she hadn’t a clue how to find her own way back to where she should be.”

“Understandable as the compound did have quite a tangle of corridors leading off willy-nilly in many different directions.”

“So you made mention at the time in a valiant attempt to soothe my much wounded sense of self-reliance. Even then you had the manners of a courtier.”

² You are Italian?”

³ Yet Italian is the native tongue of Nascoste, is it not? And my grandmother also taught that any initiation of conversation with a sovereign should be done in the native tongue of that sovereign’s country.

⁴ Your grandmother’s a very shrewd woman.

⁵ Though your Italian is impeccable, sir.

“My grandmother’s influence again,” commented Solo with one of his signature dazzling smiles.

“Oh, and she did teach you well, that grandmother of yours! You didn’t even get flustered when I started bawling so hard I erupted into fits of hiccups!”

“It would have been very impolite to take especial note of those hiccups.”

The extraordinary grin again. Abriana was literally beaming. “They were quite loud hiccups though, weren’t they?” she wheedled playfully.

“They startled the dogs in the hall into barking,” teased Napoleon just as playfully.

Now the princess laughed outright, more relaxed than she had been in she couldn’t remember how long.

“Will you escort me into dinner, Napoleon? May I call you Napoleon?”

“I would be honored, Gracious Highness, to have both the pleasure of acting as your dinner companion and in hearing you call me by my given name.”

“All settled then!” exclaimed the suddenly ebullient royal. “Oh, I would talk of those times, Napoleon,” she continued with warm wistfulness as she placed her hand on Solo’s properly curved arm, “of those sweet and innocent times long ago.”

As Napoleon and Abriana made their way into the dining room, Tilerstein took amused note of John Davies, who was standing as if thunderstruck with his jaw all but dropped to the marble tiles of the entrance hall. Casually walking up to his usually oh-so-in-control assistant, the Ambassador remarked quietly, “Looks like you underestimated that young man, John. And you’re generally so good at gauging personalities by first impressions.”

Davies found himself with absolutely no response at all to that verbal reflection.

“So small arms marksmanship is an avocation of yours, Napoleon?” Grand Princess Abriana continued her animated dinner conversation with Napoleon Solo.

“I do appreciate the solid feel of a reliable gun in my hand, yes.”

“No doubt an appreciation you learned during your time in military service?”

Napoleon smiled noncommittally. “A likely enough beginning.”

“And usually you carry a pistol?” Abriana questioned a bit disbelievingly.

“At most times,” admitted Napoleon, carefully setting the stage for future wear of his U.N.C.L.E. sidearm when in her presence, “though not tonight of course. Not yet having earned your confidence in my, shall we say, riskier nature, that would have been very rude behavior.”

Abriana laughed delightedly. “Behavior of which your grandmother would not approve. Though then perhaps I could dispense with my bodyguards when in your company. That would be a pleasant form of independence, being free of the intrusion of bodyguards.”

“And would I willingly serve as your bodyguard, Madam,” Napoleon teased with a brilliant smile, “in the hope of keeping our time together free of all intrusions.”

Abriana blushed quite prettily as was only a becoming response to such a forward yet flattering remark from her male companion.

The Grand Princess of Nascoste was, in truth, an attractive woman, though by no means one that would be commonly credited as beautiful. Of somewhat less than average height, she was nonetheless blessed with a slim, lankily limbed and small-breasted athlete’s body. Her most exceptional feature was surely her smooth-skinned, narrow hands with their long, slender fingers, and she exhibited that attribute to advantage with the donning of a multitude of rings and bracelets. Her triangular face with its delicately but undeniably pointed chin displayed a singular openness of expression. There was no sultry allure to her round eyes, upturned nose, and a mouth that was perhaps a few millimeters too large to maximize physiognomic symmetry. Those eyes though were the palest shade of blue that could be fully accounted as being that particular color, and thus were unexpectedly arresting. The short tilt of her nose gave her face a puckish quality that definitely engendered a youthful appeal. And the balanced fullness of her upper and lower lips effectively disguised any possible disproportion as to the size of her mouth as a whole. The subtle beige-pink hue of her complexion was highlighted by a sparse dusting of slightly darker freckles across the bridge of her nose, while her golden-brown hair was fetchingly cut in a face-framing chin-length style. Overall there was a vulnerable sweetness to her looks that even Solo, who made no bones about having a preference for what might be considered the more generally glamorized female physical traits, had to concede tickled the senses with warm temptation. This was not a woman with whom a man was likely to frantically leap into lust, but this was a woman with whom a man could serenely settle into satiety.

“I find I have but little time any more to indulge in my own avocations,” noted Abriana with a hint of regret. “Still, I do make time for almost daily jaunts on horseback. That’s a leisure pastime I enjoy far too much to fully sacrifice to the demands of state. Do you ride, Napoleon?”

“My Aunt Amy would not have it any other way,” stated Napoleon with a mischievous grin. “She insisted I take lessons as a boy and that I have the skill mastered by adolescence. One doesn’t gainsay Aunt Amy in such things, so I did as she insisted. Though I will confess riding never became a favorite pursuit of mine. I much prefer sailing.”

Abriana shivered. “I’m terrified of the water,” she admitted.

“I’m not fond of immersion in it myself,” admitted Napoleon in turn. “But singlehandedly guiding a boat upon its surface, interpreting the vast movements of the sea and steering your vessel to become one with them: that’s another thing entirely. I’ve sometimes thought I would like to navigate a sloop around the world.”

“By yourself?” Abriana questioned, obviously put out by the danger inherent in any such solitary endeavor.

“Well, perhaps with one special person for companionship,” Napoleon forwarded with another of his brilliant smiles, causing Abriana to blush quite appealingly once more.

“I understand that you have received an invitation from the Grand Princess to go horseback riding,” Mr. Waverly commented through the silver cigarette case. Proper attachment of a wire to an available lamp electrical cord had effectively turned the aforementioned article into a

means of international communication between U.N.C.L.E. field operative and U.N.C.L.E. operations chief.

“Yes sir,” acknowledged Napoleon.

“Good work, Mr. Solo, in capturing with such commendable alacrity the intrigued attention of Princess Abriana. The quicker you can gain full access to the royal Nascosten family circle, the better it will suit our needs.”

Napoleon didn't know what to say to that, so he wisely said nothing.

“Equestrianism is one of the Grand Princess' personal passions according to our intelligence reports,” Waverly continued. “Let us hope that her invitation to share in one of her favored pursuits will provide a possibility for you becoming another such passion of hers.”

Now that unabashed expectation by his superior really did make Solo uncomfortable. Somehow giving Abriana what amounted to the smooth-operator gigolo rush made him feel somewhat sleazy of character.

“Sir, couldn't everything just be explained to the Grand Princess upfront?” he thus found himself questioning the manner of his mission outright. “I mean about Thrush possibly grooming her sister for some nefarious purpose? I'm quite certain Abriana is savvy enough regarding national politics to—”

“No, it will not do, Mr. Solo. That method would only serve to put Thrush on the offensive and the Princess Adjuvant on the defensive. It could as well create tensions within the royal family that could never be healed. Tensions that might be entirely uncalled for, if Princess Donjeta is truly just an innocent being used by Thrush completely without her understanding.”

“But, sir—”

“No buts, Mr. Solo. You have your assignment,” the Number 1 in Section I of the North American division of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement pronounced in his most authoritative, not-to-be-second-guessed tone. “Now complete the task, young man. Sweep that young woman right off her feet and into your arms.”

Waverly broke off the verbal communiqué from his end before Napoleon could manage another word.

“Yes sir,” the greenstick enforcement agent subsequently muttered in compliant resignation to the now dead air of the closed connection.

“Are you aware, Highness,” Zamir Continetti advised the Nascosten royal who sought out his counsel in all things, “that today will be the eighth time in a two-week span your sister is going out riding with Mr. Napoleon Solo?”

“Oh, I know she is quite enamored of the man, Zamir,” Princess Adjuvant Donjeta summarily dismissed this fact. “She certainly talks about him enough when we are in private. She goes on and on like a twelve-year-old in the throes of her first romantic crush.”

“Yet the Grand Princess is not a twelve-year-old,” countered Zamir.

“Yet she **is** a romantic,” counter-answered Donjeta.

“Be that as it may, she is the ruler of Nascoste, now of legal age and soon-to-be coronated. Thus any romance in which she indulges is significant to the future of this nation. So don’t you think, as second-in-line to the throne, it is time you met the gentleman in question?” smoothly urged Continetti.

“Zamir, she likes having her beau all to herself, and I don’t begrudge her dreamy spirit that wistful little gratification. Goodness knows she has serious matters aplenty to weigh down that gentle side of her.”

“Begging your pardon, Highness, but did you know that for her past two outings with Napoleon Solo the Grand Princess bade her bodyguards give them a wide berth? Such a request for privacy speaks perhaps of her liaison with this man becoming more... intense than an idle amorous interlude.”

Donjeta worried her lower lip as she pondered what Zamir was trying, without outright saying, to get across.

“You think she would consider him as possible husband material?” Donjeta now caught on.

“We can only surmise by those small details regarding the relationship to which we are currently privy,” Continetti sagely noted.

“But...” Donjeta worried her lower lip once more, a habit when focusing upon some internal speculation that she had gotten into in childhood and that she just could not seem to break now on the brink of full adulthood. “He’s American, isn’t he? There isn’t much likelihood of him having a noble pedigree. So if she married him...”

“The marriage would need, by the laws of Nascoste, to be declared morganatic,” supplied Zamir with a small smile.

“And I would be declared Crown Princess,” concluded Donjeta. “Then I could be of more direct aid to Mergim,” she mentioned the name of the officially unmentioned stepbrother who lived in Albania and was covertly operating as a gorilla rebel against the Communist government there.

“Indeed, Highness. All our hopes in that regard could be the more assuredly realized.”

Donjeta rubbed a finger back-and-forth across her lips as she further pondered the situation.

“Do you think Abriana truly loves him, Zamir? This Mr. Napoleon Solo?” she posed the rhetorical question to the councilor. “I truly wouldn’t ever want her unhappy. But if this man could fill at last with joy the sad emptiness seemingly always resident in that starry-eyed soul of hers, well...”

“It would indeed be truly sisterly of you to wholeheartedly support her in taking firm hold of that unique opportunity, Highness.”

Acting as always on Continetti’s “suggestion”, Donjeta, the Princess Adjuvant of Nascoste, made an especial point of entering into her sister’s personal study at the exact time she was informed by said counselor that therein waiting upon the Grand Princess to keep their latest

date was none other than one Mr. Napoleon Solo. Napoleon, recognizing the lady immediately, gave her a slight bow upon that entrance.

“Mr. Napoleon Solo, I presume,” Donjeta greeted him playfully with a ready smile.

“The Princess Adjuvant Donjeta, I doubt not,” Napoleon greeted her just as playfully with just as ready a smile.

“You must pardon my uninvited intrusion into your company, Mr. Solo, but Abriana has been singing your praises day and night,” Donjeta teased. “Thus I found myself intrigued by the prospect of meeting such a paragon.”

“Your sister is too generous in her compliments,” Napoleon bantered back. “And please, Highness, do call me Napoleon.”

Donjeta tilted her head in obvious assessment of him. “You are quite handsome, Napoleon.”

“And you are quite beautiful, Highness,” Napoleon returned her cheeky chitchat tit-for-tat.

And that was no less than truth for it was Donjeta of the two royal siblings who possessed true classical allure. Taller than her sister, her figure boasted more feminine curves and her shapely legs seemed to go on forever. The somewhat subdued golden-brown color of Abriana’s hair was amplified to a breathtaking golden-blond in her younger sister. Similarly the pale blue hue of the Grand Princess’ eyes was intensified to a brilliant sapphire in the eyes of the Princess Adjuvant. Donjeta’s facial features portrayed a perfect symmetry: large eyes with a slight upward sweep at the corners, a slim nose of a length neither too long nor too short, and a set of full lips that gave her mouth a luscious pout. No freckles stippled the peach-cream complexion of this noble lady, nor was there any other impish quality to her looks. She was downright stunning from the top of her head to the tips of her toenails, and that reality was something of which Napoleon was certain she was keenly aware.

“Shall we bat flattery about like a rubber ball between us?” Donjeta moved away from the game of verbal tennis. “Or shall we attempt to get to know each other more honestly?”

“Whichever is your preference, Highness,” conceded Napoleon with diplomatic ease. “My manner is completely at your disposal.”

“So you bend in the wind, Napoleon?”

“Only in matters of casual exchange. With regard to those things dear to my heart, you will find I am made of iron.”

“And is my sister one of the things dear to your heart?”

“That is a personal matter between your sister and myself.”

“As the only living member of her immediate family, may I not be made privy to the basic nature of the issue?”

“Begging your pardon, Highness, but no you may not. Not by me in any case.”

“Touché, Napoleon. It seems we have gone from conversational table tennis to conversational fencing.”

“Quick-witted repartee, I have always found, is more an art than a sport. Thus do I pay due homage to a very talented artist, Highness,” Napoleon complimented the lady with an acknowledging slight bow of his head.

Donjeta now smiled broadly, revealing a faultless set of dazzlingly white teeth. “I think us at the very least evenly matched in that regard.

“You have gone riding with my sister a goodly number of times in the past fortnight, so I understand,” the Princess now switched tactics. “Do you much enjoy riding, Napoleon?”

“I much enjoy your sister’s company,” stated Solo quite audaciously. “Therefore, if riding is the means by which I can facilitate that particular enjoyment, then yes, I will say I do much enjoy riding.”

The Princess laughed openly at the cleverly spoken thrust-and-parry. “You do undoubtedly own a distinct devilish charm, Napoleon. But then you are quite aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Likely as much as you are aware of your beauty, Highness.”

“And both of us undeniably use such assets to full advantage.”

“Undeniably,” seconded Napoleon with one of his trademark megawatt smiles.

“I also understand you were but recently honorably discharged from your country’s army after serving quite notably in the Korean conflict.”

“You understand correctly.”

“And you have retained a continuing interest in marksmanship.”

This was not phrased as a question. Apparently the Princess Adjuvant had done her homework with regard to him. Or more likely Zamir Continetti had done it for her.

“A private passion,” glibly granted Solo.

“Like my sister?” Donjeta, with equal glibness, seized upon this opening in the ongoing dialogue between them.

Napoleon’s smirk made it evident to his subtly confrontational tête-à-tête partner that he would not be tripped up by any abrupt turn of topic.

“That is a question I will not answer.”

“To me.”

“To anyone but your sister.”

“Would you describe yourself as an opportunist, Napoleon?” the Nascosten royal bluntly put the crux of her concern out in the open.

Donjeta found Napoleon's subsequent small smile somehow soothing to even the most suspiciously alert of her nerves. There was perhaps a bit of slyness in it; yet did it make the man in some unaccountable way come across as completely trustworthy.

"I would describe myself as a man unusually blessed by Lady Luck," Napoleon unashamedly responded right to the point.

Donjeta tilted her head again as she assessed him once more. Her longtime habit of worrying her lower lip when considering the pros and cons of something – or in this case someone – came to the fore for a full minute or more before she finally pronounced her decision with regard to him. "You know, I find I like you, Mr. Napoleon Solo. I like you very much indeed."

"I am honored, Highness."

Grand Princess Abriana chose that exact moment to make her own entrance. "Donjeta," she addressed her sister, somewhat surprised to find the younger woman here in her private study, "did you wish to speak with me?"

"Only to tell you I approve of your beau, Abriana," Donjeta assured her sibling. "Don't keep him in hiding, dear," she admonished as she drew close enough to the shorter woman to lean in and kiss her lightly on the cheek. "He's quite up to the test of public scrutiny."

Then, with a mischievous wink at the Grand Princess that made the older sibling flush hotly and a quick leave-taking address of "Napoleon" to Solo, Donjeta flounced out of the room.

Following that exit, Napoleon laughed lightly as he commented to Abriana, "Something of a chess-player, that one." Then he looked affectionately at the Grand Princess. "But she does 'approve' of me, and you're secretly relieved about that, aren't you?"

"Donjeta and I are quite close as sisters go, and..." Abriana hesitated even as she blushed once more.

"Then I'm glad she does approve of me," Napoleon gently rescued the Princess from any awkwardness inherent in the moment.

"As am I, Napoleon," softly stated Abriana with a shyly adoring smile that seemed to set her whole countenance warmly aglow.

Act II: Then you shall go to the ball!

Tomas Grecco shook his head once more as silent thoughts regarding the current relationship between the Nascosten Grand Princess Abriana and the American Napoleon Solo roughly trampled upon his mental serenity. There was still too much of the romantic girl in Abriana for his liking. Oh, she understood national and international politics quite commendably, especially for one of so young an age. Her father had taught her well, and thus her role as ruler of her island nation had been to date quite effective. Policy on the public stage was never an issue for her. But as to more personal matters? Ah, there her inexperience definitely showed.

Tomas had served as internal affairs minister to Grand Prince Adalfieri, Abriana's father, for some dozen years. And now he served the current Grand Princess in the same capacity, had done so from the moment her father had passed on and thus passed the scepter of Nascoste

into the hands of his eldest daughter. Grecco accounted the Grand Princess an intelligent young woman with many fine qualities that indeed benefited her position. But her rather adolescent fascination with the supposed glories of fairytale-envisioned true love was not one of those qualities.

She believed in the mythos of the “one and only”. She believed in the mysticism of fated meetings. She believed in the magic of “happily ever after”. And now Tomas was left to wonder how much of those qualities she was investing in the physical being of and her emotional bond with Napoleon Solo.

Zamir Continetti walked into the office of the Nascosten Minister of Internal Affairs with several papers in hand. “Tomas,” he addressed that state councilor, “the Princess Adjuvant would like approval to host a family reception two days after the coronation of the Grand Princess. I realize there are celebratory events aplenty on the calendar, but Her Highness feels—” Zamir stopped his verbal explanation short when he realized Tomas was truly not listening to him.

“Your attention wanders, Tomas,” Zamir noted in a friendly manner to the other man.

“I am sorry, Zamir,” Tomas shook himself out of his mental state of preoccupied unease. “You were saying?”

“We can address that later. For the moment I would know what worries you.”

“Napoleon Solo,” declared Grecco quite glumly.

“It was my understanding the background check on the young man came up clean.”

“Squeakily clean. He is who he says he is: familial connections exactly as described; military record exemplary; current position within a world charitable organization. Nothing out-of-place or skewed off-center. All-in-all apparently a most admirable fellow.”

“Then?” prompted Continetti, though he was well aware of the one rub that was creating an uncomfortable raw spot within the mind of his colleague.

Tomas sighed loudly. “He’s an American with no descent from nobility of any kind that we can discover.”

“Ah,” commiserated Zamir. “The Grand Princess’ affection for him is growing into something more serious then?”

“I truly know not,” admitted Grecco. “But given her idealistic persuasions with regard to what constitutes any expression of binding love...” Tomas sighed again.

“Perhaps too much like her father in that,” allowed Zamir.

“Yes, that ill-advised second marriage of his: romantic no doubt, but so impractical from the standpoint of his position as sovereign of Nascoste.”

“Do remember though, my friend, that Nascoste survived intact,” Zamir reminded the other man. “The lady-in-question was even well-liked and well-received by the populace of this country.”

“Yet does the complication of Mergim remain because of that union.”

“Mergim’s ties to Nascoste are rather flimsy, Tomas.”

“Still can the man boast the deep affection of both his stepsisters.”

“True enough, but that is simply a family matter. It has no bearing on Nascoste as a political entity.” Continetti diverted this topic just a hair since he preferred the other man not make mention of the fact the ‘deep affection’ for the troublesome Mergim was surely more pronounced from Donjeta.

“I suppose you’re right, Zamir,” conceded Grecco. “Then again, with the past so often playing prologue to the present, I will be far more tranquil of mind once Napoleon Solo has returned home to his own country.”

“Invite him for a sojourn at the palace!” Donjeta urged her sister with regard to Napoleon Solo, the sole topic of their current excited chatter. “He does represent a global charitable organization, no? So how could he, with any pretense of international astuteness, refuse such a ‘royal summons’? And that way he won’t depart Diamant-Grezzo quite as soon as originally intended.”

“He hasn’t directly mentioned leaving Nascoste, but...” Abriana mulled over the likelihood of Napoleon returning home to the United States. Surely he would be doing that at some point, and likely much sooner than would suit her own desires. “I suppose he can’t stay as a guest in the American Embassy for too much longer. He is just visiting a past associate of his grandfather’s, after all, and he has been in residence there nearly three weeks now.”

“So cut him off at the pass, so to speak,” Donjeta mentally nudged her sister. “We’ll make a fine scheme between the two of us to keep him here in Nascoste,” she added with a conspiratorial smile as the nudge became physical as well.

Abriana grinned at that suggestion. “We always were rather good at plotting together as children,” she remembered.

“We’ll be even better at it now,” insisted Donjeta with a light laugh, “as the goal is so much more significant. After all, Abriana, Napoleon Solo is your one-and-only. Surely you can’t let him just vanish out of your life with no say-so in the matter?”

“I never said he was my one-and-only,” protested Abriana, but her blush gave lie to that protest.

Donjeta laughed once more as she impulsively embraced the other woman. “Oh sister mine, I will admit I do envy you the love of such a man!”

“He does love me, I think,” ventured Abriana with a dreamy expression suffusing her face with tenderness. “I know for certain I do love him.”

“Then there you go!” enthused Donjeta. “If he has captured your heart, dear sister, then we shall capture his continued physical presence in Nascoste! By hook or by crook,” she finalized with their old childhood vow as she extended one bent forefinger toward Abriana.

“By hook or by crook!” swore Abriana in turn as she linked her own bent forefinger with that of her sister.

During the dozenth outing on horseback in which Napoleon Solo joined the Grand Princess Abriana, Princess Adjuvant Donjeta became an added participant. The three rode companionably, their horses moving at a leisurely pace side-by-side. They chatted about this and that, laughing much as they basked in the bright sunshine being showcased by a bout of unusually fine March weather. It had, however, rained quite heavily the night before; thus the ground was notably muddy.

In accordance with the wishes of Her Gracious Highness, the two bodyguards accompanying the trio (Abriana had insisted upon there being just the bare minimum required by Nascosten security law) kept their distance. On a particular soggy patch of terrain, Donjeta's horse "accidentally" stumbled, tossing the Princess Adjuvant from the saddle to the mucky earth.

Napoleon was beside the prone royal in an instant. "You all right, Highness?" he queried as he aided her in sitting up.

"Nothing hurt but my pride," she replied. Gamely Donjeta tried to regain her feet, but slid sideways in the mud. "Now I've hurt more than my pride," she subsequently observed with a grimace. "It appears I've turned my ankle in this quagmire." She moved gingerly forward a single step and found the injured ankle would not support her weight, forcing her to lean quite heavily on Napoleon's arm.

Both bodyguards were on the scene now, quickly dismounting to handle the crisis. "Your mare threw a shoe apparently, Highness," one remarked after looking over the condition of the horse.

"Well then I surely can't further ride her, and my ankle is in no condition for the walk back," Donjeta forwarded matter-of-factly. "I will need to ride your mount, Hawslov," she informed the bodyguard who had just spoken, "and you will have to guide my mare."

"Of course, Highness," Hawslov accepted this task.

"Seems our outing is over for today, Napoleon," commented Abriana with a deceptively practiced sigh.

"Nonsense, Abriana," Donjeta rejected that possibility. "No reason you two need return with me. Hawslov will see me right."

"Highness," Hawslov acknowledged with a slight bow.

"You sure you'll be all right, Donjeta?" queried Abriana with seeming uncertainty.

"Oh for heaven's sake, Abriana, it's only a sprained ankle," Donjeta dismissed her sister's over-solicitousness. "You get little enough chance for personal pleasures as it is. Please, do you and Napoleon finish your ride."

"That will leave only Masterini to safeguard Your Gracious Highness," Hawslov dutifully reminded his sovereign.

"And that will be quite sufficient for a short stint," decided Abriana. "Napoleon and I won't stay out more than another half-hour."

Masterini nodded his assent, though a bit reluctantly. “No more than a half-hour, Gracious Highness,” he dutifully cautioned Abriana.

With that, Napoleon helped Donjeta into the saddle of Hawslov’s steed as the bodyguard took hold of the bridle of both his own horse and Donjeta’s lamed one. As Hawslov led this contingent back toward the palace stables, Masterini bowed to Abriana and regained his own mount. He then cantered a sufficient distance away from the Grand Princess and Solo to keep them in range of sight while yet suiting Her Gracious Highness’ standing order about giving them a wide berth during these horseback excursions.

As Napoleon swung back into the saddle of his own horse, he remarked knowingly to his royal companion, “You two handled that quite smoothly.”

“Handled what?” asked Abriana in wide-eyed innocence.

“Getting rid of one of the bodyguards,” stated Napoleon with a conspiratorial smirk, “specifically the one who is the more skilled horseman. May I assume you now want the pair of us to elude the remaining, less proficient one?”

Predictably Abriana was blushing as she stammered out, “Was it all so very obvious?”

“Yes,” Napoleon teased. “But I must reveal as well that I am very pleased you just as obviously wish to be alone with me.”

“Would being alone with me truly please you, Napoleon?”

Napoleon set the gaze of his hazel-brown eyes directly and rather longingly upon that of her pale-blue ones. “Yes,” he said, giving his response no wordy adornments for none he knew were needed at this moment.

And so Abriana set off at a full gallop, Napoleon close on the tail of her horse. They guided their steeds in enough intricate turns off side trails and through tangled wooded areas to soon lose sight of Masterini entirely. Finally they stopped in a secreted grove and quickly dismounted.

“We likely haven’t much time before your bodyguard catches on to us and finds this spot,” Solo informed the Princess straightforwardly, “and I certainly don’t intend to waste even a moment of it.”

With that he caught her fully in his arms and kissed her passionately. Seamlessly their lips melded together. After a moment his tongue pressed inside her mouth, pushing and sliding to gain familiarity with every millimeter of those warm, moist precincts. She clung to him, her body tight against his.

Napoleon’s senses were reeling. He hadn’t expected for it to feel this good: to hold her, to kiss her. He didn’t love her; he knew he didn’t. Clara had all of his love. Yet something in Abriana touched him deeply: her sweetness, her vulnerability, her childlike immersion in the fairytale of romance. She brought out in him an intense protectiveness that was stealthily bleeding into his other natural instincts. Thus it was true enough to say in that moment Abriana made emotional contact with Solo’s heart as surely as she was making physical contact with his body.

“Abriana,” he whispered in a half-groan as his mouth momentarily moved away from hers before nuzzling eagerly at the side of her neck. All forms of more ceremonial address faded from his memory. Princess or commoner: it didn’t matter a whit. He desired her: recognized the raw want in his spiritually idealistic soul as surely as that in his biologically reactive body.

Abriana’s breath was a soft caress against his ear. “Stay with me, Napoleon,” she entreated with heartfelt simplicity. “Stay with me.”

The loud sound of a throat being cleared brought them both back down-to-earth. Masterini sat his horse not far from them. The bodyguard said nothing as the couple remounted their own steeds, Napoleon giving Abriana a hand up into her saddle before swinging up into own.

The total silence persisted, contradictorily deafening, as the three rode in tandem back to the palace stables.

Amid the chaos going on two days later, as proper preparations went on to move Napoleon out of the American embassy in Diamant-Grezzo and into the royal palace of Nascoste, Solo managed to sneak in a quarter-hour to give Mr. Waverly a full update regarding his mission.

“The move into the royal residence is definitely a major step in the right direction, Mr. Solo,” the chief acknowledged over U.N.C.L.E.’s dedicated international communications line. “But you must be extremely circumspect once in that environment. Keep your ears open and do set a watchful eye upon Continetti. Charm the ministers of the Grand Princess as much as you can. Since Nascoste is not a constitutional monarchy but an absolute one, there is no requirement of law that she pay heed to their or indeed any outside advice. Still, Abriana like her father is of a modern mindset and prefers to rule within certain parameters of endorsed consent.”

“Yes sir,” Napoleon simply acquiesced.

At present he wasn’t up to providing more verbal feedback. The confusion engendered by the disquieting yearning his latest encounter with Abriana had roused in him was indeed playing and replaying unsettlingly within his mind. Was he being patently disloyal to Clara? Or just deliberately loyal to U.N.C.L.E.? Was his rational awareness of the mission discreetly leading the natural reactions of his body and even of his heart? Or was he physically and emotionally letting some unrealistic fairytale casually overtake his hold on surer reason?

The official invitation for a stay at the palace had arrived not even twenty-four hours after he and Abriana had connected in that first kiss. Delivered by liveried messenger, the authorized request bore not only the Grand Princess’ formal seal but a personal entreaty penned in her own hand beneath the sanctioned signature:

Stay with me

And for the present Napoleon Solo would oblige because U.N.C.L.E. commanded he do so. But what in the end would be the personal consequences of that action, what inside him would change forever because of that steadfast adherence to duty, he knew not and preferred not to dwell upon. Things were what they were and he would just have to deal with them as best he could within the boundaries of any given moment.

"I am Beppe, Mr. Solo," the man addressed him in but lightly-accented English. "I will be attending to your personal grooming and secretarial needs during your stay in Castello di Marmo Scuro."

The valet provided him by the Chamberlain of the Royal Household reminded Napoleon quite strongly of the cameriere personale who had served him when he was a boy back in his grandfather's ambassadorial household in Rome. An older version of course, as this man was at a guess about forty, but nonetheless with the same sense of propriety-fostered reserved decorum. Thankfully though this "gentleman's gentleman" did not address him in the third person as his long-ago manservant Giacobbe had.

"I can see you are a man of impeccable taste," Beppe now candidly complimented Solo on his urbane stylishness, something evident even in the long-sleeved white polo, stone-colored chinos and dark gray leather loafers in which Napoleon was currently quite casually outfitted. "Therefore will it, I'm sure, be a pleasure to serve you."

"I aim to please," thought Napoleon to himself in amusement. "If you bear in mind that I will expect to be granted total privacy when I expressly ask for it, I imagine we shall get on quite well, Beppe."

"Be assured I am not here to spy upon you in any fashion, Mr. Solo," the valet cleared the air straightaway. "Such covert shenanigans are not in my character, which is likely why Her Gracious Highness chose me for this particular duty. She has informed her ministers outright that you are here at her express request and that they are to honor without suspicion or hesitation her purposeful trust in making such a personal appeal to you."

Napoleon blinked in astonishment. "Very magnanimous of her to be sure."

"Our sovereign is indeed a very magnanimous lady," Beppe agreed, "and, if I may be so bold as to make mention, seems to have developed a gentle affection for you."

"As have I for her," Napoleon noted without so much as a single iota of dishonesty, as an undeniable affection for the Grand Princess of Nascoste had in fact been growing steadily in him during the sparse few weeks of their acquaintance.

"A fine thing in my opinion," Beppe ventured with all the respectful audacity of a long-time domestic who feels a certain possessive protectiveness toward his employers. "Her Gracious Highness remains too much alone. Youth should be a time for camaraderie and laughter."

"Yet I imagine such difficult to attain for one in such a lofty position."

"Just so, Mr. Solo," Beppe conceded. "But now you are here and all is as it should be."

"I thank you sincerely for the vote of confidence, Beppe."

"Do nothing to make me regret that support, Mr. Solo," cautioned the valet in all seriousness. "Her Gracious Highness deserves all the best life can bring her: be that in experiences or companionship."

Napoleon felt a pang of conscience with regard to what he knew he must do. In light of that, could he really give Abriana even the smallest piece of the best of himself?

“You set the bar high, Beppe,” he remarked a bit anxiously.

“It all things, Mr. Solo, it is paramount to aim high. Yes, perhaps it presents the possibility for bigger failure, but also for larger success. So in the end the risk is worth the taking, isn’t it?”

Yes: Napoleon decided after but a mere few seconds of contemplation on this score. Aiming to be but middling in anything was a coward’s way. And he wasn’t a coward. So he would seek the utmost goals with every ounce of vim and vigor in himself. For U.N.C.L.E.’s needs, for his own satisfaction of mind, and for Abriana’s at least temporary content.

“Damn right, Beppe,” he voiced firmly. “Risk can provide its own reward.”

Beppe nodded briskly before turning the conversation onto more immediate matters. “You are to luncheon in a few hours with Her Gracious Highness: the Grand Princess Abriana, Her Highness: the Princess Adjuvant Donjeta, the Grand Princess’ Minister of Internal Affairs: Tomas Grecco, and Her Highness’ Accesso all’Orecchio: Zamir Continetti.”

“Access to the Ear?” Napoleon translated the odd title of Continetti, pretending ignorance of the nuances of Nascosten governmental structure. His current goal was to get Beppe talking a bit about Continetti. Domestic, he recognized quite well, were often privy to much internal household tittle-tattle.

“A traditional position, Mr. Solo, in the entourage of any Prince or Princess Adjuvant,” explained Beppe. “Such a councilor is the time-honored liaison for the Adjuvant to gain the attention of the reigning sovereign. Though, in the case of Signore Continetti, that title perhaps more describes his particular situation with Her Highness, the Princess Donjeta. She is very reliant upon his counsel.”

“And the other man mentioned? The Minister of Internal Affairs?”

“Signore Grecco,” Beppe readily provided the name. “He is the first advisor to the Grand Princess herself and a noble man in every respect. His influence over Her Gracious Highness does not extend to the same length as does that of Signore Continetti over the Princess Adjuvant, however. The Grand Princess Abriana will take her first minister’s opinion under advisement when making any decision, but at the end of the day her decisions are her own.”

“Like those of her father before her,” noted Solo.

“The monarchy of Nascoste is one with few limits, Mr. Solo, most of those existing only through the courtesy of the monarchs themselves. Yet in all honesty I have to say there have been but few truly selfish and tyrannical rulers in the history of Nascoste.”

“A fortunate fall of the dice,” Napoleon warned sagely.

“Or perhaps it is that the rulers of Nascoste teach their children well,” countered Beppe with a teasing smile.

Napoleon smiled in return. “The conformist results of predictable parenting?”

“Indeed,” finalized the manservant with a small wink, something totally unexpected given the restrained nature of his overall demeanor.

Napoleon laughed lightly, liking this tiny bit of surprising “cheek” in the valet that surely the Giacobbe of his childhood had never displayed to him. Yes, he really would get on with this somewhat unconventional gentleman’s gentleman. Abriana had matched them well, with a keen understanding of the personalities of both men.

“All right then, back to business, Beppe,” Solo returned to the pressing requirements of proper attire for the upcoming luncheon. “This to-do is more informal than formal, I take it?”

Beppe nodded. “A rather intimate gathering. Suit-and-tie of course, but nothing more elaborate.”

With that Beppe opened the wardrobe where Napoleon’s rather impressive travel stock of clothing (unquestionably a necessity for this mission) had already been properly hung on satin-padded hangers or folded and stored in cedar-lined drawers as prescribed by the form of each garment. Surveying the contents within by both sight and touch, the valet ultimately suggested in a manner that was more than a suggestion, “The mocha Italian wool-and-silk suit I think: the perfect means to highlight your natural coloring. With it: a cream-colored cotton-and-silk blend poplin shirt with a Windsor-spread collar and link-cuffed sleeves. No need for full French cuffs on this occasion. As to the tie: gold silk, but not too bright in hue nor overly glossy in texture, and perhaps decorated with a discreet pattern.”

“Perhaps the tawny gold one with the pale blue swirling pattern?” suggested Napoleon in turn with a smirk of amusement. He’d been dressing himself rather successfully for a goodly number of years now, after all.

“Yes, an excellent choice,” decided Beppe as he removed the tie in question from the wardrobe’s tie rack and laid it over one of the dowels on the dressing room valet stand. “Balmorals in a medium brown leather and dark brown socks of course,” finalized the gentleman’s gentleman as he further rummaged inside the wardrobe and removed the essential items, placing them appropriately on the footrest of the stand. “I will take the suit and the shirt downstairs to be pressed after drawing your bath.”

With that the experienced manservant moved off into the bathroom, leaving Solo still smirking as he undressed. Depositing his discarded clothes in a readily accessible hamper, Solo donned a thick terry robe as he anticipated a luxurious soak in the deep claw-foot tub he espied through the open doorway of the bath.

“Rank – or even a certain nearness to rank – doth have its privileges,” he remarked with a relaxed chuckle as he prepared to thoroughly relish the pampering.

As Napoleon was led by one of the household servants into the small (in relative palace terms) private dining room used for family meals and other informal gatherings by the royals, the Grand Princess rose unexpectedly from her chair and walked over to personally greet him.

“How very handsome you do look, Napoleon!” Abriana complimented him as she pushed herself up on tiptoe to deposit an affectionate kiss on his cheek, aided by Solo bending a bit to her level when he realized her intent.

“Beppe is a man of extraordinary sartorial genius, Gracious Highness,” Napoleon asserted with a sly wink at the Grand Princess that set her broadly grinning.

The two councilors, who had risen from their own seats upon the standing of their sovereign, observed the personal ease between the young couple with differing emotions. In Grecco it raised a certain degree of circumspection, while in Continetti it engendered a definite measure of smugness.

"I told you, my dear, he was quite fit for public scrutiny," commented Donjeta with a ready smile as she followed her sister's lead, walking up to Napoleon and planting a friendly kiss on his opposite cheek.

"Come and sit," inveigled Abriana as she slipped an arm into Solo's and guided him toward the table. "As this is your first day as a guest within the Castello di Marmo Scuro, I have arranged for us to dine on a fine tagliata di manzo this luncheon. I know it is one of your favorites."

Napoleon turned a startled gaze to her. "How did you come to know that, Gracious Highness? I'm sure I never mentioned it to you."

Abriana's pale blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she replied, "A Grand Princess does have her confidential sources."

Napoleon chuckled. "And what other tidbits of information have you collected about me, spia più principesca⁶?" he subsequently asked with an answering mischievous sparkle in his own hazel brown eyes.

"Never enough to suit my boundless curiosity," came Abriana's partly teasing and partly serious retort. "I would know everything about you, Napoleon," she then admitted with perhaps a touch of shy innuendo in the revelation.

That admission on her part once again sent a pang of emotion most assuredly bordering on guilt running through the mind and heart of Napoleon Solo. She was psychologically opening herself up to him, without any of the hesitation vital to providing a fallback position of safe regal diffidence. While he had to keep himself in the main closed off from her.

Napoleon corralled his wayward conscience into submission by focusing his gaze momentarily upon one of the cufflinks he wore. It was an umbrella disk of Florentine-finished gold centered with a small blue star-sapphire. He had purchased the set that past December in Anegada just after graduating from U.N.C.L.E. Survival School top of his class. Now looking at one of the pair served to remind him that this mission delegated by the Command had a benign purpose, that he wasn't taking part in this uncompromising charade of "hearts and flowers" for selfish or malicious reasons.

The awkwardness of Napoleon's situation at that moment was blessedly relieved by Grecco's verbal prompt of "Your Gracious Highness, we keep the servers most discourteously at heel."

With a quick glance around the room where several servants stood patiently at the ready to perform their assigned tasks, Abriana acknowledged, albeit a bit reluctantly, "Yes, yes of course." And with that she left Napoleon standing behind his own chair as she went once more to the head of the table and regained her seat, the others seating themselves immediately afterwards.

⁶ most princessly spy

As principal guest, Solo was seated to the right of the Grand Princess, with the Princess Adjuvant seated to his right. The Minister of Internal Affairs was seated to the left of the Grand Princess and thus across from Napoleon. While the Accesso all'Orecchio was seated to Grecco's left and therefore across from the Princess Adjuvant. The Grand Princess informally made the necessary introductions between Napoleon and the two cabinet ministers as the first course of cucumber consommé was set before them all.

In his late-fifties, Tomas Grecco was a smallish man with a non-audacious though well-tailored manner of dress. His sandy hair was peppered with a plentitude of gray, both on his head and in the short, neatly-trimmed beard he sported. He was softly but very precisely spoken, reminiscent of someone who was part of the intelligentsia of academia. From the dossiers he had perused before the mission, Solo knew Grecco came from noble Nascosten bloodlines, was considered possessed of an astute political mind, and that the councilor's dedication to his nation was openly declared as unparalleled. As well the Minister of Internal Affairs had a calming way about him that made one immediately comfortable in his company.

In contrast Zamir Continetti was a giant of man, at least six-and-half feet in height and very likely more. The minister's custom-made clothes did little to disguise the underlying heavily muscled frame that bespoke of the sturdy Albanian peasant stock of his birth heritage. Clean-shaven, his countenance nonetheless at this midday hour already showed the beginnings of a noticeable five-o'clock shadow. He definitely displayed a penchant for flashy jewelry, attested to by the numerous gem-encrusted rings he wore on his fingers, as well as the glitteringly diamond-accented bar that held in place his tie and an equally glittering multi-stone stickpin of the Nascosten royal coat-of-arms that decorated his lapel. From the U.N.C.L.E. intelligence files, Solo was familiar with the fact that Continetti was some sixty years old. Yet he appeared nowhere near that age. This impression was only enhanced by the man's midnight black hair that displayed not a single strand of gray, though of course he likely made necessary use of a dye bottle to achieve that particular wonder. Still, there was no denying the Accesso all'Orecchio was indeed an impressive physical presence.

The luncheon moved along pleasantly enough, with the food deliciously satisfying and the dialogue agreeably relaxed. Napoleon allowed his recollections of smaller official dinner parties within the various embassies in which his grandfather had resided as top representative of the U.S. government to guide his words as well as his actions. He was no stranger to diplomacy, whether in a social or political setting.

"So this worldwide charitable organization by which you are employed," Tomas Grecco continued the chitchat that had settled, not exactly to Solo's peace of mind though he betrayed nothing, upon Napoleon's current career, "provides compassionate relief to put-upon peoples?"

"Various forms of humanitarian aid, yes," Napoleon smoothly let this public description of U.N.C.L.E. stand. After all, it wasn't an outright lie. Of course none of those at the table knew him as an agent of the U.N.C.L.E. with which all of them had in truth at least a vague familiarity. The organization that employed him was known to them by another name entirely, that of one of the Command's submersive public entities.

"No direct monetary support?" questioned Donjeta pointedly.

"No, not as a rule."

“Nor military assistance in the way of weaponry or equipment?” further prompted the Princess Adjuvant.

“Never. The intent is to better the state of the world as a whole, not worsen it.”

“Yet aren’t there situations where providing such things could indeed improve the global condition?” Donjeta pressed.

“Begging your pardon for the bluntness of my query, but improve for whom, Highness?” Napoleon inquired straight-to-the-fore. “Warfare of any kind seldom benefits the populace of the nations involved.”

“You are an American, Napoleon,” Donjeta went for her own point with equal bluntness. “You fought for your country in Korea. Surely you understand that certain threats – Communism in that case and many others at the present time – to continuing civilized well-being are worth using any means to contain?”

“Donjeta,” warned the Grand Princess sharply, “you know how I dislike political talk at private table.”

“I’ll answer the question, Gracious Highness,” Napoleon disallowed Abriana’s intervention in his behalf. “Highness,” he then directed his response to Donjeta as his eyes unwaveringly met hers, “what I learned in Korea is that political ideologies have little to do with humanitarian goals. One man’s ambrosia of spirit is another man’s poison of heart. Therefore in the end you just cannot mix universal ethics with dogmatic xenophobia. Attempting to do so becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom for the salvation of mankind as a whole.”

Donjeta was silent for a few moments after Napoleon’s declaration, her manner seeming a bit put-out. Abriana, however, appeared discreetly pleased, as indeed did Tomas Grecco. Zamir Continetti remained completely noncommittal in expression. “*More precautionary than the garden-variety Thrush power-monger, it would seem,*” Napoleon summed up the man mentally.

It was Donjeta, more than likely wordlessly prompted by Continetti, who finally broke the somewhat gauche stillness by stating plainly, “You are a man of strong opinions, Napoleon.”

“I apologize if I have given any offense, Highness.”

“No offense, merely food for thought,” Donjeta verbally dismissed the momentary unease at table.

“Most generous, Highness,” Napoleon acknowledged with a slight bow of his head in the direction of the Princess Adjuvant.

After that somewhat thorny topic, conversation returned to more neutral subjects. Yet did Napoleon take particular note of the subsequent covertly exchanged glances between the Princess Adjuvant and her Accesso all’Orecchio.

“He will be utterly useless to us in persuading Abriana to see the moral rightness of our viewpoint,” Princess Adjuvant Donjeta complained bitterly to her Accesso all’Orecchio once within the privacy of Continetti’s palace office.

“He is become, like many young men once they experience the trials of war, an optimistic idealist. I have seen this many times. In the end such lofty ideas cannot persist,” Zamir calmly placated the inexperienced royal under his experienced wing.

“I do not believe him a coward, Zamir,” stated Donjeta certainly.

“I do not account him in the least a coward, Highness,” Continetti extrapolated his own position. “I believe Mr. Napoleon Solo would fight to the death for what he envisions as right. It is just that his vision of right is perhaps too universally abstract to account for worldly practicalities. In my life have I come in contact with many such men.”

And it was perhaps this explanatory reflection by Continetti that raised the first flag of suspicion, though in the moment he did not note that flag going up inside his own head.

“What we need from Mr. Solo is simply for him to make Abriana his wife,” Zamir forwarded those ‘worldly practicalities’ in this particular venture. “As Crown Princess, you would be able to do much more in working toward our goal in Albania than is possible with your current status, Highness.”

“True,” agreed Donjeta. “And Abriana does love Napoleon. She has herself confided that to me. So we would be doing much good and little harm by promoting a union between the pair.”

“Thus we simply let nature take its course. With Mr. Solo staying here in the palace, he and the Grand Princess will be put much more in each other’s direct path and therefore will more often seek out each other’s personal company. Such is always the way of things with romantic attraction between young people.”

“I do myself like Napoleon, Zamir,” admitted Donjeta. “I would have no qualms with having him as a brother-in-law.”

Zamir chuckled amusedly. “So everything works in our favor.”

“Meaning God does Himself approve of our plan.”

Continetti made no comment to that assertion. Whether God approved or not, Thrush most certainly would, and that for him was the crux of the matter.

Because much of her time was occupied with matters of state and details regarding the ceremony of her upcoming coronation, Abriana procured for Napoleon’s especial use a French-made catamaran. The Grand Princess did not want Solo becoming bored in the generally restrictive atmosphere of the palace. Thus did she aim to keep him in good spirits by providing him a means to indulge in his favorite pastime. Sailing the small but yare craft over the blue waters of the Adriatic she surmised could all but guarantee this. And the personal enjoyment of his nautical hobby within the supplied boat also offered him a measure of privacy not possible in the Castello di Marmo Scuro with its bustling domestic and governmental staff.

Accordingly the days quickly fell into a pattern where Solo and the Grand Princess went out on an approximately hour-long riding jaunt shortly after breakfast; then Abriana attended to the business of running her nation before the two lunched together most often. After lunch Abriana would return to her royal tasks while Napoleon set out alone on the catamaran for several hours. They would meet again for dinner, which was sometimes an informal event but just as

often a formal affair with Solo serving as Her Gracious Highness' official escort. If any hours remained before needing to retire for the night, the pair would sit together in one of the private parlors of the palace. Sometimes they played chess; sometimes they played cards; sometimes they watched a bit of a televised newscast; sometimes they listened to music; yet most often they simply talked.

Abriana found these exchanges between them, which ran the gambit from extremely lighthearted to seriously weighty topics, completely addictive. She absolutely adored talking with Napoleon. He was intelligent and witty; he cared deeply about the circumstances of the world and its peoples; he could charm and cajole, but he could just as easily engage and excite. He had a wicked earth-bound sense of humor that teased and tantalized without ever breaking the boundaries of mental comfort, and an uncanny spirit-bound ability that soothed or sympathized always within the parameters most suited to the emotional climate. Every single one of these precious moments between the two of them propelled the Grand Princess deeper and deeper into the throes of genuine love.

As to the physical side of the equation, Abriana longed to be one with the man. She wanted his arms around her, his lips fastened on hers, their bodies joined in coital passion. She was fascinated by the deceptive strength she sensed in all of his physical being whenever they managed a discreet moment to eagerly embrace or clandestinely cuddle. The classically chiseled cut of his profile often left her rapt in something embarrassingly akin to idol worship. The mischief and compassion that could so easily alternate within the hazel-brown depths of his eyes made her actually shiver with pleasure. And his hair, dark as deepest night and soft as smoothest velvet, created an endless desire in her, one she could but rarely permit herself, to touch and stroke and pet.

So winter glided smoothly into spring, and to Abriana the promise inherent in the new season had never seemed more inspiring.

Napoleon made practical use of the solitude granted him during his outings on the catamaran to keep in contact by communicator with U.N.C.L.E. As Solo was a private American citizen, who was merely a current guest of the Nascosten royal family, there was no prerequisite for bodyguards of any kind. And the boat could only accommodate two people in any case. Napoleon was permitted to wear his own holstered semiautomatic, since his sharpshooting skills had been verified, and that was as much security as was considered needful under the circumstances. This suited Solo's own needs perfectly as he could, without any threat of being eavesdropped or spied upon, update the status of his assignment while afloat on the open sea.

More often than not, Mr. Waverly made himself available for these reports. The mission was such a delicate one that the Continental Chief preferred to hear of Solo's progress directly from the source rather than through organizationally abridged rundowns.

"I'm not sure what to make of Donjeta's attitude regarding what she terms as all people's essential right of self-decision with regard to political systems," Napoleon this day summarized for Waverly's benefit. "It's an idea I agree with in essence, but she seems to think it, therefore, the world's obligation to afford people seen as somehow lacking in this right any and all means to attain such."

"Any and all means? Including the clandestine furnishing of arms and monetary funding?" queried Waverly pointedly.

Since the incident at his first informal luncheon in Castello di Marmo Scuro, Solo had been making it a priority to engage the Princess Adjuvant in casual conversation whenever possible. The nature of what she had particularly asked him on that initial occasion had raised nagging questions in his mind, questions he recognized it was part of his mission to answer.

“Yes sir,” he therefore replied with absolute certainty. “She seems to have no concept of the possible price in human terms of such free-for-all methods. And there is just... Hard to explain, sir, but hers seems a worldview based more on personal aspirations than purely ideological ones.”

“Her father, in his youth, was involved in the Albanian Revolt of 1910,” Mr. Waverly supplied vital information. “That was the beginning of that country’s break from Ottoman rule.”

“When he was sixteen,” Napoleon recalled from the dossiers he had studied before beginning his assignment, “and much against his own father’s wishes.”

“Yes, he snuck into Albania by small boat and was, for a time, considered drowned at sea. He was discovered in the group of insurgents at the Kaçanik Pass blocking the railway to Skopje, and taken prisoner by the Ottoman government. It took quite a feat of international diplomacy on the part of his father, the then Grand Prince of Nascoste, to get him returned to his native country.”

“I understand that, during his time with the insurgents, he met the Albanian woman who would later become his second wife,” Napoleon remarked.

“The Grand Consort Ljena,” Waverly readily furnished the name.

“Stepmother to Abriana and Donjeta,” added Solo speculatively.

“Yes, but there were never any issues in that regard,” the chief countered the course of his agent’s speculations. “His daughters were both quite young, just five and three I believe, at the time Grand Prince Adalfieri wed Ljena. They didn’t remember their mother, the Grand Princess Trillare, who had died in childbirth when Donjeta was born. No friction thus existed in the royal family when Ljena became part of it. She was undoubtedly fond of both girls and they were apparently equally fond of her.”

“Abriana has mentioned her in passing, and always with affection,” Napoleon conceded. “Ljena died some half-dozen years ago; that right?”

“Correct, Mr. Solo. Her passing was deeply mourned not only by her husband and stepdaughters, but by the people of Nascoste as a whole. She had quite endeared herself to the national populace over the decade of her marriage.”

“She was related to Ismail Qemali, wasn’t she?” Solo made reference to Albania’s nationalist hero and that country’s first Prime Minister during its brief era of independence.

“Distantly. A cousin of some sort. She was born into a wealthy Muslim family, but converted to Roman Catholicism sometime after the 1910 revolt. Supposedly she said years later the reason she did so had less to do with religious convictions than with political ones. According to her own blunt declarations in this regard, she wanted to detach herself completely from anything that could be related to the Ottoman rule in Albania.”

“Ah. Perhaps then she instilled the personal approach toward political convictions into her younger stepdaughter?”

“A reasonable assumption, Mr. Solo, but it does little to get us the answers we need. To wit: why is Thrush so interested in the Nascosten royal family, and for what purpose are they seeking to utilize any possible ties to that family?”

“Continetti is cunning to a fault,” complained Napoleon unhappily. “Whatever dealings he has with Thrush, he is keeping close to the vest. I haven’t come across any real hint as to what might be brewing on that backburner.”

All Solo’s attempts at covert skullduggery in laying possible verbal traps for the Accesso all’Orecchio to catch him perhaps in an unguarded word had been hopelessly unsuccessful. As well Solo hadn’t yet discovered any way to directly spy or eavesdrop upon Continetti during his conferences with the Princess Adjuvant. Entrance to the man’s office was tightly restricted, and Napoleon had to retain an outward show of nonchalance and disinterest in the governmental workings of Nascoste.

Solo sighed in frustration. “This is a puzzle with just too many pieces still missing.”

“And you will only get at those pieces through closer connection with the Nascosten royal family, Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly advised with undisguised adamancy. “I understand from outside sources that the Grand Princess has been showing a marked affection for you even in public,” he further took up this tack in the discussion.

Napoleon swallowed hard in an attempt to clear an uncomfortable lump in his throat. “She seems partial to my company, yes sir, but we are seldom alone. Thus conjuring up a situation sufficiently intimate to arouse in her an irresistible impulse toward marriage is proving a bit difficult. I am making slow-but-steady progress in that direction though.”

“Not good enough, Mr. Solo,” judged the Continental Chief doggedly. “Goddamn man, get the thing done! I’ve certainly overheard tales enough of your romantic prowess from the female members of this organization to suspect this is not an overwhelming challenge for you.”

Shocked by Waverly’s bold assertion, it was all Napoleon could do to respond with a restrained, “Yes sir.”

“We understand each other then, young man. Time is a commodity that cannot be reclaimed. Therefore, get on posthaste with claiming the Nascosten Grand Princess as your bride. That will at the very least account for one less niggling item over which I need lose sleep. There are surely enough of those in my head as it is, what with all the ongoing negotiations with the Soviet government regarding obtaining an agent for training within the Command enforcement ranks.”

“Relations a bit constrained, I take it?” Like most of those in Section II, Solo was intently interested in what would happen if and when a Russian operative was added into their midst. Thus, perhaps his question was ill-advised, but it was surely understandable under the circumstances.

“Mr. Solo, you need only concern yourself with ‘unconstraining’ relations with the Grand Princess of Nascoste,” the Number 1 in Section I pronounced testily. “Waverly out.”

“Those negotiations with the Soviets must be playing out quite badly,” spontaneously thought Napoleon as he detached the cord from the wireless radio connection and disassembled the communicator, turning it once more into a cigarette case before unsuspecting eyes.

Act III: ...if the shoe fits...

April arrived in Nascoste with way too many of those showers that supposedly hold the promise of May flowers. Rain descended upon the little island nation for ten straight days, sometimes in sheeting downpours and sometimes in less heavy but nonetheless continuous storms. The dreary weather robbed Napoleon of his sailing outings on the Adriatic, making contact with U.N.C.L.E. more difficult for him to manage and thus more sporadic. Finally the eleventh day of April dawned clear and welcomingly sunny.

As Abriana had informed him on the night prior that she would have to forego their usual shared horseback ride due to a formal breakfast meeting with a foreign dignitary, Solo decided to take advantage of the break in the weather to set out extremely early on the catamaran. He had breakfasted in the sitting room of his chambers and was just finishing a final cup of coffee before making his way to the private royal dock when Abriana was announced into the room by the ever-efficient Beppe: “Her Gracious Highness, the Grand Princess Abriana.”

In courteous acknowledgement of Abriana’s unexpected entrance, Solo rose from his chair before the small table that held his breakfast tray. “Gracious Highness,” he greeted her with a broad smile.

“My appointment was cancelled as the visiting King of the Belgians, Baudouin, is indisposed this morning,” Abriana breezily informed Napoleon. “So I thought perhaps we could go for our ride after all.” Then her eyes focused on Napoleon’s particular attire and her bright cheerfulness faded a shade or two. “Oh, you were planning to go sailing.”

“My plans can change,” he assured the Nascosten monarch easily.

“No, you enjoy your excursions on the catamaran too much for me to steal one from you,” protested Abriana. She was thoroughly disappointed though in not getting to spend some relatively private time with Napoleon. Then her face brightened once more, “I have the solution: I will go sailing with you!”

“But you dislike sailing,” noted Napoleon with a teasing smile.

“But I like being in your company,” admitted Abriana with surprising readiness. “So I can bear a few hours on the water for that greater pleasure,” she uttered words unknowingly analogous to Napoleon’s own regarding the riding jaunts. “Besides, you’ll keep me safe, now won’t you?” teased the Grand Princess in her turn.

“A task I will undertake more than willingly, Gracious Highness,” forwarded Napoleon. “Do realize though that the catamaran only has room for two,” he reminded with a mischievous twinkle in his hazel eyes.

Abriana laughed lightly at his sly hint. “All the better!” she confirmed. “My bodyguards can shadow in another boat if they have a mind to.”

“I’m certain they will be of that mind,” guaranteed Solo.

“Most likely, but no matter,” Abriana declared with a radiant smile. “We will have our day together on the water whatever they decide to do.”

And so, after Abriana had changed into clothes suitable for sailing, the two made their way onto the catamaran. Abriana’s two bodyguards meanwhile outfitted a motorized daysailer for their use in shadowing Solo’s smaller boat.

The day was fine and sunny, though definitely windy, perhaps indicative of a strong bora blowing through the more northern reaches of the Adriatic. Napoleon enjoyed the nautical maneuvering necessary to pilot the sleek catamaran across the choppy waters. Abriana watched him in rather mesmerized admiration. There was no doubting his expertise in this venue. And she had to admit she adored covertly scrutinizing the controlled flex of biceps and triceps, bared by the short sleeves of his blue-and-white striped polo, as he handled the rigging of the boat.

“He is positively gorgeous,” she thought absently as she observed him at his various seafaring chores.

The rough waves proved far easier for the catamaran to navigate than for the slightly larger daysailer. The sails of the catamaran stretched perfectly in the wind under Solo’s skilled guiding touch. While the motor of the daysailer had to fight through the uneven peaks of water, sometimes resulting in the boat rotating to one side or the other.

Breaking her fascinated gaze from Solo for a moment, Abriana noticed the daysailer spin in a less-than-controlled circle a bit farther than expected from their own craft. “They’re in trouble,” she remarked worriedly to Napoleon as she incautiously stood up in her place on one of the boat’s twin hulls.

“Abriana, sit down!” Solo shouted out a warning, but too late as a high-cresting wave threw the standing Grand Princess off-balance and thus over into the blue waters of the Adriatic Sea. Immediately she panicked, with the result that she was only sporadically able to keep her head above the waves.

Lifejackets were not standard equipment for recreational sailing in 1955. Thus neither Napoleon nor Abriana was wearing one. The swift little catamaran had opened up a huge swath of sweeping water between itself and the daysailer. There was no likelihood of aid from that quarter. So Solo took a deep breath to calm his own nerves at the prospect of immersion in the churning sea, and dove into the waves to retrieve the struggling Abriana.

Though he absolutely abhorred the endeavor, Solo was a more than competent swimmer. It was a skill he had sharply disciplined himself to learn in childhood. Napoleon, therefore, soon had Abriana in tow. The catamaran had kept up its rapid fronting into the wind, however, pushing it further and further from the last position where Napoleon had espied the daysailer. It took him several long minutes of pushing through the choppy sea, with Abriana secured by one of his arms around her chest, before he made contact with the catamaran. He lifted the fortunately fully conscious Grand Princess and literally rolled her slight form onto the nearest hull. Then he plunged under the waves a final time before pulling himself up on the opposite hull.

"I'm going to take the boat in onto the nearest wedge of shore," Solo advised the Grand Princess as he briskly turned to the effort of bringing the catamaran back fully under his control. "Your bodyguards can catch up with us there."

Abriana nodded briefly, her breathing still shaky, and remained exactly where she was, lying on her back on one hull of that boat. Napoleon used the force of the wind to turn into shore, ultimately jumping into waist-high water and beaching the catamaran by dragging it onto the coastline once near enough to do so. He again lifted the somewhat traumatized Grand Princess in his arms and settled her on the sand, sitting beside her and pulling her close. She clung to him, trembling all over and clenching at his sodden shirt with tightly closed fists. She pressed her face into his chest as gulping sobs finally escaped from her.

"Shhh. Hush now," Napoleon soothed her in soft tones. "It's all right. You're safe."

She looked up into his face with huge, tear-glazed eyes. "It was almost all over. Almost the end."

"I pledged to keep you safe, Abriana, and I always keep my promises," Napoleon stated as he rubbed one hand in comforting circles over her back, gentling her as one would any genuinely terrified creature.

"Life is too short," she whispered quietly. "Life is always too short."

"You'll have a long life, Abriana," he contradicted as he hugged her even closer.

"No one can count on that," Abriana gainsaid him in an eerily muted voice. "No one should count on that."

"We can only live as best we can for as long as we are given," Napoleon reassured her.

"Yes. No moment should be wasted because we never know if that moment might be the last."

This melancholy mood in her gave Napoleon real pause. It was perhaps understandable, but there was as well something... oddly determined in it.

"I want to tell you a story, Napoleon," she then began out-of-the-blue.

"Does it begin with once upon a time?" he asked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Yes, I suppose it does," she decided as she turned her body to sit sideways in his arms and thus lean her head back against his chest. She could feel his steady heartbeat and it relaxed her shock-born anxiety like nothing else could.

"Once upon a time there was a Crown Prince whose moral principles demanded of him that he aid a neighboring country in shaking off the yoke of a longtime oppressor. He set sail upon the waters of the Adriatic in pursuit of this personal quest. Encountering a bad squall at sea, he was given up for drowned. But in truth he had managed to make shore within the land of his personal quest.

"There he joined a group of insurgents fighting for freedom from that oppressor. And there he met a young woman whose idealistic character captured the innermost yearnings of his own

soul. She was some years older than him and more importantly not of his faith. Thus marrying her was something that would not be countenanced within his own land for one of his status of birth. That mattered not to him in the moment as he fought with the revolutionaries and gave his heart willingly to the young woman.

“Eventually he was taken prisoner by the oppressor’s forces, as was the young woman. His royal birth shielded him from the worse circumstances of political imprisonment. Not true for the young woman. Freedom for the Crown Prince was secured by his royal father and he was taken back to his home country. He begged for intervention by his father to secure the freedom of the young woman as well. His father provided such intervention, but only after receiving from his son a promise never to contact the young woman again. After all she could never reign beside him, so it was best he let her live her life without further imposition. That reasoning was without doubt sound, and so the bargain was made between father and son.

“By unspoken commandment, the young woman with whom the Crown Prince had fallen in love so foolishly, foolish in terms of position and that position’s responsibilities, was never mentioned within the precincts of the royal household and was never even heard tell of by those outside it. The Crown Prince came to rule after his father’s passing and subsequently, at a greater age than most, married as was deemed suitable by the nation at large. His wife was a fine and noble woman, a goodly number of years his junior, who blessed him with two daughters. But their union was built on simple fondness and national expectations: not true devotion. Thus it surely was understandable when his wife died giving birth to that second daughter, the one-time Crown Prince felt particularly his lifelong personal loneliness.

“Word came to him about the young woman from sources he relentlessly plumbed for information in such regard. He knew then what his soul demanded he do. He was Grand Prince now with two viable heirs. With the duties of rule fulfilled with regard to the particulars of succession, he was at last free to follow the dictates of his own heart.

“Therefore did he seek out the young woman, who was of course no longer young but who still had a hold on his very soul. By a strange stroke of luck, she had converted to his faith because of a personal wish to distance herself from the oppressor past of her own country. He married her, against the advice of all his councilors. Yet he was an absolute ruler and had no need for their agreement or endorsement on such a score.

“The one-time young woman, contrary to all negative reservations, became beloved of his people. She gave the nation a decade of caring as the consort of the reigning sovereign, and that sovereign himself a decade of happiness unparalleled in his life. Yet in his inmost heart, as he sometimes would reveal in private to one or the other of his daughters after the death of that beloved second wife, did he continuously regret all the prior moments of her life he had lost to his own ‘sensible’ decision.”

Her story done, Abriana fell silent.

Napoleon said with quiet certitude, “The Crown Prince was your father.”

“Yes,” she conceded.

“And you told me this story because...”

“Because, even when good things eventually come from bad decisions, life is never as long as we hope.”

Perhaps it was a bit unanticipated that those words reminded Solo strongly of some recent ones of Waverly: *Time is a commodity that cannot be reclaimed.*

Buoyed by the truth of this sentiment no matter how or why expressed, Napoleon took hold of Abriana’s face within the palm of one hand and turned it up toward his own, so he could look down directly into her eyes.

“Marry me, Abriana,” he requested simply, “because life is never as long as we hope.”

Her gaze glued to his, she responded just as simply, “Yes.”

And, like any romantic pact shared between two idealistic young people, this one was sealed with a kiss.

“You did what?” demanded Tomas Grecco in a stunned and totally disapproving tone.

“I have accepted Napoleon’s proposal of marriage,” pronounced Abriana unwaveringly.

“Then you will just have to ‘unaccept’ it,” counseled Grecco. “I am sure the young man will understand the necessities of your position make this union an impossibility.”

“Perhaps he might understand, but I would not,” firmly forwarded the Grand Princess. “I intend to marry him, Tomas. I **will** marry him.”

“Madam, you cannot!”

“Let me remind you that, as Grand Princess of Nascoste, I do not need your sanction in anything. I am most certainly not asking your permission; I am merely telling you what will be.”

“Gracious Highness, this is a most unwise exercise of royal prerogative,” Grecco attempted to take the rational route. “Though he is Catholic and his religion thus presents no issue, there is the matter of his lineage not suiting the paradigm legally required to allow any children you may conceive by him to be accepted as heirs presumptive to the throne of Nascoste.”

“Donjeta can be assumed as heir presumptive even as she is now. I have no qualms with that as the blood flowing in her veins comes as much by way of my father, Grand Prince Adalfieri, as does my own.”

“And if Donjeta does as you would do and enters into a morganatic marriage as well?” needed Grecco somewhat unfairly. “After all, you are setting her but a poor example in this.”

“I have sacrificed much as ruler of Nascoste. I surely during my lifetime will be called upon to sacrifice more, and willingly will I do so. But I will **not** sacrifice the one I love! I have my father’s sad example in this,” the Grand Princess hotly countered her minister’s somewhat low emotional blow.

“Your father did not in the end make any such sacrifice!”

“After how many years of doing so? One cannot count on there always being time for things to work themselves out with some eternal sense of justice, Tomas. Thus will I marry Napoleon now.”

“You are too young!” Tomas all but shouted at her. “The pair of you! You’re barely twenty-one and he is what? A year older?”

“Fourteen months older,” stated Abriana without a qualm.

“Babes in the woods! Both of you!”

“I don’t believe Napoleon would tolerate being referred to in such a manner,” Abriana noted in her coldest official voice. “I know I will not. If I am of sufficient age to legally reign over Nascoste, I am of sufficient age to marry as I wish.”

“Gracious Highness, I beg you to reconsider,” Tomas returned to a more reasonable approach and a less strident tone.

“Reconsider I will not,” came Abriana’s unshakable decision. “On the morrow, you will make the official announcement regarding my betrothal to Mr. Napoleon Solo of the State of New York in the United States of America. And immediately, Tomas, you will set about all needful arrangements for a wedding in May. I want to marry before I am formally crowned. A small nuptial service only, as the coronation celebration is already taxing this country’s exchequer. Perhaps in the parish church of Vatican City, St Anne’s, where my father wed Ljena some sixteen years ago. Sixteen is a number of some significance in religious matters as there are sixteen names for God in the Old Testament and St. Paul wrote of the sixteen qualities of love within the New.”

“Madam,” Grecco reluctantly acknowledged her instructions with a slight bowing of his head for he knew there would be in this no dissuading her. Her romanticized view of love as a fairytale always intended to end in ‘happily ever after’ would make her adamancy absolute. But as to any possible significance of the number sixteen, Tomas was more inclined to account it by more modern standards as the number of destruction.

Handsomely dressed in a linen shirt, riding breeches and mid-calf boots in readiness for his usual morning horseback ride with the Grand Princess of Nascoste, Napoleon Solo stood in the sitting room of his private apartments within Castello di Marmo Scuro. At the moment, however, he was engaged in another morning routine: going over his calendar for the day with the ever-efficient Beppe.

“You will have to forego any excursion in the catamaran as you have another alteration session with the tailor this afternoon, Mr. Solo,” the gentleman’s gentleman reminded Napoleon after checking the black leather diary in which he kept meticulous record of all Solo’s scheduled appointments.

“Another one, Beppe?” questioned Napoleon in some surprise. Goodness knows he always appreciated the procurement of new clothes, but it seemed he had been scheduled for a fitting with the tailor every other day since the formal announcement of his engagement to Abriana two-and-a-half weeks before.

“Mr. Solo, you are to be the August Sir, Grand Consort of the Grand Princess Abriana of Nascoste. You must never lack for the proper wardrobe to play that part to the full.”

Funny that Beppe should describe it as playing a part. The faithful valet had no clue just how accurate that description truly was in this case.

“The precedence title ‘August Sir’ makes me feel like some sort of ancient Roman emperor,” further grumped Napoleon.

“Tradition is tradition, Mr. Solo,” tut-tutted Beppe. “And by tradition the title of precedence for a male Grand Consort is August Sir.”

“So even you will refer to me in such a manner after the marriage, Beppe?” Napoleon asked with a little sigh of disgruntled disappointment.

“Of course, Mr. Solo. Not to do so would be to demean the royal family of Nascoste by dismissing your place in the household. And I would never do that.”

Just then the Grand Princess, rather fetchingly dressed in a female variation of Napoleon’s attire, bustled into the open door of the sitting room. Her ubiquitous bodyguards remained on quiet watch in the adjoining hall.

“Good morning, my darling,” Abriana greeted Napoleon happily as she walked straight to him, pushed herself up onto her tiptoes and placed a brief kiss on Solo’s lips as he obligingly bent his head to meet hers. “And what will you be up to today after our ride?”

“Letting the tailor stick me with pins again,” gibed Napoleon, still with some annoyance at the currently too oft-repeated process of custom couture.

Abriana laughed lightly. “Ah, but you make me the envy of every woman in the world when they see the striking man I chose as my future husband so well turned-out in newsreels and photographs.”

Napoleon chuckled, his own mood lightening. “Then I guess it’s worth all the pinpricks.”

“That’s my brave cavalier,” she mock-praised as she rubbed a supposedly soothing yet slyly stimulating hand up-and-down the length of one his arms. “But what I actually came for is to tell you an international phone call will be put through here to your confidential line in a few moments. From your Aunt Amy in Copenhagen.”

“Ah.” Napoleon mentally prepared himself for his aunt’s likely interrogation involving his upcoming nuptials.

“I thought I would bring you that news myself, and at the same time gather up Beppe for suggestions regarding ceremonial garb for you during the coronation ceremony. Thus granting you full privacy to talk with your aunt.”

“I’m grateful for the consideration with regard to the privacy, Gracious Highness,” acknowledged Napoleon with a somewhat mischievous smile, “but not enough to submit to being outfitted in any sort of velvet-and-ermine getup for your coronation.”

"I haven't yet decided on the styling of the 'getup'," Abriana taunted with a mischievous smile of her own. "But you'll wear by royal decree whatever I come up with in my head, with Beppe's capable guidance."

"Woah is me! About to be shackled to a woman with supreme power within her sphere of sway!" moaned Napoleon with dramatic silliness.

"And don't you forget it, my August Sir!" Abriana joked merrily.

Since her betrothal, Abriana's mood had been continually upbeat and marked by unbridled bliss. A fact that once more sent stabs of guilt through Napoleon's conscience. Yet he knew he couldn't dwell on that guilt. He had a job to do. In any case he also intended to do his best, more than his best, to provide Abriana with at least a short-lived period of joy in her marriage to him.

The ringing of the phone resulted in Abriana commanding Beppe, with just the single mention of his name, to follow her out of the room. The competent manservant did so with a slight bow to the Grand Princess and the tactful closing of the door to the chamber after his own exit.

Napoleon sat down on a chair near the table on which the phone rested, took a deep breath, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Aunt Amy," he greeted his maternal grandmother's sister, thus his actual great-aunt, with a ready cheeriness.

"Napoleon, trying to get a hold of you has been all but impossible!" Amy Oppen-Schilden complained a bit anxiously. "All this regal folderol! From the international security folks," she made discreet allusion to the initiation of her quest to contact him through U.N.C.L.E. channels, "to the American government folks, to the Nascosten security folks, to the Nascosten government folks, and then back to the Nascosten security folks again. I swear my call was routed to you by way of Shanghai!"

"I do apologize for the runaround, Aunt Amy," Napoleon contritely assured her. "I'm not accustomed to all this regal folderol yet myself, or I would have circumvented at least some of it with regard to you getting in touch with me."

"So what is this I hear about you marrying the Grand Princess of Nascoste?" Amy put the most salient query squarely on the table.

"Seems a passionate taste for European aristocracy runs in the family," teased Napoleon with regard to Amy's own conjugal union with a minor Danish noble. That husband of hers was long dead now. Yet had he been without question the love of her life, a man she had wheedled and cajoled her parents into letting her wed at but seventeen years of age.

"It's the French LaCoursiere blood," Amy alluded to the maternal roots of Solo's heritage through his grandmother. "I've always told you it runs hot."

"So you have," conceded Napoleon.

"I did want to let you know there were inquiries made to the family estate lawyers by various representatives of the Nascosten government," Amy noncommittally noted. Yet Napoleon knew what was concerning her.

"I've no doubt of that. Researched my background every which way from Sunday, more than likely," he kept his response easy and untroubled.

"And found it of course quite pristine," his aunt guaranteed him. "Napoleon," she then questioned in a composed yet undeniably worried manner, "is this really what you want?"

"This is right for me, Aunt," he answered her in a way that told her much more than what was actually said.

Amy Oppen-Schilden was listed as the next-of-kin of one Napoleon Solo with regard to U.N.C.L.E. legalities as she and his paternal grandfather were all that was left of Solo's immediate family. And that grandfather, the Admiral as he was always referenced even by his closest relations, had but recently retired from the United States Navy and was enjoying his new carefree life in Fiji. Thus Napoleon hadn't thought it fair to burden the man with any disquieting provisions of his own budding career as a Command enforcement agent.

That didn't mean, however, that Aunt Amy was privy to the full parameters of her nephew's position within Section II of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Such relatives of record were never told more than the barest of essentials. Yet Amy was an extremely astute woman with a well-traveled global awareness. Thus Napoleon often suspected his great-aunt understood far more about his chosen professional path than she ever let on.

"You know I will always support you in anything that means much to you, Napoleon. I will do no less in this."

"Come to the wedding, Aunt," he invited her with tender affection. "It is to be rather private, for a royal wedding that is."

"Try and keep me away, mon cher neveu," she pledged him lovingly.

"Never, ma chère tante. Goodbye, Aunt Amy, and I will try and get any future calls you make to me transmitted through a route less circuitous than that via Shanghai. I promise!"

"You'd better, young man. Goodbye, Napoleon." And with that the open line between Diamant-Grezzo and Copenhagen clicked off.

Napoleon was just about to return the receiver to its cradle when a muffled sound through the earpiece caught his attention. He heard the words "...works to our advantage..." in what he quickly recognized, with all the astute alertness of a spy, as the voice of Zamir Continetti.

Somehow the private line in his suite was picking up a signal from another private line in the palace. The signal was weak and a bit sporadic, but Napoleon knew this was an unlooked-for opportunity to garner direct information about the Accesso all'Orecchio's transactions with Thrush. Placing a hand over the mouthpiece to keep his breathing from possibly being overheard through the misbehaving phone line, Solo intently listened in.

“...idealistic young man... ...not of direct use...”

Solo quickly realized he was only hearing bits of conversation from one side, Continetti’s side. That didn’t provide the ideal setup for obtaining the facts he needed, but it was nonetheless an unexpected windfall. And Napoleon was certainly not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“...Donjeta’s future position is assured... providing impetus for perhaps quicker... ...been in touch... ...will travel from Albania... ...keeping him under wraps will be... ...rather arrogant and definitely self-willed... ...revolutionary zealot, this stepbrother... ...making himself a negative reputation within Soviet circles... ...has no qualms about using his vague link... ...emotional ties to the past...”

Napoleon blinked in astonishment. A stepbrother? To whom? Vague link to what? And what emotional ties had he to what past?

Solo noted the muted click that indicated the communication line leaking into his had terminated its connection. Hanging up the receiver of the phone, Napoleon knew he had to get in immediate touch with U.N.C.L.E. They would be able to further investigate this lead, while he was even more inhibited in that department with all the constant fluttering and flustering going on about him with regard to the upcoming wedding.

Not in the least sure that the private line from his communicator with its location-to-location hop technology might not wind up leaking into another line in the palace as had Continetti’s, Solo decided to at least make any undetected pick-up of his exchange as difficult as possible to overhear. Accordingly he locked himself in the bathroom and, after piggybacking the connector of his communicator into the electrical current available in an outlet near the shaving mirror, opened the water spigots at full blast within the shower, the tub, and the sink.

“Open Channel D. International relay: Solo to New York.”

It took a good three minutes for the hop to be completed. At last Mr. Waverly’s voice sounded over the transmitter: “Report, Mr. Solo. And good heavens, man, what is all that background noise? Sounds like you are sending through the main cascade of Niagara Falls!”

“Necessary precaution, sir,” explained Napoleon. “I discovered quite by accident that there might be some bleeding of communication lines within the palace.”

“Ah,” Waverly acknowledged. “Then I assume you have good reason for attempting this contact after such a discovery?”

“Yes sir. That chance discovery also granted me one-sided though rather intermittent access to the private communication line used by Zamir Continetti.”

“I see. And that afforded you what information of interest, Mr. Solo?”

“There is a stepbrother of some sort. I don’t know what sort or to whom related exactly. Perhaps to Continetti himself, or to his Thrush contact, or to—”

“Or to the Princesses of Nascoste,” Waverly interjected, knowing where Solo’s supposition was heading.

“Yes sir. I don’t see how that could really be kept secret, but... In any case this stepbrother is apparently some kind of revolutionary. Most likely in Albania from what little I was able to catch. There was mention of him accumulating a ‘negative reputation’ with the Soviets.”

“Intriguing to be sure, Mr. Solo.”

“The puzzle is still missing a lot of pieces, sir.”

“Indeed, but we are making progress toward finding them all. Then it will only be a question of fitting them rightly together.”

“Yes sir.”

“U.N.C.L.E. will make discreet inquiries in Albania. In the meanwhile, Mr. Solo, try to sweet talk any possible family secrets out of your future wife.”

“Yes sir,” Solo acquiesced though this idea really bothered him in ways he would be completely at a loss to explain. Perhaps part of the issue was that he positively knew Abriana would hide nothing from him, if he straightforwardly asked. But asking any such potentially upsetting questions seemed so overtly manipulative, the prospect all but made his skin crawl.

“Carry on, Mr. Solo. And do find a more discreet location for transmission when you next make contact.”

“I had been doing so from the catamaran when I went out alone sailing. Now though, with all the wedding preparations, well...”

“Understood, Mr. Solo. Waverly out.”

Napoleon closed up the cigarette case and then closed off all the running taps. With a sigh he returned to his bedroom and put back the communicator where he routinely stashed it, beneath a floorboard he had expertly pried up and undetectably replaced in its original spot under the bed.

Granted less than five weeks to make all preparations for the wedding of Abriana, Grand Princess of Nascoste, and Napoleon Solo, citizen of the United States, Tomas Grecco had been negotiating, arranging and stage-managing details day and night.

Receiving the necessary permissions to use St. Anne’s in Vatican City as the venue for the matrimonial service hadn’t been as difficult as Tomas had feared. The members of the Nascosten royal family were all devout Roman Catholics whose relations with the Vatican rested on very secure ground. But that still left the overriding matter of the documents necessary for the marriage to take place. A Nulla Osta was needed for both parties, since neither Abriana nor Napoleon were Italian citizens. And, as an American, Solo was required to attain an Atto Notorio as well.

Grecco had anticipated no issue with procuring the Nulla Osta for the Grand Princess, but had been less certain of what might be involved with obtaining both this and the Atto Notorio for Solo. The timeframe was so short and movement of the Italian civil administration was not usually of the swiftest in nature. Surprisingly though he encountered little trouble and even less delay in this process. Of course that U.N.C.L.E. used covert influence to ensure everything ran

smoothly in these particulars was a fact entirely unknown to the Nascosten Minister of Internal Affairs.

And then there was the subject of the wedding vows. The couple, undoubtedly through the initial impetus of Mr. Solo though Abriana had supported him without hesitation in this request, stubbornly wanted the traditional Catholic verbiage slightly customized. Grecco went back-and-forth with the rather staid Italian bishop who would be officiating the sacrament. As adamant as the marrying couple was about varying the words, the man of God was just as adamant about **not** varying the words. Or at least he had been just as adamant until yesterday. Today Grecco had thankfully received notification that the modified wording was approved. Tomas had no idea why the bishop had undergone a change of heart, but he was much relieved that he had. It tidied up the last worrisome facet of the upcoming nuptials. With only four days left until the date of the wedding, this final point had wound up timed far too close to the vest for maximum comfort. Yet at last Tomas could allow himself to breathe somewhat freely.

Zamir Continetti entered the office of the Minister of Internal Affairs after receiving an “Enter” in response to his discreet knock.

“How are you holding up in all this matrimonial hubbub, Tomas?” inquired the Accesso all'Orecchio with a friendly smile.

Tomas cheerfully returned the smile. “Much more calmly, now that the request for the alteration in the marriage vows has been granted.”

“Ah yes, something for which Mr. Solo particularly asked,” Continetti verbally recalled as he physically acknowledged Grecco’s invitational gesture toward an available chair by seating himself in that chair.

“And to which Her Gracious Highness gave unqualified assent. And now so have all necessary parties,” declared Grecco with obvious relief in his voice.

The Internal Affairs Minister passed across the desk to his governmental colleague a letter direct from the bishop’s office which delineated the specifics of the vow and verified its acceptance for use within the ceremony. Continetti took that paper in hand and read it over, noting the contents of the customized vow. Something in that verbiage raised yet another flag within his mind, tugging at a misgiving he couldn’t quite name.

“And the Holy See permitted this?” he inquired pointedly.

“It was left in the hands of the officiating bishop and,” Grecco clarified, “as you have read in that document, he has at last consented.”

Continetti had much on his mind and honestly he considered the man the Grand Princess would soon marry as of but minor consequence. Solo would serve his purpose by bringing Donjeta more leverage as Crown Princess. Beyond that he cared not at all. Thrush Central had notified him of nothing to give undue pause regarding Napoleon Solo. Therefore, that Abriana would have her desired romantic fairytale with a charming American idealist was a matter of small import in his eyes.

“Young people can be so very obstinate regarding such irrelevant minutiae,” Zamir commented idly as he returned the dispatch to the desk of Tomas Grecco.

Thus for the second time did Zamir Continetti ignore the niggling of indefinable suspicion tickling at the back of his mind.

Three days before the date of the wedding Abriana, Grand Princess of Nascoste, and her fiancé, the American Napoleon Solo, made their way via the royal yacht across the Adriatic Sea to the coast of Italy. Such a means of travel was not exactly Abriana's preference, but this was an occasion for a certain exhibition of nationalistic spectacle. Arriving in the Italian port of Bari after a trip of about seven hours across the water, the couple was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of onlookers who cheered and applauded them. Abriana was at her regal best, smiling and waving, and Napoleon fell easily into the practice of amiable public display as well.

In Bari the two settled into a limousine that was nestled within the midst of a cavalcade of similar cars for the additional approximately five-hour trip westerly across and northerly up the Italian peninsula into the capital city of Rome. Their first night housed in the Nascosten embassy in The Eternal City was understandably one of complete rest after their long day of travel. On the second night, the American Embassy to the Holy See in Vatican City hosted a pre-wedding reception for them. They spent the last day before the wedding in personal preparations: the remaining filing of any needed documentation, final fittings for wedding apparel, private get-togethers with family or friends visiting for the celebration, and a face-to-face discussion with the bishop who would be officiating the marriage service. Finally on May 16th in the year 1955, the young couple separately made their way, each in a silver limousine, to the Church of St. Anne in Vatican.

The wedding was being kept as much a private affair as possible considering it would create a connubial union for a reigning monarch. Yet, in accordance with general monarchial custom, the crowned heads of various nations were all accounted as "extended family". Thus such nations all sent envoys, most direct relations of the crowned heads in question, to the ceremony. Elected heads of state were not included on the guest list, however, though Ambassador Tilerstein did serve as official representative of the President of the United States, who had been invited because of Napoleon's native citizenry.

No cameras were being allowed inside the chapel precincts during the service. Both still and newsreel photographers, therefore, made up for this lack of opportunity by obtaining as much footage as possible outside the venue, in particular when the pair made their arrival. Cameras snapped wildly as first Napoleon, nattily attired in an Oxford gray morning suit contrasted by a dove-gray waistcoat, pure white shirt, and silver-toned tie, exited his car near the baroque arched gate of St. Anne's and subsequently made his way into the interior of the church. Those cameras exploded into even more furious action as the Grand Princess, dressed in a flowing full-length gown of pale lavender silk organza, arrived on the scene. She wore on her head only a wreath of intermingled light and dark lavender flowers securing a waist-length expanse of wispy silver illusion veiling. As Her Gracious Highness had explained to her Minister of Internal Affairs, Tomas Grecco, since she was not yet coronated, she would not make a display of misguided hubris by wearing any type of tiara. One particular image of Abriana standing under the baroque header of the open main gate of St. Anne in Vatican, her dress and veil billowing prettily in the breeze as she clutched steadily in both hands a bouquet of lavender blossoms in the same color palette of intermixed purples as her headpiece, appeared the next day somewhere in the pages of just about every newspaper worldwide.

The full nuptial mass of the service was of course highlighted by the exchange of marriage vows. The couple stood before the main altar within the square surrounded by four arches that

separated that sacred area from the oval of the rest of the church. Napoleon was first to speak. In a strong and clear voice he made his pledge to Abriana in Italian.

“Io, Napoleone, prendo te, Abriana Pranvera Celestina, di essere mia moglie. Prometto che esserti fedele sempre nella gioia e nel dolore, nella salute e nella malattia. Farò tesoro e onorare voi negli occhi di Dio, negli occhi del mondo, e negli occhi di ogni altro.”

Then, for the benefit of those not fluent in Italian, the groom repeated his vow in his native tongue.

“I, Napoleon, take you, Abriana Pranvera Celestina, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will treasure and honor you in the eyes of God, in the eyes of the world, and in the eyes of each another.”

The last line was what had been the matter of such contention. The original verbiage of “I will love you and honor you all the days of my life” was just not comfortable wording for Napoleon. He had never made a promise he hadn’t intended to keep, and to make an oath to Abriana to love her for all the days of his life would be an outright lie. He just couldn’t bring his conscience to an inner acceptance of saying those words to her. Thus had he proposed the version of the vow he ultimately wound up making. The modified last line indeed framed a promise he fully intended on keeping for as long as he and Abriana remained together... and even beyond.

Napoleon was never to learn that it was Mr. Waverly who personally set things in motion to get the new words approved by the Church. This was not a thing the Continental Chief did for U.N.C.L.E.’s purposes. Rather it was something he arranged for the ease of mind of one of his operatives. He was fully cognizant of how much he asked of these young men. They all put much on the line with every enforcement mission. Thus now and again eliminating for them just a bit of mental or emotional pressure was something he considered part of his own mission as a high-level administrator within the Command.

After Abriana made her parallel vow in Italian and in English, the pair exchanged rings blessed by the bishop. With the traditional vocal notation, Napoleon slipped a wide gold band etched with an abstract design of bells, a symbol of protection by God’s saints and angels, upon the third finger, left hand of his bride. Then Abriana followed suit, placing a similar ring on the third finger, left hand of her groom, saying as she did so:

“Napoleone, prendi questo anello come segno del mio amore e di fedeltà. Nel nome del Padre e del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo.”

Subsequently she repeated the words in English as well.

“Napoleon, take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Together as one, the couple intoned in Italian: “Ti do questo anello, segno di tutto ciò che possiedo.” And in English: “I give you this ring, a token of all I possess.”

“Io ora vi dichiaro marito e moglie. È ora possibile baciare la sposa.⁷” afterwards declared the bishop in a ringing tone.

Napoleon needed no further invitation. He drew Abriana close to him and kissed her with genuine tenderness. In deference to the sacredness of the venue, only a controlled smattering of applause filled the church.

And so it was done. The rite continued with the lighting of the candle, the prayers of the faithful, the liturgy of the Eucharist, and all other holy facets that marked a full Roman Catholic nuptial mass. Yet the main event was concluded and a strange peace settled upon the spirit of Napoleon Solo.

He didn't know why. His job was far from finished. He still had no real clue as to what Thrush was hoping to accomplish by involving itself on the sly with the royal family of Nascoste. Yet he suddenly felt as if he would be truly able to protect Abriana from any fallout with regard to those presumably foul plans. He didn't understand why he should feel any more secure in this now than he had before the wedding had taken place; he just recognized that he did. And in the moment he accepted that recognition with a more than willing heart.

Perhaps he too was being seduced by the romance of a fairytale.

Act IV: Ever After

Sunlight sneaking in bright ribbons through the curtains of the bedchamber window gently awakened Abriana. She languidly stretched her naked body within the comfy nest of bedclothes and then turned with a radiant smile to gaze upon the slumbering visage of her new husband. Curling onto her side to snuggle closer to his warm and equally naked body, she positioned her head upon his chest to listen to his sleep-slowed yet satisfyingly rhythmic heartbeat. She had never before in her life been this completely content.

With a happy sigh, she burrowed even closer, the soft sound and soothing movement finally rousing Napoleon from the land of dreams. He focused his sleep-glazed eyes upon the woman lying with her head on his chest. Expecting in his mind's eye to see Clara there, he was for an instant totally disoriented by the vision of someone other than she cuddling close in a shared bed. He quickly quelled that flash of internal confusion, however, as recognition of his current situation and of his new wife returned in full measure.

“Sleep well, my darling?” The totally relaxed and eminently blissful Abriana all but purred out the question.

“How could I help but do so?” Napoleon quipped with a roguish smirk. “After so much enthusiastic exercise on the night before?”

Abriana's response was a blush accompanied by an impish smirk of her own and accented by a light punch to his upper arm. “Have you no sense of decorum, August Sir?”

“Not in bed,” forwarded Napoleon candidly.

“So I noticed last night,” Abriana assured him just as candidly.

⁷ I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.

And then the both of them broke into a bout of quiet laughter.

Beneath the cover of that easy laughter though, Napoleon's private emotions were churning round and round. Clara: would she understand? Clara: could he even expect her to understand? Clara: had he forfeited her love forever?

"Napoleon?" Abriana called his attention fully back to present realities with a seriously-toned address.

"Hmmm?" he gave a barely verbal reply as the current woman in his bed took to enticingly rubbing a hand back-and-forth across his bare chest.

"I know this will likely sound silly, but... Have you ever... well... felt as if you just couldn't get physically close enough to someone? As if what you wanted more than anything was somehow to get right inside the other person's skin?"

Napoleon wasn't certain how to answer that particular query. Had he ever felt that way? Yes... with Clara.

"I think your memory is a bit off with regard to just who has the ability to get inside whose skin," he therefore avoided the dilemma with teasing innuendo.

What that garnered him was another light punch to the upper arm from Abriana, along with another round of quiet laughter on her part. Raising her head up off his chest and looking straight into his eyes, she subsequently inveigled with a mischievous grin, "Remind me."

And that Napoleon did. Because he was an U.N.C.L.E. agent with a mission to complete. But more because her naïve sweetness tempted him with temporary forgetfulness of the hurt he was inflicting upon the heart of his Clara.

The duo honeymooned on the Amalfi Coast. After arriving by private plane in Naples, they booked a hydrofoil to Sorrento. From there they took off on the famously winding roads in a fire-engine red Alfa Romeo Barchetta convertible that Napoleon absolutely adored. Their bodyguards kept a discreet distance in a separate (and less eye-catching car) as the royal couple traveled to Positano, to Furore, to Ravello, to Amalfi, to Praiano, and then back to Positano.

Enjoying themselves like tourists, the pair reveled in the seaside and mountain views, the quaint towns and landmark churches, and stayed overnight with carefree ease in one preapproved venue or another as the mood struck them. Finally they embarked on a chartered ferry to return from Positano to Sorrento, and then on a private vessel to voyage from Sorrento to Capri, where they lazed in the sun for the remaining few days of their post-wedding jaunt. On the morning of the twelfth day after their marriage, a final boat ride brought the Grand Princess Abriana and her Grand Consort Napoleon Solo back to Naples. A private plane was waiting at the Capodichino Airport to return them to Diamant-Grezzo and the full responsibilities of their relative positions in Nascoste.

In many ways the honeymoon trip had been an indulgent luxury, what with the close proximity to the date of Abriana's formal coronation. Yet was it a luxury Abriana had been unwilling to forego. So now, just three-and-half weeks before that all-important scheduled ceremony, the regal couple returned to a furor of activity in Castello di Marmo Scuro. While Abriana went

immediately into meetings with her Minister of Internal Affairs, Solo went sailing on the catamaran.

Grecco was not pleased when Napoleon noted to Abriana his plans for the afternoon. The time had come for decisions on what part the new Grand Consort would play in Nascosten governmental affairs. Tomas urgently wanted to get Napoleon's own feedback on this. But Napoleon insisted on the boating excursion, saying it would likely be the last time he could manage such until after the coronation. Abriana had agreed, stating to Tomas there were matters that initially needed to be discussed between herself and the minister prior to Solo's input being sought. Reluctantly, Grecco acquiesced to the wishes of his sovereign.

Napoleon's expressed desire for an outing on the catamaran had nothing to do with wanting to postpone more weighty concerns. He needed to contact U.N.C.L.E. rather urgently as he hadn't been able to do so at all during the honeymoon. He hadn't even taken his communicator across the sea with him to Italy, knowing there would be no opportunity to make clandestine use of it. Thus, before making his way to the private royal dock, he took a few minutes to retrieve the communications instrument from its hiding place in his former chambers. Upon finding the supposed cigarette case exactly where he had left it, he breathed a sigh of silent relief that no overzealous maid had uncovered it during the final cleaning of those rooms and the move of his possessions into his new private suite adjoining that of Abriana.

As Grand Consort, Solo was now required to have a bodyguard near-at-hand during his sails. Thankfully the man assigned to him only shadowed in a motorized daysailer rather than insisting upon being actually onboard the same craft as the August Sir. Napoleon had to play a bit of hide-and-seek to ensure his use of the communicator was veiled from ready view of the bodyguard. This he accomplished by interposing the wind-filled canvas of his own vessel between himself and the man's sightline. He was a spy after all.

"Open Channel D. Solo to New York."

"Back from your honeymoon, I take it, Mr. Solo?" Mr. Waverly's voice responded with more swiftness than Napoleon had expected.

"Yes sir. Has Section III or Section IV been able to garner any intelligence about the possible Albanian stepbrother?"

"That is proving a difficult matter, Mr. Solo. Whatever secrets are being hidden, they are buried uncommonly deep. But we did manage to come up with a possible match with regard to an Albanian revolutionary who is currently very much in the negative sights of the Soviets. One Mergim Hajdari."

"I can't say I've heard the name before."

"You likely wouldn't have, Mr. Solo. In revolutionary circles he goes by the pseudonym Një nga Hijet⁸."

"Now that name is somewhat familiar."

⁸ One of the Shadows

“Indeed. A zealot in the truest sense of the word who obsessively seeks Albanian political self-determination. More than one Soviet warrant has been issued for his arrest and detention, but he is a slippery one with apparently much support throughout the local citizenry.”

“I imagine the Soviet government is truly less than fond of him then.”

“That’s putting it mildly, Mr. Solo. In fact, whenever I attempted to get any real information about the man from my own Russian sources, they so much as told me to keep out of Soviet national business.”

Napoleon was shocked. Waverly was well regarded by the international political elite and thus could almost without fail get inside data by pulling a few personal strings. That such apparently hadn’t worked in this particular case spoke volumes about the level of threat the Soviets considered this Një nga Hijet to be.

“Do we know anything about his familial background?” Solo further queried.

“Next to nothing. He was brought up by adoptive parents, both now deceased. If they had any clue regarding the specifics of his birth, they took it to their graves.”

“Could he possibly be an illegitimate son of the late Nascosten Grand Prince Adalfieri?” Solo suggested to his superior.

“Not likely, Mr. Solo. Hajdari is approximately thirty years of age. Thus his birthdate is around 1925. Grand Prince Adalfieri, who had gained the throne of Nascoste just the year before, was rather occupied at that point with some unexpected serious financial problems in his principality. Thus he traveled outside his island realm not at all that year or the previous or the next.”

“Well, still a possibility. Yet you’re of course right, sir; it’s not likely. What about Continetti?”

“Ah, there we have a more likely possibility. Continetti, as a teenager, was part of the insurgent forces during the 1910 revolt in Albania. Thus was how he first came in contact with then Crown Prince Adalfieri. He’s an Albanian by birth, but traveled to Nascoste around 1913 or so at the invitation of the Crown Prince to take up a post within the young heir’s household. It seems Prince Adalfieri considered Continetti, who was just a year younger than himself, as much a friend as a political associate. In 1925 Continetti returned to his native country to champion the new Albanian Republic. But when the republic failed, he made Nascoste his permanent home, becoming a naturalized citizen. He’s held various positions in the Nascosten government since that time.”

“And Continetti has an extremely huge influence on Princess Adjuvant Donjeta. But the stepbrother reference is still a bit ambiguous in that scenario.”

“Missing pieces to the puzzle: agreed, Mr. Solo. Have you made any inquiries of your wife in this regard?”

Napoleon foolishly felt his face flush crimson. “I... uh... well... no.”

“For pity’s sake, why ever not, young man?” demanded a rather irritated Waverly.

“You yourself said I had to be circumspect about possibly unjustly accusing Donjeta of any wrongdoing, sir.” Napoleon fell back on the initial instructions he had been given regarding his mission.

“Of course, but the Grand Princess is now your wife! Thus you have a right to be made privy to any possible skeletons in the family closet!”

Thinking of one particular skeleton in his own family closet, Napoleon couldn’t help but comment, “Speaking about rights in such instances can often be a self-tripping exercise, sir.”

For a long moment the line went quiet, causing Solo to wonder if maybe the connection had gone dead. But then came again the voice of the Continental Chief, sounding a bit apologetic in Napoleon’s ears. Though Solo was willing to concede he was conceivably imagining something in his superior’s vocal tone that just wasn’t there.

“Do as you think best, Mr. Solo. But we do need to gather up all the necessary pieces of this puzzle as quickly as possible.”

“Understood, sir. Solo, out.”

“As you have a background in coordinating charitable endeavors, Napoleon,” Abriana extrapolated to her husband, “you are perfect for this task.”

“So this aid organization your family controls,” Napoleon sought clarification, “is international in scope?”

Abriana nodded. “We have global humanitarian goals similar to those of the concern you worked for.”

“*I doubt that,*” Napoleon couldn’t resist a mental caveat, though of course he said nothing outright.

“You’ll have to co-manage this with Donjeta of course. As Princess Adjuvant, her position automatically puts her in the lead of anything meant for the societal benefit of the people of Nascoste.”

“I have no issue with such restrictions, Abriana,” Napoleon assured his wife. “Your country, your rules,” he added with a sly wink.

His wife laughed lightly. “Though I will admit I am less than keen on sharing you with Donjeta even in so procedural a manner,” she then remarked with a bit of a crooked grin.

“My possessive little autocrat,” teased Napoleon as he leaned well over the desk in the private study of the Grand Princess, where they currently sat across from one another, to place an affectionate peck on her lips. “So when do I begin this new Grand Consortly duty?”

“As soon as possible. I want the people of this nation to recognize you as a fully functioning part of this monarchy.”

“Don’t want me labeled a slug-a-bed boy-toy, eh?” Napoleon playfully mocked with a raised eyebrow.

Abriana laughed merrily. "I don't in the least mind toying with you in bed. But, being so much thrust in the public eye, we both need to have more civic-minded occupations as well. Therefore, Grecco will arrange within a few days an initial meeting on this facet of your new position with my sister and her Accesso all'Orecchio. Beppe will subsequently be provided with all the scheduling details for entry in your daily diary."

"Ah. Then it is assured I will not only be on time to this consultation but extremely well-dressed!" giped Solo. "Beppe, after all, is a wonder of gentlemanly gentleman proficiency."

"Well, he does have a wonder of a gentleman to gentleman for," noted Abriana in return, as she stood to lean over the intervening desk and place a warm kiss of her own on his lips.

Three days later Napoleon was seated in the private study of the Princess Adjuvant going over a list of charities to which the National Nascosten Benevolence had in the recent past or would be in the near future providing donations in one form or another. Medical equipment; various vaccines and pharmaceutical drugs; educational assistance in the form of books and other supplies; clean water facilities, food provisions; warm clothing depots; funding for the repair and upkeep of orphanages, hospitals, schools and old age homes.

"As you can see from that list, Napoleon, my choice of avenues to furnish support is rather eclectic," commented Donjeta with a ready smile as her brother-in-law continued to peruse the provided documentation.

"Indeed," Solo agreed. "But I take no issue with that as long as all these distribution channels have been thoroughly vetted."

"Zamir takes more than admirable care of such details," noted the Princess with a nod toward her Accesso all'Orecchio.

"Your Highness," Continetti acknowledged the compliment paid him with a nod of his own.

"I trust your diligence to be more than adequate, Mr. Continetti," lied Napoleon smoothly. "Still, I hope you will not take offense if I do some checking via my own sources?"

"Not in the least, Mr. Solo. As there is nothing to hide, there is no cause for offense on my part."

"*Cool as a cucumber,*" Napoleon mentally assessed the man. "I do see one entry here that gives me pause," he then verbally stated to Donjeta.

"What entry would that be, Napoleon?"

"This rather substantial monetary outlay to Fëmijët e Engjëjve Orphanage in Shkodër, Albania."

"A sad case that, Mr. Solo, a very sad case," put in Continetti with a distressed frown.

"Indeed, Zamir," chimed in Donjeta. "It's an orphanage that houses children with life-threatening medical issues who have been abandoned by their families for such reasons. Zamir himself brought its needs to my attention."

"I was born and raised in Albania as you undoubtedly know, Mr. Solo," Continetti expounded easily. "Though I have settled most happily here in Diamant-Grezzo, Shkodër is my original

hometown. Thus I personally recall the outstanding humanitarian work done by that orphanage. It currently operates under very difficult circumstances, however, as it once had direct ties to the Catholic Church, ties that the Soviet government has more than once suggested have never been fully severed.”

“Difficult circumstances to be sure,” commiserated Napoleon.

“Some months ago I heard through friends in my former country that the orphanage was in desperate need of a half-dozen iron lungs for the treatment of young polio victims. But the Soviet government,” Continetti continued, an identifiable bitterness sneaking into his voice, “would not provide these because of the accused Catholic connection of the institution.”

“So the Benevolence is stepping in to provide the required equipment,” finalized Donjeta.

“Not to sound too critical,” Napoleon forwarded, “but isn’t the sum mentioned in these records rather large to account for the purchase of six iron lungs?”

“Just so,” the Princess Adjuvant conceded, “for you see I decided, upon hearing the tale of the orphanage’s plight, to arrange for a full reequip of its infirmary.”

“And the Soviet government approved this plan?” doubted Solo.

“Not as of yet. But Zamir will, shortly after my sister’s coronation, undertake a diplomatic mission to Moscow to convince the Soviets that allowing this altruistic endeavor would be a publicity boon for them in the eyes of the world at large.”

“I see,” was all Napoleon remarked.

“I hope you will not think ill of me, August Sir,” Continetti pleaded his case with an obsequious smile, “in importuning for this particular instance of humanitarian intervention in my country of origin?”

“Of course not, Mr. Continetti. Such is understandable, as all of us are products of our pasts. And a good cause is still a good cause no matter the reason pursued,” Napoleon allayed the man’s fears.

Though Solo was well aware any such supposed fears on the part of Zamir Continetti were most definitely faked.

“We’ve looked into the Fëmijët e Engjëjve Orphanage in Shkodër as you suggested, Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly confirmed less than a week later during a communicator session with his agent. “It’s a hotbed of Albanian insurrectionist activity, often acting as a way-station for the movement of rebel forces.”

“And the Soviets haven’t just shut the place down?” Napoleon questioned in astonishment.

“It seems they may be hoping to use it as a trap to capture the elusive Një nga Hijet. Of course that is only educated surmise on my part, as rather frustratingly none of my sources will speak even in the closest confidence about the place or the man in question.”

“So I must assume the Soviet government considers the whole matter something of an embarrassment?”

“Undoubtedly, Mr. Solo.”

“I’m still having trouble fitting this all together, sir. I mean what good does it do Thrush to champion a rebel fight in Albania with a goal of that country achieving independent self-determination of future government?”

“Mergim Hajdari could be himself Thrush,” postulated the Continental Chief.

“Maybe, but honestly, sir, have you ever known Thrush to purposely put itself in a losing situation? They surely can’t expect a group of rebels, no matter how well armed, to stand up in the long run against the entirety of the Soviet armed forces.”

“That would seem a curiously optimistic expectation, agreed,” Waverly affirmed his operative’s conclusion.

“So why then bother with all this? What’s the end-goal?”

Both men ruminated in silence for a few moments before Waverly finally remarked, “Good heavens, they are playing both sides against the middle. Thrush is arranging the arms deal so they can whisper the details in Russian ears and arrange for Soviet capture of Mergim Hajdari.”

“The same thought occurs to me, sir,” seconded Napoleon, “with Thrush placing the blame for the arms procurement squarely on the shoulders of the Nascosten royal family.”

“They must have a reason why they believe the Soviets will accept that scenario without issue.”

“It has to be the stepbrother angle, sir,” prompted Napoleon. “Mergim Hajdari has to have some familial connection with the Nascosten royal family.”

“Our research dead-ended there, Mr. Solo.”

“I believe our research might have taken the wrong approach there, Mr. Waverly.

“Explain.”

“A **stepbrother**, sir. Not a half-brother,” enumerated Solo pointedly.

“Through the former Grand Consort Ljena,” the Number 1 in Section I finalized the mental computation of facts toward an inevitable conclusion.

“That seems to provide the answer.”

“There have never been any references or even rumors about Ljena having been married previous to her union with the Grand Prince, or to her having any children legitimate or otherwise. Still, it does make perfect sense, Mr. Solo,” Waverly concurred about accepting this speculation without verifiable facts. “Thrush would seem to be seeking in this instance to gain a bit of favorable leverage with the Soviet government.”

"I still don't know the full extent of Donjeta's involvement in any of this," complained Napoleon unhappily.

"Well, find out, Mr. Solo! Before Mr. Continetti makes his planned trip to Moscow at the very latest!"

"Yes sir," responded Napoleon with snap-to quickness. "Sir?" he then ventured a bit hesitantly.

"Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"Can I ask how negotiations are going with the Soviets with regard to their providing a candidate to serve as a Section II enforcement agent in the Command?"

Waverly didn't need to be hit over the head. He knew at what this inquiry was meant to hint. Thrush wanted to use whatever favorable leverage they might gain with the Soviets, by instigating the circumstances of the ultimate capture of Mergim Hajdari, as a power-play against U.N.C.L.E. If they had their way, U.N.C.L.E. might as a result lose any tangible influence within the entire Communist Bloc.

"Get me the evidence, man! This scheme cannot be allowed to succeed! Not only for the sake of the Nascosten royal family, but for the sake of the world at large. Waverly, out."

How one gathered evidence of any variety within a heavily secured palace, and when one was oneself a member of the royal family and thus had to submit to bodyguard protection nearly every day and night, was definitely a quandary. At least his new position provided Solo an excuse to enter the precincts of Donjeta's private study. He made it a point to arrive early for any meeting there in the hopes of momentarily catching the room unoccupied. After four days of this strategy he was finally rewarded and was able to search unhindered for about fifteen minutes. Not much time, but luck was with him and he came across a personal letter Donjeta was in the process of composing.

Scanning the contents, he realized the missive, with its salutation of "My dearest Mergim", was undoubtedly intended for Mergim Hajdari himself. Through her written words the Princess crowed about how she and their "ever-loyal and faithful Zamir" were arranging for the illegal arms shipment to the orphanage in Albania.

"Soon you will have the means to fight with more than the vigor of your convictions," the memo went on to say. "I will put guns in the hands of you and your men so you may end in explosions of freedom the lives of those who make Albania subject to whims other than those of its own people."

Napoleon sighed. There was now no question that Donjeta knew of the clandestine arrangement to provide arms to the Albanian insurgents. More than that Solo truly doubted she did know, however. He didn't think her Thrush; he merely thought her naïve and thus easily manipulated by Continetti. Her letter to the man he assumed was her stepbrother wreaked of misplaced idealism. Napoleon was an idealist himself, but he gave his beliefs far more grounding in reality than apparently did the young Princess Adjuvant.

Unhappily Napoleon stole the piece of telltale correspondence and hoped it would not be missed, that Donjeta would just assume she had secretly stowed it someplace other than where she thought she had. It was a risk, but one he had no choice but to take.

His heart crowded with conflicting emotions, Napoleon considered how he should approach Abriana with news of her sister's dangerous liaison with Hajdari and Continetti. As fate would have it, the method of this was taken out of his hands.

The members of the Nascosten royal family were all seated within one of the private parlors in Castello di Marmo Scuro, a place where they were free from the constant watch of bodyguards. Abriana, Donjeta and Napoleon were all involved in a game of three-handed Skat. Solo had found the revealing letter in Donjeta's office earlier in the day and had not yet hit upon a strategy he favored to bring the subject up with Abriana. For the moment he kept silent, trying to focus all his concentration on the harmless hand of cards.

A sound off to right brought all three to their feet, with Solo drawing the gun Abriana permitted him, for his "personal ease of mind", to wear holstered under his suit jacket on most occasions. From a hidden panel near one of the bookcases entered a man unknown to Napoleon, but apparently known to the other two occupants of the room as Donjeta immediately rushed into his arms.

"Mergim!" she greeted him with enthusiastic joy.

"Motra pak⁹," the man gave his own greeting in Albanian. "Che cosa è questo?¹⁰" he then asked in Italian with his eye on Napoleon and that drawn gun. "Perché questo uomo permesso di portare una pistola in presenza delle mie sorelle? Sei una guardia del corpo nuova, signore?¹¹" he further demanded of Napoleon.

"He is my husband, Mergim," Abriana answered simply in English as she moved forward and gave Mergim a brief kiss on the cheek, "and I permit him to carry the gun in my presence."

"Ah, the new Grand Consort," Mergim now acknowledged in English as well. "I of course heard of your marriage, Abriana. He is an American, yes?"

"Yes," Napoleon answered for himself as he reluctantly returned his weapon to its holster. "And I seem the only one in need of introductions here."

"This is Mergim," Abriana intervened before Donjeta could say anything. "He is... a relative," she kept things vague.

"Black sheep of the family?" provoked Napoleon.

"Not in the least!" countered Donjeta hotly.

"Donjeta," warned Abriana with all the surety of her own position as both older sibling and in order of official precedence. "I will explain everything to my husband in private. If you will excuse us."

With that Abriana grasped Napoleon's arm, and led him from the room where Donjeta and Mergim immediately went into a happy course of catching up.

⁹ Little sister

¹⁰ What is this?

¹¹ Why is this man allowed to carry a handgun in the presence of my sisters? Are you a new bodyguard, sir?

Once within the shared sitting room of their adjoining chambers, Solo put the blunt question to Abriana. “Who is that man?”

Abriana took a deep breath. “My and Donjeta’s stepbrother.”

“How? I mean how is he related?”

“He is the son of my stepmother, the late Grand Consort Ljena.”

Thus was Napoleon’s previous supposition confirmed.

“A secret son, I take it.”

“Yes,” admitted Abriana. “I have to tell you another story, Napoleon. But this one doesn’t have any sort of fairytale ending.”

“Tell me,” prompted Solo.

“Ljena was, as you know, one of the insurgents in Albania. That was how my father first met her. I’ve already told you how they were captured and subsequently separated by circumstances. My grandfather kept his promise to my father to get her released from detention by the Ottoman government of the time. But Ljena had not an easy time in prison and thus became even more determined against Ottoman rule in her home country.”

“Causing her to abandon her old religion, so that all ties she might be seen to have to such rule were removed,” interjected Napoleon with a small nod.

“Yes,” Abriana said with a nod of her own. “Despite the supposed achievement of independence in 1912, the Albanians were treated to constant encroachment within their borders by other governments, both in the form of military incursions and political maneuverings. Ljena, therefore, remained as part of a revolutionary fringe seeking full self-determination of Albania.

“Of that time in her life, I must be honest and say I know little,” went on the deceased woman’s stepdaughter. “But apparently she strove for her goals in any way possible and kept purposely in the shadows, gaining something of a reputation among the revolutionaries. Sometime around 1923, we have never been sure of the exact timeframe, she developed a romantic relationship with democratic idealist Avni Rustemi, the man who had killed Essad Pasha Toptani in Paris. That relationship, in the insecure political environment of Albania at the time, was never spoken of by any. When Rustemi was assassinated on June 10, 1924, Ljena went into even deeper hiding. It was during this period that Mergim was born. She gave him to others to raise, never wanting it known that Rustemi had a son as it might put the boy in danger.

“At the time of her marriage, Ljena told my father all about Mergim and it was agreed between them to keep everything regarding the then adolescent boy completely under wraps. The man who ensured the security of this information was my father’s friend Zamir Continetti. Neither I nor Donjeta knew anything about Mergim until Ljena’s death. Then our father revealed this secret to us. The idea of having as a relation the son of a man many considered a democratic hero was wildly appealing to Donjeta. She sought out a means to communicate with him, and that means again wound up being Zamir Continetti. She began corresponding with Mergim on a

regular basis, thrilled to find him as much a fighter for full Albanian self-determination as his mother and father had been before him.

“Neither she nor I ever met Mergim, however, until the death of my father. He came in secret to pay his respects and later made himself known to us. His identity was confirmed by Continetti through the Albanian contacts he maintains in the insurgent movement. Subsequently I made Tomas Grecco privy to the existence of Mergim, letting both Donjeta and her Accesso all’Orecchio know of my decision in that regard.

“That’s as much of the story as there is to tell, Napoleon. Mergim doesn’t flaunt in any public way his connection to us, and his coming here today is thus very much a surprise to me.”

“Do you think his coming as much of a surprise to Donjeta? Or to her Accesso all’Orecchio?” Solo wanted to know.

Abriana stared at him in some confusion. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Napoleon took a deep breath. The time for subterfuge was now over. Yet, as with Clara, he deeply regretted any hurt he must now inflict.

“Abriana, do you know of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement?”

“Vaguely. I know it is a sort of international peace-keeping organization which opposes no particular government, but rather the world-terrorizing schemes instigated by a mixed group of power-seeking individuals.”

“I am an agent for that organization,” Napoleon revealed as he set his eyes directly on hers.

“What?” came her bewildered question.

“There were...” he made an attempt to condense everything she needed to know into a cohesive but limited whole, “...suspicions regarding a plot to make use of the Nascosten royal family in a venture to... well, upset the global applecart as it were.”

“What sort of use?” she asked anxiously.

“A covert provision of illegal arms to the Albanian insurgency, in which Mergim is heavily involved, via the National Nascosten Benevolence.”

“You mean Donjeta...”

“I think Donjeta was manipulated by Continetti. But she does know about that illegal arms deal, Abriana. I have proof of that.”

Abriana shook her head in stunned disbelief. “I know she has a tendency to see things in rather a kind of tunnel vision, but...”

“Abriana, that’s truly only part of the equation. You see, Continetti is one of that mixed group of power-seeking individuals. And it’s highly unlikely his real concern is about providing arms for revolutionaries in his former country. Perhaps that would be understandable, if still a form of betrayal to you and your family. What he really wants is for that group of his to gain perhaps favorable regard with the Soviet government.”

“How would providing arms to the Albanian insurgents accomplish that?”

“The Soviets want Mergim. He is a declared enemy of the state. But they have never been able to apprehend him and are rather humiliated about that inability. I believe Continetti is setting up Mergim to be captured as a result of this arms deal. He is going to betray him, and Donjeta as well.”

Abriana stared at him, trying to come to terms with everything he had told her.

“We have to warn them, don’t we?” she queried uneasily.

“Yes, but it has to be done discreetly. We don’t want to put Continetti on his guard.”

“I’ll have them brought here, to our private sitting room, and we’ll speak to them together.”

“That we will, but we need an inconspicuous messenger.”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Abriana with a frowning of her brow.

“Beppe, I’ll send Beppe,” decided Napoleon.

“Yes,” Abriana approved his selection. “Beppe would be the best choice. But Napoleon, during this meeting, I can’t allow you to wear your sidearm.”

“Abriana—“

“Please, Napoleon,” interjected Abriana with a pleading note in her voice and an equally pleading look in her eyes. “I don’t want Donjeta or even Mergim to think I mean to take any punitive action toward either of them. Not at this point. Not when they are so caught in a web only partially of their own making.”

Napoleon reluctantly nodded his acceptance of her request and then summoned Beppe via an accessible bell rope in the room.

“Bring the Princess Adjuvant and the man accompanying her in the south private parlor here into the presence of Her Gracious Highness,” Napoleon instructed the servant. Then he removed the Walther from the holster under his suit coat and handed it off to Beppe. “And put this away safely for me,” he additionally charged.

“August Sir,” Beppe gave the customary slight bow and left to do what had been asked of him.

Meanwhile in the office of Zamir Continetti an urgent phone call was being received.

“Are you a fool to attempt contact with me in this way, Milot?” Zamir, in Albanian, chastised the man on the other end of the connection.

“I had no choice, Zamir, as other channels might prove too slow for this news,” Milot continued the conversation in the same tongue. “We might have to change the drop point for the arms shipment. There have been too many people snooping about.”

“Stop being paranoid. It is likely just the usual Soviet surveillance.”

“This wasn’t the Soviets. Their methods aren’t quite so... polished.”

“What are your particular suspicions then?” asked Continetti rather irritably. He was certain the man was overreacting, a typical occurrence with these dedicated revolutionary types.

“I haven’t a clue, Zamir! They were good. I couldn’t garner any traceable hint as to who they might be. But that they were there and making inquiries: that I do know.”

“Milot, let me assure you,” Continetti began a spiel aimed at putting the man’s mind at rest. And then he stopped short. Polished? Making inquiries and yet not traceable as to where those inquiries might be coming from? Or where the information was being dispatched to?

Then the memory of those previous mental red flags he had so nonchalantly ignored waved like a matador’s cape within his brain. Napoleon Solo and his abstract vision of right. Napoleon Solo and that requested change to the marriage vows. Napoleon Solo asking about vetting the orphanage through his own sources. “U.N.C.L.E.!” exclaimed Continetti in frustration.

Central was getting lax! They hadn’t given him any information about Napoleon Solo. They apparently didn’t even know of the man. And now Continetti was all but positive Solo was a field operative of U.N.C.L.E.

“What’s that you say, Zamir?”

“Never mind. I’ll handle everything from here.”

“Wait, Zamir!” Milot caught the man’s attention before he could hang up. “You should know that Mergim slipped out by boat across the Adriatic sometime this morning. I’m sure his intent is to speak with you there in Diamant-Grezzo and personally let you know about all I’ve just told you.”

“Why did you let him go?” demanded the highly aggravated Continetti.

“You know Mergim. Who can stop him when he makes up his mind?”

“That arrogant, irrational clod! He’ll ruin everything!”

“Zamir!” exclaimed a shocked Milot. “Mergim is the main reason any of us here in Albania are willing to take the risks we do. We have much to lose and only his courage and determination rouses us—”

“Yes, yes,” Continetti cut off the other man’s speech in praise of Një nga Hijet. “I’ll handle everything from here as I said.” And with that he slammed down the receiver of the phone.

Mergim running loose in Nascoste and the Grand Princess married to an U.N.C.L.E. plant! Things were crumbling about his ears!

Once upon a time Zamir Continetti had been as much of a revolutionary zealot as now was Mergim Hajdari. He had, however, witnessed too near at hand politics being used in personal sprees by unconscionable men. Unconscionable men that average citizens then followed like lemmings, content to let others decide their fate. That had left him with an abhorrence of visionary yearnings spouted by people who in the end would follow whatever leader stood at the ready with pretty words and empty promises on his lips. Thus why pretend it could ever be

otherwise? Why not simply seek personal power to begin with? Embittered and hardened, with his ideals crushed completely under the tread of heavy boots, Continetti had been the perfect recruit for Thrush. And he had served them well, and wasn't about to be tossed in the trash heap by them anymore than by anyone else. He deserved his time of triumph, and he would have it!

First though he needed to be rid of the unexpected obstacle posed by Mr. Napoleon Solo.

Zamir stood and opened a secreted wall panel to reveal a personal safe. He dialed in the combination and unlocked the small vault, subsequently removing from its interior a semiautomatic handgun.

The meeting of Abriana and Napoleon with Donjeta and Mergim was not going well. The latter two simply refused to believe in Continetti's perfidy.

"Zamir will not betray me!" insisted Donjeta. "And certainly he would not betray Mergim! His heart has always been with the cause of Albanian self-determination!"

"I don't know about his heart, but his actions are bound to Thrush," Napoleon countered his sister-in-law.

"Thrush, thrush, thrush!" spat out Mergim. "And why should we be concerned with the curious nesting habits of little birds?"

"Because those 'curious nesting habits' can destroy everything you believe in, everything you fight for," retorted Napoleon. "You don't seem to understand the scope of any of this!"

"Of course not, Mr. Solo," came an unexpected voice. Everyone turned to the source, Zamir Continetti, who had apparently made his way in through another of the secret wall panels similar to that in the south parlor. "He's a zealot and zealots never see beyond the length of their own noses."

"What right have you to make such a clandestine entrance into my private chambers?" Abriana put up a bravely affronted stance, ignoring the wild beat of terror in her own heart as she saw the gun clutched in Continetti's firm grip.

"I do beg your pardon, Your Gracious Highness," Continetti smugly pretended an apology. "I know these secret passages were ordered sealed many years ago, but sometimes a bit of bribery to construction managers does indeed reveal loopholes in such orders. I was hoping, however, to find Mr. Solo alone. Isn't this the usual timing of your daily reviews of upcoming edicts with the Minister of Internal Affairs?" Continetti clucked his tongue. "Missing governmental meetings to chat with family. Wherever is your sense of duty, Gracious Highness?"

"Certainly not in the same stinkhole where you've flushed yours," Abriana flung back at him fiercely. Solo gently took one of his wife's hands in his, seeking to silently counsel caution since it was Continetti with the advantage of a cocked gun.

"Put that gun away, Zamir," Mergim commanded in the tone of one who expected to be obeyed.

Continetti let out a small laugh. “You do not cow me, oh Një nga Hijet. Nor do I stumble at your feet like the cattle of your insurgent herd.”

To say Mergim was shocked was putting it but mildly. The man’s expression was positively stunned.

“Zamir, there are bodyguards outside this room,” a definitely incensed Princess Adjuvant reminded her Accesso all’Orecchio.

“No, there aren’t. I made sure of it,” Zamir informed her in turn. “Haven’t you yourself, Highness, often commented on my notable efficiency?”

“So what do you intend to do, Continetti?” queried Solo brusquely. “Shoot the entire royal family of Nascoste?”

“Such a sad necessity, but you see there was this Albanian rebel who claimed familial ties to the royals and who, in a demonstration of his extremist principles, killed them all before turning the gun on himself.”

“You’ll never get away with that,” the Grand Princess denied the fabricated solution to his current dilemma.

“I’m more than willing to try,” challenged Continetti in a stone-cold voice.

In an instant Napoleon lunged toward Continetti, intending to knock him off-balance even if he had to take a bullet for it. Everything became confusion. Abriana screamed as the gun in Continetti’s hand, angled down by Solo’s bodily hit, glanced a bullet off Napoleon’s thigh, leaving a bloody trail in its wake. Despite his injury, Solo continued to struggle with Continetti on the floor for possession of the weapon. Continetti raised his hand wildly in the air, impulsively squeezing the trigger of the gun once more, the muzzle pointed in the direction of a charging Mergim. Donjeta tackled her stepbrother to clear him from the path of the shot and herself took a glancing blow across the abdomen for her effort. Napoleon, now on his back with the huge-framed Continetti on top of him pinning him to the floor, managed to knock the semiautomatic from his assailant’s hand. The report of a third shot dropped Continetti heavily onto Napoleon’s body, the traitorous minister hit squarely in the upper back and definitely quite dead.

Abriana placed a trembling hand across her mouth as she looked across the room where stood the valet Beppe with Solo’s Walther in hand, the gun muzzle still hotly smoking.

“He demeaned the honor of the royal family of Nascoste,” pronounced Beppe in a tight voice.

Rolling the substantial body of Continetti off his own, Solo managed to get to Beppe and calmly take the gun from the dazed manservant’s hand before his injured leg gave way and a stab of excruciating pain tossed him over the far edge of consciousness.

Napoleon awoke to the feel of heavy numbness in his left leg and gentle fingers carding through his hair. At the realization he was awake, Abriana stopped the soothing motion of those fingers almost in a recoil, as if she had been caught doing something she no longer had a right to do.

“You’re awake at last,” she remarked rather inanely.

“At last?” questioned Napoleon in a somewhat hoarsened voice.

“The doctors gave you injections to keep you unconscious while they sutured and wrapped your leg. And then afterwards so you wouldn’t move about too much, keeping you asleep for two days. You had everyone really worried, Napoleon. The bullet you took to the left leg lightly glanced your femoral artery. Luckily the nick was small and there was no associated nerve damage. Emergency meds got a tourniquet on the leg quickly to stop the bleeding, and the vascular surgery proved an unqualified success. Still, nobody could believe you actually limped over to Beppe on that leg.”

“That was pure adrenaline,” admitted Solo.

Abriana nodded. “In any case the doctors say it will heal completely.”

“What about Donjeta?”

“She’ll make it. Though the doctors predict, that due to some damage to the uterine wall, she’ll never be able to bear children.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“I suppose it’s fortunate in a way.”

“Fortunate?” queried Napoleon with a raised eyebrow.

“As now any future heirs of Nascoste will have to come from my direct line,” Abriana expounded, “it provides the perfect exit for you, from our marriage.”

“Oh,” was all Solo found himself comfortable enough to remark.

Abriana took a little huff of breath and then sat down in a nearby chair. “Mr. Davies of the American Embassy put me in direct touch with your Mr. Waverly in the New York headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement,” she stated straight to the point. “He was very kind and explained everything to me. He was also extremely helpful with Mergim, arranging for him to get a new identity and a new life far away from both Albania and Nascoste.

“And he specifically wanted me to tell you that the Soviets have agreed to provide a candidate for the first session of U.N.C.L.E. training school in the new year.”

“I suppose then I did a good job,” Napoleon decided with a noticeable glumness in his tone.

Abriana’s lips curled in an ironic smile. “I suppose you did.”

Biting her lower lip in consternation for a moment, Abriana finally continued, “Tomas and others of my ministers have advised that my coronation take place as planned eight days from now. I’m not sure how I feel about that myself, but I have acquiesced to their counsel. The doctors tell me that you likely will be able to attend the ceremony in a wheelchair, if you so desire.”

“I so desire, Abriana; I honestly do,” spoke Napoleon in a saddened but sincere manner.

“Then it will be so,” she declared in the secure tone of royal prerogative. “Rest well, Napoleon.”

She rose to take her leave, hesitating for a long moment, as if unsure about something. Then she seemed to make an internal decision and walked up once more close beside his hospital bed. Leaning over him, she kissed him softly on the forehead.

Eight days later Abriana Pranvera Celestina was crowned Grand Princess of Nascoste with all due pomp and circumstance. Seated in a wheelchair tucked in the royal alcove of the Cathedral of the Seven Holy Martyrs in Diamant-Grezzo on that celebratory day, Grand Consort Napoleon Solo watched through the unexplainable tears clouding his vision.

Two Weeks Later

He entered her private study, bowing wordlessly from the waist in acknowledgement of her presence. From where she calmly stood behind her desk, she gazed across the full expanse of the room at him. Her polished veneer of poise betrayed nothing of any internal disquiet. Yet could Napoleon sense her intense emotional hurt almost as a blanket of fog that obscured their full images one from the other.

“I have read the contents of the declaration prepared to announce the dissolution of our marriage to the public,” Abriana at last broke the long silence that stretched between them. “The manner of it meets well with my approval. It is heartbreakingly touching, speaking as it does of your ‘gentle ending of the fairytale’ in order to permit me to get on with ‘the inescapable realities’ of my position as ruler of this nation. There will not be a dry eye amongst any of the citizenry when it is broadcast.”

“Thank you for allowing me to appear in this as such a noble character,” Napoleon sincerely expressed his gratitude.

“How could I make you appear as anything less than what you are?”

“It would be understandable were you to resent my role in all this.”

“I do not now nor will I ever resent anything about your role in my life, Napoleon, despite its transience,” she assured him, her tone now more personal, almost unbearably intimate.

Napoleon didn’t know what to say. Even in this, she was as gracious as her prescribed form of ceremonial address proclaimed.

“But there is another declaration, the contents of which I wish you to read,” she requested simply, “as it will be entirely your choice whether it is ever made public or not.”

She lifted a paper from the desktop and extended it toward him. Still nursing a slight limp, he walked to the front of the wooden table elaborately carved with the national Nascosten coat-of-arms, noting to himself how it seemed to serve now as more than simply a physical barrier between them. After accepting the proffered document from her hand, he scanned it thoroughly. Finally he raised astonished eyes to hers.

“If I decree this as truth, it can be so,” came her frank statement.

The document in question proclaimed a lineage had been uncovered on the LaCoursiere side of Napoleon’s maternal heritage linking him to old French nobility. He knew exactly the purpose of that invented ancestry: the morganatic marriage from which he would, with globally perceived

altruistic intent, free his monarchical wife could then be declared fully valid with regard to the royal inheritance edicts of Nascoste. Swept away in that scenario would be any presumed “selfish impediment” to the continuance of the union, presenting the possibility of his remaining at the lady’s side as a legally suitable spouse. To say Napoleon was absolutely flabbergasted that the Grand Princess would risk this legislative lie for him was describing his reaction but mildly indeed.

“It would be no more than another fairytale,” he forwarded with an aching tenderness in his voice. “And a very unwise one at that.”

“Because by the moral and legal standards of the world your birth is in principle illegitimate?” she straightforwardly pursued his unspoken reservation.

Napoleon blinked. He was completely shocked and somewhat shamed that she had discovered the family secret so carefully buried for so many years by his two powerful grandfathers.

“You needn’t fret, Napoleon. Your grandfathers initially, and no doubt U.N.C.L.E. subsequently, did a very good job of hiding that inconsequential technicality. My ministers and investigators found nothing at all to even hint at such. It was Mr. Waverly himself who informed me of it, when I spoke to him in privacy about this – shall we say – enhanced genealogical background I had designed for you. He quite succinctly made the point that, even were you personally inclined to accept my little slight-of-legal-hand, your inherent decency of nature would not permit you to do so because of the particular circumstances regarding your direct parental history.”

Napoleon supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that Mr. Waverly not only knew this hush-hush reality, but also that the Old Man understood so well the underlying personality of his operative. Yet then again Napoleon hadn’t until recently realized how very tightly bound to U.N.C.L.E. every aspect of his life had become.

Abriana’s eyes held Napoleon’s once more. “In any case, your deceptively gentlemanly superior needn’t have hedged his bets by revealing your private humiliation to me. I can see by the distressing wretchedness of your expression that you would never be inclined to accept my heartfelt offer.”

“Gracious Highness,” began the genuinely distraught Napoleon. “Abriana,” he stumbled out more softly.

“So the fairytale does indeed end here,” Abriana forestalled any self-conscious words on his part. “U.N.C.L.E. whisked you into my life and now will whisk you away. And all that will remain of our engineered encounter are fond memories and questions that must forever go unanswered.”

“Ask whatever questions you will of me, and I will honestly answer,” he wholeheartedly pledged her.

She smiled sadly.

“Do I still love you, Napoleon?” she queried unexpectedly.

“I would imagine not,” answered Napoleon with a very sad smile of his own.

“Did you ever love me, Napoleon?” she voiced her final question.

“Not as you would have had me do.”

“Therein lies the essence of the matter: for you loved me only as you love any innocent of this world in need of saving.”

“I still love you in that way,” he assured her.

“And that must suffice me because there is no more to be had.”

She formally put out her hand to him, reaching easily across the solidness of the desk that divided them in more ways than one. Napoleon again bowed from the waist as he took her hand in his and pressed his lips lightly against her fingers, managing with kindly consideration of her feelings to match his formality of gesture to her own.

“Your Gracious Highness,” he appropriately addressed her in final farewell. And then he made his way out of her private study and out of her private life.

“Yet can I take cold comfort in the knowing,” Abriana thought resignedly after his exit, *“that U.N.C.L.E. will always claim more of him than any woman could ever hope to possess.”*

December 1957

New York City

It had taken Napoleon several months of cajoling to get Clara to forgive him his U.N.C.L.E.-instigated marriage to the Grand Princess of Nascoste. Yet the pair was now beyond all that stressful unease, more than two years beyond.

Everyday Napoleon thanked his lucky stars that Clara had eventually come around. What finally had convinced her to “bestow absolution” had been his assurances there could be no more such assignments. Thrush now had a dossier on him, and thus any undercover operation in which he was involved would of necessity have to be less in the public view. And as well this first significant mission of his as a Section II agent had truly been a unique case.

“It was a remarkably singular fall of the dice, Clara,” he had explained. “My being virtually unknown to Thrush. My particular upbringing that led to a fortuitous childhood encounter with the Grand Princess. Abriana’s secret need for some touchstone back to the innocence of her own childhood at a particular point in her life when adult responsibilities of the most restrictive variety were seemingly about to overwhelm her. The need for U.N.C.L.E. to have a presence inside the Nascosten royal family circle in order to figure out what exact manipulations Thrush intended on making via its influence on the Princess Adjuvant, an influence that could pay a higher dividend for them if Donjeta was the recognized heir apparent. Truly, Clara, it’s a set of circumstances that had absolutely astronomical odds of ever coming together at all. Let alone there ever being by the chaotic rules of chance a recurrence of anything even remotely similar.”

She had accepted the truth of that and in the end they had “kissed and made up”. And now they were an engaged couple, if a surreptitious one due to the restrictions of Solo’s position in Section II. Tonight they were spending a quiet night together in Napoleon’s apartment, eating Chinese takeout from cardboard cartons, and cuddling on the sofa while they casually watched

the evening news. It was holiday time and it seemed that the television reporters were joyously embracing human-interest stories over more depressing fare.

“It’s a truly celebratory Christmas season in Nascoste!” informed a broadly smiling broadcaster on the electronic box that was gradually becoming ubiquitous in every American household. “Today it was announced by the palace that Grand Princess Abriana, the reigning monarch of the small island nation, will wed in the summer of the coming year Lucca Barberini, an Italian citizen who can trace his ancestral roots back to the noble Colonna family of Palestrina.”

As the on-air reporter chattily relayed his story, black-and-white images of the Nascosten Grand Princess and her new fiancé flickered across the screen. Clara stiffened and sat up straighter, perceptibly increasing the distance between Napoleon’s body and her own. To Solo it seemed the temperature of his usually comfortable living room dropped by several very discernible degrees.

“She looks happy,” Napoleon made an awkward verbal attempt to break the even more awkward silence.

“She merely looks pleased,” countered Clara in a rather clipped tone. “She looked happy with you though, positively blissful from what I recall of the press coverage.”

“She was a few years younger and a good deal less life experienced,” he found his words taking on as snappish an edge as Clara’s. “Thus fairytales still seemed plausible to her.”

Would Clara never truly get past this? He had married the princess as part of a mission assignment. He hadn’t loved her, at least not as a man should love the woman to whom he makes a lifetime commitment. His only true commitment in the union with Abriana had been to U.N.C.L.E.

Clara turned to face him, her manner strangely timid and her tear-glazed eyes appearing incredibly huge and thus almost childlike. “I hadn’t the courage to ask this when you initially came back from Nascoste,” she admitted hesitantly, “back to me. I’m not even sure I have that courage now. Yet the question keeps rattling around in my head like the remnants of a broken wedding-toast champagne flute. And I want them gone, those sharply hurtful crystalline shards; so I have to ask.”

Napoleon furrowed his brow in concern. She seemed suddenly so vulnerable, so defenseless. “Ask what, Clara?” he prompted gently.

“In your time with Abriana,” she began; then halted and bit her lower lip in consternation. “During all those weeks when you were an adoring couple in the eyes of the world and even in her eyes...” She halted again and took a deep breath. “I don’t know how to put this. I just don’t have the right words. But... well, was it a **real** marriage, Napoleon?”

The emphasis she put on the word “real” revealed to Napoleon the crux of her question. He cleared his suddenly painfully dry throat.

“What do you want me to say, Clara? How would you have me answer?”

“You don’t have to say anything else,” Clara assured him in a very quiet and rather strained voice. “You’ve already given me the answer.”

“And I know it’s not the one you wanted to hear,” he conceded as he ran a frustrated hand through his dark hair, dislodging the controlled placement of his forelock. “But I’m no saint, Clara. I don’t have the internal fortitude to stoically resist temptation placed so willingly in my direct purview.”

“Unless it is at the insistence of Mr. Waverly and suits the needs of U.N.C.L.E.,” batted back Clara with a careless certainty that caught Napoleon completely off-guard.

Napoleon gaped. “What? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind, Napoleon,” Clara backed off readily. “None of it really matters,” she deceived herself just as readily as she snuggled her body again close to his.

She just couldn’t summon the stomach for this fight. It was Christmas after all, and she desperately wanted something of her own fairytale. She loved this man beside her so very much, and she simply didn’t want to believe that might not in the end prove enough.

—THE END—



A Final Word from the Author: *Once upon a time, when MFU was still but a glint in the eye of Norman Felton, a background was created for Napoleon Solo that included a marriage at a young age, his wife dying less than a year into the union. Like many initial thoughts, this one was not pursued in the series. I would venture to say in the end it purposely wasn’t used because widowers in the 1960s were viewed as rather stable fellows and definitely not as sexy womanizing spy-types.*

*In any case, Clara Richards – the one-time great love of NS – seemingly replaced the persona of the dead wife within the framework of the TV show. It was unquestionably more romantic for Napoleon to have fully loved and ultimately lost because of his work in U.N.C.L.E. rather than because of a traffic accident. Who can forget the poignancy of the episode **THE TERBUF AFFAIR** that highlighted the past and present relationship between NS and Clara?*

Now some fanfic writers embrace the dead wife idea and certainly more creative power to them. Yet for me Clara is Napoleon’s definitive love: the one he always regretted losing, though it was just not in him to abandon his dedication to U.N.C.L.E. in order to keep her.

*Yet when the morganatic marriage concept came up as related to “left-handedness” being explained in a socio-cultural way, the thought rocketed into my head to utilize that as a “wicked twist” scenario for the **HODOWE** challenge. A twist that did indeed have NS marrying at a young age (he is only 22 in this story), but at U.N.C.L.E.’s behest. To me this invokes the first true test of Solo’s unwavering commitment to U.N.C.L.E. And thus this particular scenario in my opinion has more emotional pith than any commonplace tale of teenage passion and tragic happenstance.*