

HELLO, MY NAME IS...

BY [LAH](#)

Late Spring, 1966...

When I found him in the Thrush cell, he was battered, but not too badly. Broken right arm, deep slash in his left thigh from a large shard of glass that was yet imbedded in the wound, various cuts and bruises all over his body: frankly we've both gone through much worse at the hands of the enemy. Still, there was something not quite right. He was much disoriented, but more kind of... psychologically shrunken is the only way I can describe it. I barely got a chance to talk to him before the medical evac team had him in tow though, and I had to finish the mission on that lab with the assault force. I blew it up spiffily, my mind granting the act special significance as I dedicated the explosion to my injured partner.

It was when I got back to New York headquarters that things became strange. The powers-that-be would only let me see him in Medical through a glass partition: just enough to assure me my partner was indeed alive. Yet they didn't let me talk to him at all. The doctors told me he had a very bad concussion, very bad indeed. Yet there had been no sign of a gash or bullet crease or even a bump on his head. And it was then the medical personnel revealed the strangest part of all: the concussion was not due to impact of any kind. It was, to the best of their estimation, induced by some less physically obvious method: drugs or electrical current. In any case there was definite bruising on the brain.

I held my breath and asked the question I didn't want to ask. Had he permanently lost brain function? No, it didn't seem so, but there were some unexpected side-effects. Best medical opinion was that he not be forced to try and piece everything together right now. So they continued to refuse to let me see him or talk to him.

I was livid and desperate. I begged Mr. Waverly to intervene, but instead he kept me busy with milk-run missions for almost two weeks. At last the Number 1 in Section I exercised his authority to the full by making an especial point with Medical that I be allowed unrestricted access to Napoleon Solo. Whether the Old Man did it out of pity for my plight, or simply out of exasperation with my constant requests, I cannot honestly be certain. Still, I was grateful beyond words for the consideration. Yet I had absolutely no idea what would greet me when I finally stood face-to-face with my partner. The doctors remained no more forthcoming and seemed in some ways completely flustered with the whole scenario.

Day One...

The physician in charge of the case walked me into Napoleon's room in Medical. My partner was seated on the edge of the bed, his broken right arm in a cast and held in a black sling. He wore dark green pajamas that I'm sure were his own because I am equally sure they were made of silk. He was clean-shaven and his hair was neatly combed. He didn't look drugged or disoriented. In fact he looked damn good for a man who had spent more than two weeks in a medical facility.

"You have a special visitor today," the doctor informed him evenly.

Napoleon obligingly set his gaze on me and then he smiled: one of his sincerely warm smiles. I think I exhaled in relief. This was very much like my partner.

“Hello, my name is...” he began as he extended his left hand in a friendly manner. Then he stopped dead and I realized he didn’t know his name.

I thought to myself, *“Amnesia. Not so horribly bad. We can get through this.”*

“Hello, my name is Illya Kuryakin,” I jumped into the fray to cover his discomfort.

“I know,” he stated with a quick blink.

“You remember me?” I asked.

“I remember everybody,” he assured me. “Except me,” he then added in a confused tone I found personally disturbing to hear.

“Well, maybe I can help you remember yourself,” I suggested as I took a chair near the bed and the doctor made his exit, granting us two at least the illusion of privacy.

Napoleon tilted his head at me. “Am I worth remembering?” he asked quite candidly.

“You are more than a tad arrogant, somewhat vain, and habitually over-confident,” I tried a bit of our usual banter, “but yes, I think you are worth remembering.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” he quietly disagreed. And the way he said it – that sad, resigned tone of voice – hit me like a ton of bricks. This wasn’t at all like my partner.

“You are also uncannily shrewd, remarkably brave, and completely dedicated to what you believe is right,” I attempted to reassure him.

He eyed me unhappily. “You’re making that up to make me feel better,” he challenged.

“Napoleon, we have never lied to one another about anything important,” I put all my sincerity into my voice. “I am not lying to you now.”

“Don’t call me that,” he told me outright, his voice hard and sharp.

“Don’t call you what? Napoleon? I realize it is a bit portentous sounding, but it is your name.”

“I don’t have a name,” he corrected me.

I stared at him for a moment, trying to assess exactly what he was thinking.

“Everyone has a name,” I reminded him.

“I don’t,” he insisted stubbornly.

His facial expression in that moment almost floored me. He looked so despondent and yet so resolute in this determination, that for a few moments I really did not know what to say.

And then he muttered so softly that I almost didn’t catch it, “I don’t deserve one.”

I sat there wondering what in the hell Thrush had done with my cocksure and ever-optimistic partner. It wasn't amnesia that was the problem here, but rather his very image of himself.

"So now you see what we are up against," stated the physician. "The bruise to his brain is healing, but that to his id is not."

"And you think that has something to do with whatever Thrush did to internally bruise his brain?"

"Yes," forwarded the doctor with a small nod, "but I'm not quite sure they got the results they were expecting."

"How do you mean?"

"It isn't really amnesia from which he is suffering," the man elaborated, "as you have experienced for yourself. He honestly remembers everything we ask about U.N.C.L.E. or people around him or places he's visited—"

"Yes, I noticed that," I interrupted the doctor rather testily.

"So, doesn't it seem to you as if he might be selectively suppressing memory of who he is? Of his name? As if doing that makes him someone else—"

"Someone less," I interjected. "Yes, I see your point."

"My hypothesis is that Thrush wanted to somehow inhibit Mr. Solo's effectiveness in U.N.C.L.E. by raising doubts in him about his own competence, but somehow it translated into raising doubts about his entire image of himself. So I think they got more than they bargained for and yet much less than they hoped."

"Less?"

"Yes. If Mr. Solo isn't U.N.C.L.E.'s North American CEA anymore because of this refusal to any longer see himself as himself, well... What did Thrush gain exactly? They got one top agent out of the field. It would be much more effective from their standpoint for Mr. Solo to stay in the field, remain actively CEA, and be second-guessing and thus changing his own decisions at every turn."

"That certainly would wreak much more havoc within U.N.C.L.E.," I had to concede the logic of his point.

"Mr. Waverly wants his CEA back in top form," revealed the physician. "No excuses for failure. It's why he insisted you be allowed to see him."

"So the burden for healing the man's psyche rests with me?" I questioned disbelievingly.

"It would seem so, Mr. Kuryakin," acknowledged the doctor with disapproval for Waverly's decision evidenced in his tone. "Unless you feel you are not up to the task."

I stared at the doctor. Now this was indeed rich. Expecting me to succeed where trained physicians of both the medical and psychiatric variety had failed.

But then again no one knew Napoleon Solo like I did. I am not naive enough to believe I know every nuance of his mind. We both have secret mental and emotional places to which we let no one travel, not even each other. Still, I have more insight than most into the man in question. That was the likely reason Mr. Waverly – with all his usual astuteness – had pegged me for the task at hand.

“I’ll manage,” I told the doctor drily as I mentally swore I would do much more than that, that I would succeed.

Day Four...

“Check, and mate in two,” he declared with an easy smile. He does so love beating me at chess and – damn the man – he **always** beats me at chess.

I muttered my discontent with the results of our latest match. Then I conceded with a “Game yours... again.”

“I like playing chess,” he remarked absently as we reset the pieces on the board.

“I can tell,” I cautiously zeroed in on the moment. “Where did you learn to play so well?”

“My grandfather taught me,” he answered without real thought as he fell into the habit of relaxed conversation between us. “He used to say that a man could never really understand any kind of strategy until he had conquered the game of chess.”

“So he made you into a conqueror,” I bantered with seeming nonchalance, hoping in vain he would latch unthinkingly onto the quip referencing his name and automatically respond with a quip of his own.

His back noticeably stiffened. “I guess,” he granted through tightened lips.

Inwardly I sighed. I had pushed too much and he was closing up... again.

“You learned much from your grandfather’s method. You are an expert strategist, Napoleon,” I attempted to salvage the moment.

“Maybe Napoleon is an expert strategist,” he countered rather acidly. “I’m not.”

I had needed to be very careful in all my meetings with him these past four days not to address him by any name. I had tried the ploy of asking if there was some name in particular by which he would prefer to be called and had received a tart “No” in response. He simply preferred not to be addressed by any name at all, and he made that more than clear without outright saying so. So I was not in the least surprised my somewhat clumsy attempt at a playful tease using his name raised his emotional hackles. I assume he considered it but a means I was utilizing to gain mental advantage in this exchange between us. Not exactly a thought to foster openness on his part, nor admittedly a very clever tack on mine.

“My grandfather also used to say that there were some things just born in a man,” he made unsolicited mention as he toyed uncharacteristically with the star-sapphire ring he always wore on his left pinky finger. “That it took certain education and training to bring them out perhaps, but that they could only be brought out if they existed to begin with.”

“And what things were born in you?” I pressed as I aggressively seized onto this turn of the conversation.

He glanced over at me in what seemed honest astonishment at the question. His hazel eyes were wide and... Frightened? No, more like panicked. A deer caught in headlights.

“Do you want to play another game of chess?” he hurriedly asked a question of his own rather than answer mine.

“Why not?” I responded glibly, knowing no verbal answer to my own query would be forthcoming from him at this moment. “I’ll take black this time.”

He nodded and reversed the board to accommodate my preference, and then there was only the strategy of moving the chess pieces to best effect holding his attention.

“How are things progressing, Mr. Kuryakin?” asked Mr. Waverly directly.

“Not as well as I’d like,” I admitted. It is utterly pointless to lie to Alexander Waverly. Somehow the Old Man always gets to the truth anyhow.

Mr. Waverly rocked back in his big chair, picking up his pipe from the surface of his revolving desk as he did so.

“You need to get him to talk about what happened when he was in Thrush hands this last time,” he advised, sagely of course.

“If only I could,” I bemoaned the unexpected difficulty of that seemingly simple task. “He can shut down quicker than a starving man devours food.”

“Umh, you should have some personal experience with handling that kind of situation, Mr. Kuryakin,” baited Mr. Waverly with a twinkle in his eye just before setting his pipe firmly between his teeth.

I sighed quite audibly. I couldn’t help myself.

“Yes sir,” I nonetheless answered dutifully, all the while wondering how exactly I could reach deep enough inside my partner’s mind to pull the man himself back out into the open.

Day Six...

The smiling and admittedly curvaceous nurse, the only kind that ever seems to tend my partner, stepped through the doorway carrying yet another vase of flowers. The small hospital room was already overrun with them, but somehow she made space for this latest addition on one of the bedside tables.

“More flowers, Napoleon,” she chirped cheerily, not even noticing the visible stiffening of the man’s shoulders at the casual mention of the name.

“You certainly are being well remembered during your convalescence,” the nurse continued her happy commentary until she registered the man in the bed was offering no companion banter, no friendly flirting. At that realization she clammed up and exited hurriedly.

“Why do they all keep sending this stuff?” he huffed as he swept his arm around the room to indicate all the flowers and cards and stuffed animals and who-knows-what-else that had come as gifts to the patient.

“Because they all like you and they all miss you,” I answered.

“They shouldn’t bother,” came his retort.

“Sending gifts? Or liking you and missing you?” I parried.

At first he said nothing, and then he responded in a voice little more than a mumble, “Either and both.”

“I’ve known him at least as long as you have, Illya,” Mandy noted with a pout, “so why can’t I be allowed to see him?”

“It just isn’t wise at the moment, Mandy,” I tried to reason with her. “He really isn’t himself.”

“Maybe I can perk him up.”

“Frankly I doubt it.”

“Thanks for that oh-so-gracious vote of confidence, Illya,” she responded tartly.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Mandy,” I made a conciliatory attempt at appeasement; “it’s just... Well, he isn’t the Napoleon you know.”

She quieted for a minute and then asked pointedly, “Thrush really did a number on him this time, didn’t they?”

I bit my lip. I wanted with everything in me to shout “No, he’ll be fine!” but honestly this time I wasn’t so sure. So I simply nodded mutely.

“Damn bastards, the lot of them!” she spat out in a half-caught breath.

There was no sentiment on earth with which I could more agree.

Day Ten...

“Why are they keeping me here?” he demanded fretfully. “There really is no medical reason anymore.”

“The bruise to your brain isn’t quite healed yet,” I forestalled as best I could.

“Malarkey!” he spat back. “The doctors are all terrified I’ll do something like kill myself or at least seriously injure myself if I’m not kept under constant watch.”

“Do they have reason to fear you might do that?” I countered him.

I was sure he would just shut down, the way he had been whenever I pushed too hard the past ten days. To my surprise, he didn’t.

"I don't know," he answered me with quiet honesty.

I took a mental deep breath and ventured into deeper psychological waters.

"Do you want to die?"

"No," he responded quickly, so quickly I knew he didn't even have to think about it.

So he really did not want to die then.

"Do you want to live?"

Trickier question and the answer was, not unexpectedly, much slower in coming.

"I don't know."

I immediately knew this too was truth.

"Why don't you know?"

"Because..." He hesitated noticeably, but finally answered in full. "Because there are always consequences."

"To living?" I sought clarification.

He nodded shortly.

"What kind of consequences?" I prompted.

"Responsibilities: accepted or shirked, discharged or ignored, those that turn out in the right and those that turn out in the wrong."

I forcibly kept myself from crowing in triumph. At last things were moving forward!

"If I managed to get you released from Medical here, where would you like to be instead? Do you want to go home?"

"I..."

He looked totally bewildered. Unreservedly vulnerable. And me – who does not find it generally necessary to indulge in tactile gestures of comfort – wished I could hug him to offer some physical encouragement to combat his current insecurity of self. Yet I knew for the present any such demonstration, however well intentioned, wasn't in the best interests of anyone. It was far too risky with his emotional state as fragile as it was.

"You always liked to sail when you were feeling restless. Would you maybe like to rent a boat and have a weekend excursion on the water?"

Oh Napoleon, the sacrifices I make for you! Battling seasickness along with battling your present demons: the prospect was so much less than appealing, but...

He smiled one of his exceedingly rare shy smiles, like a little boy offered an exceptional treat and not sure he should accept though he wanted to do so with all his heart.

“I would like that very much.”

“Then I’ll see what I can arrange,” I promised.

“I’d advise against this, Alexander,” spoke the lead psychiatrist with dire warning heavy in his voice.

Dr. Haslo is, if you’ll pardon a none-too-polite American expression, a damn prick. He always addresses everyone by their first names, even if they have barely been introduced to him. He pontificates through every conversation, accenting that supposed eloquence with knowing nods and shakes of the head. He has all the compassion of a worker ant that sets out on a prescribed task. He always performs each detail flawlessly, yet somehow he misses out on the object of the whole.

“You can’t continue to keep him confined to Medical like some kind of invalid or psychopath or worse, a test subject,” I protested. “He’s a man accustomed to action; so much inactivity is slowly eating away his peace of mind.”

“Illya,” Haslo tried one of his most soothing tones on me to no effect, “I realize he is your friend. Thus you want very much to help him through this, but—”

“Mr. Waverly,” I turned to address the Old Man directly, “you wanted me to make a concerted attempt at jarring Mr. Solo loose from this... induced depression. That means I have to be allowed to make some decisions as to what might aid in doing that.”

“Of course, Mr. Kuryakin, of course,” put in Mr. Waverly readily. “But we don’t want to take any unnecessary risks. What if Mr. Solo tried to drown himself at sea? Or attempted any other of a dozen different scenarios to in some way harm himself while there was only you standing between him and possible death?”

I smiled wryly. “That is not such an unusual situation between us.”

Mr. Waverly raised one bushy eyebrow, but then conceded, “I suppose not.”

“Alexander,” ventured Haslo once more, “the consequences have to be carefully considered. This is too sudden a turnaround for making such an overarching decision. All possibilities have to be weighed—”

“I am well aware of the necessity of weighing all possibilities in any situation,” interrupted Mr. Waverly gruffly.

I raised my hand near my mouth to hide my amused smile. Rather a foolish statement for a psychiatrist to make to the foremost hemispheric chief of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

Haslo’s face turned a particularly florid shade of red, but he recovered his composure rather quickly. I will give the man that.

“Then let me ask Illya one particular question: Why rent a boat for this excursion when Napoleon owns one of his own docked precisely where you want to go to locate one for hire?”

“Because that boat belongs to Napoleon,” I answered without further elaboration, expecting him to need no more explanation than that.

“Precisely so,” he countered with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile. “So he knows that vessel intimately. It could thus provide a comfortable atmosphere where he might be inclined to relax and talk more openly.”

“Not at present,” I begged to differ, amazed this supposed doctor of the mind was coming up so short in understanding Napoleon’s current mental state.

“That’s a very big assumption, Illya,” Haslo chose to patronize me.

“And you’re an even bigger ass,” I thought to myself as I clenched my lips tightly shut to keep from making the accusation aloud.

“Doctor, I don’t think we can at present force Mr. Solo to associate with... pieces of his life that are particularly important to his currently suppressed persona,” intervened Mr. Waverly. “That might push him over a precipice from which his mind could not be drawn back.”

“He’s associating with Illya,” Haslo made the assertion he had pointedly set up the question to make.

I shifted a bit uncomfortably in my chair.

“He’s never once said, or even hinted, that he would prefer not to be around me,” I reminded Haslo.

The good doctor shrugged as he smiled another one of those cat-that-ate-the-canary smiles.

“Yet you, as his trusted working partner and valued personal friend, are surely a piece of his life that is particularly important to his persona as Napoleon Solo,” he furthered. “So perhaps his reaction to sailing in his own boat wouldn’t be any more detrimental to his current mental state than is spending time presently with you.”

“Perhaps, but—” I began.

“But as you’ve cautioned, doctor, we cannot take unnecessary risks,” Mr. Waverly came unexpectedly to the rescue. “I agree with Mr. Kuryakin. Though I think his taking Mr. Solo sailing for the weekend might provide impetus for our patient to drop some of the mental barriers with which he is currently surrounding himself, I don’t think that sailing weekend should take place on the boat that patient himself owns.”

I released a mental breath.

“Go and arrange for the boat rental, Mr. Kuryakin,” Mr. Waverly ordered. “But do be aware Mr. Solo’s continued physical well-being is entirely your responsibility during this sailing excursion.”

I nodded my understanding of that. And looking into Mr. Waverly's eyes, I saw that he understood that was a responsibility I have never taken lightly and certainly wouldn't now.

Day Twelve...

The day was fair and sunny, cooled by a light spring breeze. Napoleon stood at the helm of the small yachting sloop I had rented looking more at peace than I'd seen him since before his last sojourn in Thrush captivity. The heavy plaster cast on his broken arm had been replaced with a much lighter one now that the fracture was all but healed. That arm was still confined to a sling, but he did have easier movement of the associated hand. However, the immobilized arm seemed of little hindrance to him with regard to most of the "nautical tasks" necessary to keep the boat sailing on a smooth course across Long Island Sound. And when something threatened to lie outside his current abilities, he did not hesitate to call on me to aid him in getting it done aright.

"You want to anchor here and put out a line to catch us some dinner?" he asked genially.

He was truly enjoying himself and somehow that made my less-than-placid stomach more bearable.

"I wouldn't mind dropping anchor for a bit and sitting in the sun on the deck," I answered. "However, I cannot promise my stomach will cooperate with keeping down any dinner, self-acquired or otherwise."

He laughed lightly.

"You and your seasickness," he teased, some of his old sense of mischief sounding – quite pleasingly to my ears – within the words. "How did you ever spend eight months on a submarine?"

"Submarines don't bob on the waves," I stated bluntly.

"The sound is very calm today, Illya," he chastised me playfully.

"It will be even calmer when we drop anchor and sit still."

His only response was another laugh, but he nevertheless prepared the boat to safely anchor awhile upon the sun-dappled and gently undulating water.

I took it upon myself to retrieve the fishing gear from the trap compartment under the seat at the stern of the boat. I heaved a couple of collapsible canvas chairs from the net sling fastened on one side of that permanent seat and pulled everything over to the middle of the deck.

"Set the chairs on the starboard side," ordered Napoleon easily.

I did the old equation in my head – Starboard = Steering Side = Right – and unfolded the chairs where desired, one close beside the other with the tackle box and pair of fishing poles laid between them.

Napoleon came over from the helm and took the seat nearest the bow. I settled gratefully into the other. It felt good to just sit and not worry about slipping while performing any needed

adjustments to sails that Napoleon, with his stationary arm, couldn't manage. The sun was warm, but not overly baking. The slight breeze freshened the air with a pleasant wash of spray. I leaned back and reveled in the caress of the sunshine and the sea air as Napoleon grabbed one of the fishing poles and cast a line over the side.

"Sometimes I can understand why you like sailing," I told him contentedly as I languidly stretched out my legs.

"It's a world with no responsibilities," he replied dreamily.

I cracked one eye open and squinted in his direction.

"You have a responsibility to see the boat doesn't capsize and I don't drown," I countered him.

He laughed again, a very stress-free sound.

"That I can manage," he assured me.

We sat in contented silence for a few minutes and then he said completely off-the-cuff, "My grandfather taught me to sail."

"The same grandfather who taught you to play chess?" I inquired cautiously, not wanting to cause him to shut down again.

"No, a different one," he answered straightforwardly.

That made perfect sense. I knew one of his grandfathers – the maternal one – had been an ambassador, while the one on the paternal side had been an admiral. I had no clue if one or both were still alive, or if my partner in any way kept in touch with either of them if they were. The only relative of his I had ever met and of whom he often spoke (always with affection) was his Aunt Amy. Yet I wasn't even certain on what side of the family belonged said Aunt Amy.

A few more moments of silence ensued and then he commented from out-of-the-blue, "You're a good friend, Illya, a really good friend."

"A really good friend to a man with no name currently," I thought to myself, but I didn't verbalize that thought.

I had hopes of the dialogue moving forward from there, hopes that he would tell me what had happened in that Thrush cell, but he became distracted by an extraordinarily large striped bass tugging insistently on his line. His entire attention became absorbed in successfully pulling in his prize and the moment for possible revelation passed beyond the stretch of my mental fishing line.

We dined *el fresco* sitting cross-legged on the deck. The fare of sea-bass sautéed with shallots, thyme and white wine presented on a bed of fragrant citrus-infused rice tossed with asparagus tips was delicious.

Napoleon is quite honestly an accomplished cook... when he wants to be. Certainly he is not above feigning ineptitude in the kitchen to get an attractive female to cluck and coo about how he deserved a home-cooked meal: ultimately cooked by said attractive female in his home with

multiple “desserts” to finish off the feast. Yet there are times when he likes to show off his culinary prowess as well, sometimes to a different type of attractive woman and sometimes to his “I-even-burn-toast” truly kitchen-inept partner. This nameless version of the man, however, seemed to feel no compunction to either conceal or showcase his cooking talents. He simply utilized them because he found he had them.

The pleasant lassitude that generally attends upon a contentedly full belly filled us both as we sat drinking the remainder of our wine. I was gazing up at the stars in the black velvet of the night sky, but Napoleon’s eyes were only for the broad expanse of now dark water surrounding us on all sides.

“They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;” Napoleon recited softly, “These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.”

I studied his profile in the dim light of the battery lanterns we had set on deck to enhance the atmosphere of our dining experience. I realized that he had lost all awareness of me.

“For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof,” he quoted on. “They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.”

I kept my peace until he turned to me, a rather sheepish look on his face.

“That psalm was my grandfather’s favorite.”

“The one who taught you to sail?” I queried, of course already knowing the answer but hoping the question would provide a conversational bridge between us.

He nodded.

“He really wasn’t a very religious man,” he went on, “but he liked to recite that psalm and did so quite often. Guess that’s why the words have stayed rooted in brain, bruised or not.”

“And what about your other grandfather, the chess player?” I ventured. “Was he a very religious man?”

He turned his pinky ring round and round on his finger before he finally said, “He was a very righteous man.

“He raised me,” he added after a few moments.

Yes, I knew that from reading what small portion of his file was not classified beyond my access level. Reared by his maternal grandparents; father died before he was born; mother... The file particularly noted that his mother, who died when he was a teenager, had played no part in his upbringing. I had always found that a somewhat peculiar tidbit of information to so pointedly include in his dossier.

“Sounds like you were quite close to your sailing grandfather,” I probed with purposeful caution.

He shrugged. "He was an easy man to whom to get close, an easy man to like. He was a widower. His wife died when my father was ten or eleven and he never married again, though he had many a romantic liaison afterwards. Very many," he continued with a smile. "He was the epitome of the roving sailor: a girl in every port. He used to say: Wine, women, song and the sea are what bind a man happily to this world."

"Certainly the man is much reflected in his grandson then," I thought to myself with an inner smirk.

"I take it your chess-playing grandfather was not as easy a man to whom to get close?"

He shrugged again. "He had his reasons for that... at least with me."

"Were you a difficult and wayward child?" I teased with a quick wink.

"Not in the way you mean, no," he stated with surprising candor, "but to him in many ways, yes."

I found that answer a bit confusing, but decided not to push for a direct explanation.

"And your mother wasn't there as a buffer," I instead tried to make a casual observation.

He glanced out over the water once more, but there was no mistaking the strain in his features.

"We didn't speak of my mother," he commented bluntly, "at least not in polite company.

"I think we should get some sleep before we both get good and drunk and wind up falling overboard," he came back into the moment. "There are no weather warnings and the water is calm; so we'll be safe enough anchored here overnight."

Then he rose to his feet and started collecting up the dishware to take down into the galley below. I knew there would be no further opening-up that night. He was now bound inward tighter than the rigging of the downed sails.

Day Thirteen...

I awoke early but Napoleon was already up and steering the boat steadily through the water when I came topside. How he had reset the sails without my aid and only one fully usable arm I had no idea, but I suspected it had taken him a good while and thus that he had been awake several hours at least. In truth I rather suspected he hadn't slept at all.

"There's hot coffee in the thermos in the galley," he informed me, "fresh cut fruit and creamery butter in the cooler, and a loaf of crusty sourdough bread on the sideboard."

"Did you bake it yourself?" I couldn't resist teasing him.

"I'm not that dedicated a Hausfrau," he snickered in much the manner of that Napoleon who did acknowledge his name. "I bought it in that little bakery on the dock before we left port yesterday. So I admit it's a day old, but still quite tasty."

"I take it you've already had your breakfast?"

“A while ago,” he stated with a short nod.

I returned below deck to the galley and came back up topside with a plastic mug of black coffee in one hand, an equally plastic bowl of sliced strawberries and honeydew melon with accompanying plastic fork in the other, and a thick slice of buttered sourdough bread gripped firmly between my teeth. Well, a man only has so many hands.

I made my way to the stern and settled on the seat that covered the rear stowage. Setting the bowl beside me on the flat surface, I took my bread in hand and tore off with my teeth the bite that had been previously residing within my mouth. Napoleon was right; day old or not, the crusty bread was quite tasty.

I looked across the length of the boat at my occupied partner, noting how sure of himself he seemed in this environment. So different than in Medical. Still, he wasn't truly himself, and it was my task to get him back to being fully that.

“Why did you choose the Army?” I voiced a question which last night's conversation had raised within my mind.

“What?” he asked, his expression a bit befuddled.

“When you enlisted in the service,” I pressed. “You enlisted before you could be drafted.” This was another piece of information I knew from his personnel file, that part of it I was permitted to see. “So you had a choice of which of the armed forces you wanted to join. Why did you choose the Army?” I repeated my original question. “Why not the Navy?” I made my point clearer.

He shrugged. “I guess I didn't want to be referred to as the Admiral's grandson.”

“So you wanted to rise or fall strictly on your own merits?”

His eyes focused directly on mine for a few moments. “I guess so,” he waffled as he returned his gaze to the sea and the path he was steering through the water.

“Didn't your choice disappoint your sailing grandfather?” I was not going to let this track of conversation fade so easily away.

He shrugged again. “Maybe, but he knew the military would never be my ultimate choice of career anyway; so he didn't overstress about my decision.”

“What did he think would be your ultimate choice of career?”

“Law. Politics. Something in that vein.”

“And is that what you expected your own ultimate choice to be?”

“Not for so much as a New York minute,” he declared with an almost vehement certainty.

This was an American idiom I had to remember. It really did speak volumes with such meaningful brevity.

"I suppose that disappointed your chess-playing grandfather," I decided to go out on an emotional limb.

"I think he was glad I didn't become a chance embarrassment through that route," he responded, I thought rather oddly.

"What career choice did you foresee for yourself back then?" I backed off onto what I considered safer ground.

"I don't know. I didn't seem to fit into any particular profession," he countered a bit testily.

"Wrong, my friend," I thought with complete conviction. *"You are a born spy."*

"Let me save you the trouble of all this pussyfooting around, Illya," he then declared with apparent irritation, "and tell you the sordid facts point-blank. My mother and father were never officially married... Well, at least not until my chess-playing grandfather arranged for the filing of a retroactive and less-than-strictly-above-board marriage certificate shortly after my birth.

"My father was a discontented cynic with pretensions of being philosophically more enlightened than most of humanity. He was also the apple of his own father's eye and thus rather indulged. He never took responsibility for anything in his life, yet paradoxically died a hero rescuing survivors from the resultant storm surge of the Cuba hurricane in 1932. He was in the Cayman Islands at the time, enjoying the months' long sort of leisurely holiday only a rich man's son can enjoy. I don't know why he suddenly found the intestinal fortitude to do what he did at the cost of his own life, but it certainly granted him a level of... esteem he had never achieved through any other aspect of his existence.

"My mother was a sheltered debutante who found the somewhat detached and world-weary view of humanity espoused by my father romantic in the extreme. They met, she declared undying love and he took her to bed, likely avowing in the voice of all such hypocrites that true love was something only she could teach him to appreciate. I was conceived, my father wandered off to the Cayman Islands to divest himself of... natural uncertainties, I believe is how he worded it in a letter to her at the time. My mother remained convinced he would return and marry her. Instead he died. Hugely pregnant by that point, she was totally disgraced in the eyes of her strictly upper-crust and therefore socially strict family. I was born, her parents told her flatly they would raise me, and then sanctimoniously disowned her.

"In amazingly short shrift, clandestine legal arrangements were made between my two grandfathers, both politically very powerful men, to make it appear my parents had been married for almost a year prior to my father's death. Thus making me seemingly a legitimate scion of both oh-so-respectable bloodlines."

He took a deep breath and then clamped his jaw tightly shut.

This explained much, especially the adamant conviction about having no name and deserving none. Yet I still didn't know how Thrush had managed to hit so painfully upon all this buried angst within my partner, to tap deeply enough within his psyche for him to outright deny the man he had become, the man he had made himself.

"Remarkable," I chose to purposely bait him. "You remember all this comprehensive background history, yet are virtually flummoxed by a minor detail like your own name."

His anger rose to alarming heights. I could all but feel the heat of that anger radiating in scorching waves off of him and toward me, but I raised my chin and let my eyes confront his.

“I’m not who you and everyone else believe I am!” he literally shouted.

That explosion did rattle me because Napoleon so rarely shouts in anger. Instead his voice usually becomes more controlled, quieter. But not this time. Or maybe just not this Napoleon who was somehow not quite Napoleon. Still, I stood (or rather sat) my ground.

“Then who are you?” I challenged, I admit with aimed belligerence.

I expected more anger, but instead his face went blank.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he said simply, and then just as simply refused to talk to me about anything at all for several hours.

Strictly to myself I had to admit that Napoleon had every right to be angry with me. I was venturing into emotional territory where, even as a trusted friend, it was not within my purview to freely wander. Yet I didn’t know how else I could unlock the mental cell that was keeping my partner imprisoned from himself. I felt uncomfortable with my lack of options on this score, and just as uncomfortable with the idea of not fully exploring those few options I did have. Where that left me was in a moral quandary.

The sun had just reached its zenith in the sky as I sat once more on my former perch in the stern pondering this dilemma. We were again anchored on becalmed waters and Napoleon had disappeared below some time ago. I hoped he would try and catch a nap for, as I have already noted, my suspicion ran along the lines of him not getting much, if any, sleep the night before. Yet he was still recovering from that bruising to the brain and needed adequate rest to fully heal.

My partner returned topside at this point, two bottles of beer clasped by their glass necks in the right hand his sling kept close to his body and a large plate laden with a pair of sandwiches in the other. He crossed to the back of the boat where I sat.

“Peace offering,” he explained with an uncertain smile. “Hot pastrami, though on the last of the sourdough bread rather than rye.”

I took one of the beers from his less-mobile hand and then retrieved a sandwich from the plate he held in the other. He then dropped down cross-legged to the deck in front of me.

I appreciatively inhaled the heavenly aroma of the warm brined meat nestled between two thick slices of crusty bread.

“Surprising how U.N.C.L.E. packed the cooler with tastier foodstuffs than mystery meat cold-cut sandwiches and uninspired deli salads from the commissary.”

“Not surprising at all,” Napoleon countered as he plopped the plate with the remaining sandwich down in an empty space on the covered stowage compartment where I sat. “I requested certain supplies, and the gal handling that aspect of this trip was quite happy to oblige.”

“I’m sure she was,” I commented just before taking a covering bite of my hot pastrami sandwich to hide my smirk. Whether he recalled himself as himself or not, this man was nonetheless

Napoleon Solo. Thus he could still charm the birds out of the trees... and all the gals in U.N.C.L.E. into smiling cooperation... with little seeming effort.

He repositioned himself facing the view of the water, switched his beer to his fully mobile left hand and then pulled his legs up to his chest, resting his sling-held arm on his raised knees. His eyes scanned the horizon as he took a long swig of his beer. Then he apologized quietly, "I'm sorry I yelled at you like that. It wasn't fair of me. None of this is your fault and I do realize you're only trying to help."

"Actually I'm a bit surprised it took that long for you to get angry," I, with some embarrassment, apologized in turn. "I was baiting you, as well as peeking like a voyeuristic neighbor into your personal history."

He smiled absently though he kept his countenance turned away from me. Thus I saw his reaction only in profile.

"That's certainly true," he acknowledged, "but there still was no call for me to give you the cold-shoulder silent treatment as I did once my anger had been vented. It's just..." He sighed. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Everything is there in place in my head," he gave that head of his a light tap with the side of his beer bottle, "but I don't seem to fit anywhere into that mental landscape. It's like looking at it all through a window: the clear glass makes everything visible in fine detail even as it separates you bodily from the scene."

"Maybe we should discuss what Thrush did to create that barring window," I attempted to travel the route that would less trample on private mental grounds.

He sighed again. "Honestly, Illya, I don't remember. I know I should, but I just don't."

"Maybe if we tried to get at some of the smaller details, it would fit together to form a recognizable picture, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle."

He was quiet for a long moment, his eyes still focused on the expanse of sun-glinted water.

"I'm willing to try," he said at last.

"Good. Then let's start with what we do know," I began. "The doctors said the concussion you suffered wasn't the result of an impact but likely was either drug or electrically induced. Do you remember being fitted with electrodes of any kind while being held captive?"

He squinted off into the brightness of the horizon, thinking it through carefully, and then he shook his head.

"All right then, let's move on to the possibility of a drug," I forwarded. "Do you remember being injected with anything?"

"Yes, but that's a common enough practice with Thrush," he told me plainly. "Truth serum: it was just another truth serum."

"Was it?" I questioned as I sought for him to really think this through.

His features squished up in concerted concentration. It seemed as if it gave him actual physical pain to even try and think about this.

"It made my head hurt," he stated softly, "a lot." Then he rubbed the edge of his beer bottle against his left temple. "My head hurts now too."

"Then I think it safe to assume that whatever Thrush did to bruise your brain involved a drug."

"Medical checked my blood for drugs," he reminded me.

"And found a well-stocked pharmacy, courtesy of Thrush," I reminded him in turn. "They did use truth serum and they later sedated you to keep you quiet in your cell. They also apparently used some kind of sensory enhancer to increase your pain levels and yet another to decrease your pain endurance thresholds. Maybe they didn't physically knock you around too much this time, Napoleon, but they played virtual battleship in your bloodstream, torpedoing one chemical with another in what appears to have been a purposeful effort at leaving behind no clearly identifiable debris."

My mention of his name had been purely accidental. I hadn't even realized I had made that mention until I noticed the telltale stiffening in my partner's shoulders and back.

I sighed. "I'm sorry," I expressed verbal regret for my unintentional faux-pas. "It's just your name comes naturally to my tongue."

"I understand," he responded in a strained voice before taking another large swallow of beer.

"So it was likely a drug they used," I went on with fitting together the jigsaw puzzle. "But there has to be more to it than that. Do you remember them asking you any specific questions?"

"They didn't ask me any questions," he responded without any doubt evident in his voice. "They just... reminded me of things."

I tilted my head as I mentally absorbed this information.

"What things?" I asked as non-threateningly as I could.

He still hadn't looked at me and I could sense his growing discomfort rising like a gradual tidal wave between us. So I uncharacteristically put out my hand and rested it on his shoulder.

He jumped as if I had burned him with a hot poker. I blinked in surprise. True, I'm not usually a tactile person, but Napoleon is. Thus this reaction on his part to a simple physical gesture of support and understanding did shock me.

"I can't do this," he suddenly spoke through clenched teeth. Then he shot to his feet and hurriedly made his way back down below deck.

Not ten seconds later I heard the distinctive smash of glass. I sprang to my own feet, dropping my half-eaten sandwich back onto the plate beside Napoleon's untouched one, and abandoned my beer on the stowage compartment. Literally galloping down the short flight of steps that led below (I don't have the most picture-perfect running technique, I do admit, but it gets the job done), I ducked my head instinctively as I glanced around the tightly confined space.

The splatter of Napoleon's remaining beer was plainly evident on the back wall as a dark stain dribbling its way slowly towards the floor. Shards and specks of glass from the broken bottle sparkled in the dim light across much of that floor. The man himself was sitting hunched up on one of the pair of pull-down cots attached to opposing walls of the tiny living space. His forehead rested on his drawn up knees, completely hiding his face from view.

I walked over and sat down on the narrow cot near but pointedly not touching him.

"I know who you want me to be," he began in a voice edged in misery. "I know who everyone wants me to be. And I know I have a responsibility to people who depend on me and trust me..."

"Your first responsibility," I interjected honestly, "is to yourself."

"But what if," he spoke in a hesitant tone and halting voice, never lifting his face to my line of sight, "what if thinking that just makes me feel... small? What if thinking that leaves me so disappointed in myself, in what I am, that I just don't want to be?"

Now I did move to touch him, coming up more alongside him and placing a protective arm across his shoulders.

I felt the soundless sobs as they rocked through his body and I clutched his shoulders tighter, as if in that gesture I could pass over to him all the inner strength necessary to conquer not the world, but himself. The world, you see, I could fight with him, but this inner battle he had to fight alone. And all I could do was offer a physical reminder that, no matter what the outcome, I would never abandon him.

He never made a single sound though he cried for a long while. And somehow that those sobs were silent – pressed firmly back inside himself – made them all the more poignant. I had never before seen my partner cry, and frankly it was a distressing experience I never want to repeat. So, finding myself as mute as he, I just kept my arm slung protectively across his shoulders.

Perhaps three-quarters of an hour had passed when I felt him slump against me in sheer exhaustion, his tears finally spent and his physical energy with them. I guided him down flat on the narrow cot, stretching out his legs as I moved off the bed myself. I removed his shoes and socks and laid a light blanket over his body.

Turning to make my way out of the living compartment and back up topside, his voice sounded unexpectedly in my ears.

"Did I ever tell you how beautiful my mother was?" he asked in a weary voice.

I turned back. His eyes were shut but apparently he was yet awake.

"Why don't you try and get some sleep?" I advised him gently as I stood near the bed.

"She was stunning. No other word can describe her," he ignored my suggestion and kept talking in that tired voice, though his eyes remained closed. "Jet black hair and snow white skin. Huge eyes the color of warm sherry and surrounded with an unbelievable wealth of dark lashes. The beguilingly innocent face of one of those porcelain gamine dolls."

“So you did get to meet her then?” I queried receptively as I pulled a small stool out from under the tiny galley dining table, set it close beside the cot, and settled myself as comfortably as I could on its low and hard seat. It was obvious my partner was not yet ready to sleep and that he wanted to talk, so I appreciated I might have to retain that less-than-ideal perch for a goodly while.

“When I was eight,” he provided the specifics. “I have an aunt,” he continued.

“Aunt Amy,” I provided more specifics.

“Aunt Amy,” he acknowledged, “though she is really a great aunt. My grandmother’s sister.”

“Which grandmother?” I asked.

“I only ever knew one, the chess player’s wife.”

“Ah,” I voiced that nondescript form of verbal encouragement we offer in those moments when we recognize our only function in a ‘conversation’ is to listen.

“Aunt Amy liked to indulge me when I was a child,” he expounded. “She thought I was being given too restrictive an upbringing and made no bones about saying so to both my grandparents, particularly my grandfather. And apparently I told her once – when I was very small and upset about something that had gone on with my grandfather – that I wanted my mother. So years later, she took it upon herself to take me to see her.”

I could well envision the likely family row that action had precipitated.

“My mother lived in a charming historic section of the city in a compact but equally charming apartment that was decorated in all dusky rose damask and frilly white lace. It looked like a dollhouse,” he went on. “What I told you before may have given you the impression her life unfolded like some sort of Victorian tragedy and that isn’t true. I told you my chess-playing grandfather was a very righteous man, and he was, but he also had a very ingrained sense of responsibility. He disowned his daughter, yes, but it was more a social renunciation than anything more substantive. He still supported my mother with a monthly stipend and, while she couldn’t live in the grand manner to which she had been accustomed in her own childhood, she lived quite well. She was never in any way financially destitute.”

I suppose the typical upper-class abandonment scenario had initially crossed my mind. I tossed away that mental supposition and instead tried to listen without preformed ideas invading my head before all the facts were revealed.

“She was so lovely, so genteel and sweet when I met her, I guess I romanticized her image in my mind as a child,” Napoleon admitted. “I so wanted loss of my custody to count as the greatest misfortune of her life. It didn’t. The only loss that she accounted as any real heartbreak was that of my father, a man who had in essence abandoned her. I was incidental to that poignant calamity in her life, little more than a detail around the edges, sort of like the lace that trimmed seemingly all of her belongings.

“Up until she died – poetically of complications following a bout of tuberculosis – I saw her off and on. Though not really that often for truthfully little of my childhood and adolescence was spent in the States. My grandfather was ambassador to Canada for many years, then to Italy

for several, and then to Greece when I was teenager. I lived successively in Montreal, Rome and Athens. My grandparents always kept a home in New York though, one we would visit when we could. And wayward Aunt Amy,” he noted with real affection in his tone, “would make all the arrangements for me to spend some time with my mother whenever we were temporarily in residence in New York.”

This of course explained the Québécois version of French Napoleon spoke, and his fluent ease in Italian. I had no clue if he spoke any Greek, however.

“She would tell me tales of my father,” Napoleon’s now hoarsened voice spoke on. “In fact that’s all she ever did. The same tales over and over, because honestly she hadn’t known my father all that long or all that well, though she never came to terms with that reality. And just as honestly she had no particular interest in my life; so she never questioned me on mundane things like how I was doing in school, or what friends I had or what hobbies I enjoyed. As I said, I was incidental, gilded calligraphy decorating the text of a sad saga written by herself. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized she indeed had very much wanted to present herself as the tragic heroine in one of those stilted Victorian romances. She never outgrew that schoolgirl notion. She died still immersed in it.”

At last, thoroughly exhausted and for the moment talked out, he drifted into slumber. In the quiet of the cabin, I was left to mull over what he had said. How did it fit into the jigsaw puzzle I was still trying to piece together regarding what nerve Thrush had hit to send his self-recognition into determined hiding?

I’d like to say that he slept peacefully and soundly after that intense emotional release, but it would be a lie. Not a quarter-hour after he had finally slipped into a completely done-in doze he was tossing and turning on the cot, muttering in his sleep, facial expression shifting in turns from pained to panicked.

I found I didn’t want to eavesdrop on his nightmares, feeling as if I had acted as a peeping-tom into his currently troubled mind far too much already. Accordingly I grabbed another beer from the cooler and took myself topside, hoping to salvage the remnants of my sandwich – or better yet Napoleon’s untouched one – from scavenging birds.

I took my accustomed seat on the covered stern stowage compartment and tried to ignore the increasingly louder dream-induced exclamations coming from the cabin below. I guzzled my beer with determined gusto, attempting to force a veil of alcoholic disconnection between my ears and his tormented cries. It didn’t work, yet I steadfastly pretended to myself that it did.

Not even two hours later he emerged topside, bleary-eyed and looking even more tired than he had before the supposedly restorative nap. I bit my lip and decided to keep the interaction between us laid-back and non-taxing for the remainder of the day.

We docked the boat at a nearby wharf and had dinner at a yachting-club glitzy French restaurant in a small town bordering the Sound. I purposely kept the conversation light. We spoke about the quality of the meal, the ‘assets’ of various female employees at HQ, the fineness of the spring weather: in short we spoke of nothing of consequence.

We kept the boat in port that night and I hoped maybe he would be able to really sleep, to turn off his mind and truly rest. But again that was not to be.

Day Fourteen...

Though I arose quite early the next day, Napoleon was again awake before me. This was not really unusual as my partner has never been one to sleep well. I honestly think part of the reason he takes so many women to bed is that an energetic round of sex seems to be the only sort of sleep aid that works to give him a full night's rest. Even alcohol only serves to make him edgy and less likely to sleep, and his system fights sleeping pills in any safe dosage.

Knowing Napoleon to be already topside, I took the time to brew up a fresh pot of coffee. This is one culinary skill I have down pat, if I do say so myself. Once the coffee was finished perking on the stove, I poured it from the pot into a thermos and fastened down the lid to keep it hot. I then pulled two of the plastic mugs off the hooks over the narrow sideboard and made my way topside carrying my bounty.

I found Napoleon seated in the middle of the deck. The boat was once more on open water, the fully unfurled sails lifting gently in the breeze. I walked over and seated myself beside my partner. Unscrewing the lid on the thermos and dropping that lid on the deck, I dexterously filled the cups as I held the handles of both wrapped in the fingers of my opposite hand.

"Take one," I invited Napoleon as I extended toward him the cups filled with the fragrantly steaming dark liquid.

He accepted my offer with a polite "Thank you" and then turned his head to gaze out over the water as he had so often during this trip.

I set the thermos on the deck, retrieved the lid and fastened it onto that container, and then set my gaze to match his.

"We have to head back to port today," I reminded him that this excursion was coming to an end.

He nodded shortly as he took a drink of the strong black coffee in his mug.

"I'm sorry I fell apart at the seams on you yesterday," he spoke after a few long minutes had stretched in silence between us.

"We've endured each other's company while half-dead, full-drunk, scared out of our wits, maudlin with regret, sleep-deprived, food-starved, drugged into stupors and who knows how else," I sought to reassure him. "With that kind of personal history, what makes you think you have to apologize for simply being emotionally upset?"

He smiled ruefully. "Maybe I don't," he conceded.

"Illya," he began after another few silent minutes had passed, "do you really think it can help? My telling you all this stuff?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but I do think you need to tell someone and—"

"You're a safer bet than most," he completed the statement with a bit of a smirk.

"I appreciate the compliment, backhanded as it might be," I responded acerbically. It was almost like old times, the fits-like-an-old-shoe quality of teasingly bashing banter between us.

“So,” I took advantage of the ease in the moment, “you never told me about your grandmother.”

“She was something of a social butterfly,” he responded readily enough. “She liked attending tea parties and embassy receptions and society balls and charity concerts. She adored the ballet and the opera, but mostly she adored her position as an ambassador’s wife. She always blended in perfectly, no matter what the situation or occasion. She made absolutely sure of that as if it was her sole mission in life.

“She was the one who taught me to cook,” he added unexpectedly.

A musing little grin edged its way onto his lips as probable memories of those early kitchen adventures seemed to capture his fancy.

“She insisted it was a ‘personal survival skill’ every man, no matter of what societal rank, should learn. So she took me into the kitchen at a very young age and began teaching me the skill. Everything from how to successfully scramble an egg to how to properly bone a fish.”

“Sounds like a very intelligent lady,” I commented appreciatively.

“She was. I think you would have liked her.”

“Would have?”

“She died when I was in Korea. I never even got to say goodbye. Couldn’t even attend her funeral.”

I waited quietly for him to continue.

“You know, outside of those lessons, she never cooked at all. Not even special tidbits prepared especially for my grandfather on birthdays or anniversaries or the like. She didn’t even venture into the kitchen unless she was teaching me. In retrospect I think it was her way of spending time with me. She was more comfortable using the pretense of showing me how to cook than just sitting and talking.”

“One method is as good as another. She obviously cared about you.”

He nodded. “I was never unloved, Illya. I want you to understand that. Bastard or not, I was always loved,” he finalized. “Even cherished in some ways.”

I nodded my agreement. “By your grandmother and your Aunt Amy and your sailing grandfather— Whatever happened to him by the way?”

He broke into a wide grin. “Happily retired to the Fiji Islands about a decade ago. There he gets all the wine, women, song and the sea he can handle. I get a letter from him every now and again in which he waxes poetic about the local flora in the way of tropical ‘fruit juices’ or the local fauna in the way of scantily-clad native girls.”

I couldn’t help grinning myself at that description. “Seems a retirement in natural accord with his personality.”

“Definitely,” agreed Napoleon.

“And your chess-playing grandfather?” I ventured cautiously.

He brought the left hand yet holding his coffee mug close to his constrained right hand as he sought the star-sapphire ring on his left little finger with the fingers of the right. He began continuously turning that ring as he spoke.

“He died shortly after I entered U.N.C.L.E. Survival School. I never got to say a proper goodbye to him either, though at least I got to attend his funeral and pay my last respects.”

I didn’t press. I simply waited. I knew he had more to say, but I had to let him say it in his own time.

“My grandfather never lied to me about my background,” he spoke at last. “In fact he made a point of telling me the whole truth, explaining however much he thought I could understand as I came to various ages of maturity.

“I know that likely sounds cruel, but that wasn’t the intent behind him doing so. He simply wanted me to understand the why of things. Why my mother was not raising me; why he didn’t have any respect for my father; why my grandmother had a tendency to fret about me in certain public situations even though I was brought up to exercise more than the usual wont of ‘social graces’.

“But mostly he wanted me to understand the importance of personal responsibilities,” Napoleon made known. “My father had failed in his and my mother had ignored hers. Such was not acceptable to my grandfather. In his eyes, you always met your responsibilities to the best of your abilities. You never ran away from them; you never failed to acknowledge them; you never created a cocoon to shield yourself from them—”

His complexion paled to a sickly ashen shade and then he unexpectedly dove on his knees toward the railing of the boat, throwing his upper body over that fragile barrier and letting his coffee mug fall into the sea as he was most profoundly sick.

The retching wracked through him as I sat there completely dumbfounded. I had never known Napoleon to be seasick, so I doubted this bout of nausea had such a simple source as the natural motion of the boat. And I had drunk the very same coffee, so it couldn’t be I hadn’t achieved my usual success in the brewing of that beverage. No, the whole episode seemed to have been triggered by what he was saying about responsibilities, or rather what he was remembering in that regard as he spoke.

Finally he pulled himself back from the railing, his breath coming in short and uneven pants.

“God, Illya, is that what I’m doing?” he demanded.

I squinted in confusion.

“Are you doing what?” I questioned.

“Am I forming a cozy cocoon to burrow away from my responsibilities?” he quizzed me roughly.

"I don't know, Napoleon," I answered, not even worrying that I let slip his name since I had the distinct feeling we had hit a crossroads from which there was now no turning back. "Is that what you think you're doing?"

He didn't answer, but pinched his face up in seeming pain. He rubbed at his left temple. His forehead was beaded in perspiration and his breathing was still very uneven.

"Let's get you out of the sun," I stated in some alarm.

I helped him stagger unsteadily to his feet and half-propelled him in front of me – while yet trying to maintain a guiding arm about his waist – down the narrow stairway to the cabin below.

I pulled down one of the cots and maneuvered him down flat onto it. Then I grabbed a clean dishtowel, soaked it under the tap of the galley sink, wrung some of the water from it, and proceeded to wipe his face with the dampened cloth.

"I want to get this right, Illya," he told me in an anxious voice.

"What?" I pressed for more details.

"I have responsibilities and they are all colliding together and I don't know which is what and if I am taking on the right one or if I am simply shirking all of them," he rambled. "I can't get it straight in my head."

He rubbed his left temple again, both the physical and emotional torment evident on his countenance.

"What if this is just a cocoon I've created to protect myself from those responsibilities?" he sought an answer from me, an answer at which I couldn't even guess as I was still unsure of the cause of all this angst. "I knew I had to do something; they were getting too close. What if the something I chose was the wrong something?"

"Calm down," I made a futile attempt at soothing him. "Tell me who was getting too close?"

"Thrush!" he exclaimed harshly as if I should already have realized that.

"They were inside my head," he went on, "and it hurt so much. And I didn't know how much more I could take. I knew what they wanted and I didn't want for them to get that."

"What was it they wanted?" I asked as gently as I could.

"They wanted..." His face screwed up in agony once more. "Me! Not secrets, not talk. They wanted me, wanted to use me against U.N.C.L.E. Easy. It would be easy they told me, easy just like my mother. They reminded me of every one of my failures; every agent who had died because I couldn't anticipate some action or other; every innocent who had suffered."

"There really haven't been many of those kinds of failures for you, Napoleon," I again sought to calm him. "But you have to realize you are human and that no human is perfect."

"Consequences!" he shouted as he freed his cast-bound arm from its protective sling and thus managed to grab both my upper arms in a painfully tight grip within both his fists. "There are always consequences! They told me they knew there would be many more failures brought on

by my mistakes, the mistakes of a man whose birth was one big mistake to begin with, and that they intended to use every one of those future failures to their advantage.

“My head was splitting and they were pounding at it with their piercing words. And my chess-playing grandfather was admonishing me about responsibilities and my sailing grandfather was suggesting forgetting everything for the pleasures of wine, women, song and the sea and my grandmother was espousing how every gentleman needed certain skills to survive and my aunt was advising me never to accept too many boundaries and my father was shrugging his shoulders and walking away and my mother was saying ‘That’s all very nice, dear, but let me tell you a story of true love’—”

“It’s all right; you’re safe now...”

“And my head hurt so badly,” he rattled on, his voice strident and agitated. “I wanted to crack open my skull and pull out my brain, it hurt so badly. I couldn’t sleep; I couldn’t eat; all I could do was think and think and think. They were taking my safe haven and I couldn’t let them do that. I broke the glass of a window—”

“Where was the window?” I tried to get him to focus.

“I don’t know! It was just a window! I broke the glass and I took a shard and stabbed it into my leg, deeper and deeper to stop the thinking and all the words. I concentrated on that different source of pain, a source over which I had complete control, as I forced my mind to focus on the most important responsibility. And then I took into hiding that part of me they wanted: Napoleon Solo.”

At last the fast flow of words slowed to a dead halt. He was breathing heavily and his eyes were wide and dazed.

“But it’s safe now,” I reassured him. “Napoleon Solo can come out of hiding.”

He gazed at me uncertainly.

“You’re sure? You’re sure doing that won’t give them what they want?”

“Not if you don’t let them have it,” I pronounced certainly.

He still looked wary and scared, but at last he nodded.

“But I’m too tired right now to bring him out of hiding,” he fretted nervously.

“Then rest,” I told him, not sure he would comply but knowing well enough that this kind of emotional outburst and those kind of terrifying memories would leave anyone drained and exhausted, yet alone a man who was already fatigued beyond normal limits as well as not quite healed from a brain injury. “He’s not going anywhere.”

He nodded again.

Thankfully, he didn’t fight the exhaustion at all this time, merely closed his eyes and slept peacefully at last.

I managed to get the boat anchored while he deeply slumbered below deck. I didn't trust my own abilities enough to make any attempt to steer the vessel toward its home dock. That would have to wait upon his awakening.

The sun was bathing the water in the multi-colored hues of a glorious sunset when he finally made his way topside. He looked a little drawn, but overall more refreshed.

"Did you rest well, Napo—"

I broke off in the middle of his name, not wanting to compromise all the progress I believed made in his recovery of self.

He smiled hesitantly. "It's all right, Illya," he assured me. "I've come out of hiding."

I exhaled in relief.

"Good to have you back, Napoleon," I assured him in turn.

"Is it?"

He still looked a little uncertain, a bit uncomfortable in his own skin. I reasoned that was only to be expected. He was still going to need the professional talents of the U.N.C.L.E. psychiatrists to get everything fitting perfectly back together inside him. I didn't fool myself in that regard. But we had broken through the barring window. Now he only needed to step over the impeding sill, an action very much within his rational scope at this point. So he would be all right. For the first time in more than a month I knew he really would be all right.

"I missed you," I told him with honest enthusiasm.

"I think maybe I even missed myself," he remarked with a self-deprecating smile.

"Of course you did," I teased with a smile of my own. "After all, you do have an enormous ego."

He laughed and it was an honest laugh. Oh yes, he would definitely be all right.

"Napoleon," I began, wanting him to understand that there were hurdles he would still need to get across, "you do realize that you'll have to go through a battery of counseling sessions with likely a battery of head-shrinkers when he get back to headquarters."

He grinned mischievously.

"I've always been labeled an optimist, Illya, but I don't think anyone has ever mistaken me for a cockeyed one."

I found myself grinning too.

"No, I don't believe that has ever been the case."

"I'm ready to let all those would-be Freuds aid me in gluing back together all the disparate pieces of my psyche," he stated with all of his usual charming seeming-insouciance. "I'll be fine, Illya," he then summarized particularly for my benefit.

“Then I’ll stop worrying,” I said in the same deceptively light tone he had used.

He nodded. “No need to stress yourself on my account,” he teased.

“Damn smug American,” I commented as I squinted with mock censure at him.

“Damn stubborn Russian,” he commented in return with the same sort of mock censure.

“Thank you for that relentless stubbornness, my friend,” he then added in a tone of sincere gratitude.

I nodded shortly, feeling a bit awkward when confronted with that gratitude of his.

“You would do the same for me,” I stated what to me was only the obvious.

“Always,” he made what I recognized with absolute certainty as a heartfelt vow.

“Now,” he changed the timbre of the moment before it became too expressively intense for the comfort of either of us, “we had best get this vessel set on course for home. It will be dark by the time we get into port as it is, and likely the boat dealer will be wondering if we absconded with his sloop.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” I gave him a mock salute.

And then we set about all the necessities of getting the boat underway and headed in the right direction home.

After we finally tied up the vessel in its berth on the dock, he turned to look out once more over the water, a bit of longing evident in his dark eyes.

“Next time you can go sailing in your own boat,” I made an attempt at cheering him.

He smiled broadly. “That I can,” he agreed.

“A safe haven, like that in your sailing grandfather’s favorite psalm,” I suggested gently.

He shook his head but offered nothing further, so I queried directly, “You spoke of Thrush trying to take your safe haven, did you mean your view of yourself?”

He shook his head once more and was quiet long enough that I thought he would say nothing more in that regard. Finally, with an impulsive little tug at his pinky ring, he stated, “U.N.C.L.E. is my safe haven, Illya.”

Yes, I suppose I had always known that.

“And you,” he added with a very warm smile, “are a really good friend.”

I basked in the warmth of that smile. Napoleon can make you feel like the most important person in the world to him. Or maybe it is that every person in the world is indeed important to him. Honestly I can’t be sure.

But I know I can see in him the dominant traits of each of the people who surrounded him as a child: the careless charm of his sailing grandfather, the social adaptability of his over-achieving grandmother, the forward independence of his wayward Aunt Amy, the acutely romantic soul of his life-lost mother, the ever-questing philosophy of his father that turned in him from fatalistic cynicism to idealistic optimism, and the unrelenting determination to discharge personal responsibilities to the utmost limit of his capacity that came to him directly from his chess-playing grandfather.

He is all of them and he is none of them, because first and foremost he is uniquely himself. A man of schemes and a man of action. A man filled with boundless hope and yet intimately touched by despair. A doer and a dreamer. A man with drive and ambition who yet longs for personal tranquility. My most treasured and trusted friend, even as I am his. Napoleon Solo.

He ran a hand through his hair, pushing that errant forelock off his forehead with the fingers of his left hand, and I couldn't resist asking about the ring that action so prominently displayed upon his pinky finger.

"Was that your chess-playing grandfather's?" I queried as I pointed to the gem-set band.

I had noticed how he had toyed with it, touched it, turned it round and round on his finger as events had unfolded on the boat. It was not a usual habit with him, and so I wondered why – in his uncertain state of self – it had become one.

"He gave it to me, yes," he revealed, "but it was never his. Oh he had one like it, a generations-old family piece. But that was never intended for me and I understood why. However, he did gift me with this one," he tapped the star sapphire bauble with one finger as he explained, "its twin, when I enrolled in U.N.C.L.E. Survival School. He told me it was to remind me that a man always has to find his own way in the world, no matter his personal bloodlines... or lack of them. 'One doesn't need heirlooms to understand that all of humanity is of one blood,' he said when he presented it to me."

I found myself heartily agreeing with that sentiment expressed by a very righteous man.

A few months later...

He was standing in the hallway just beyond the enforcement agents' reception area in HQ consulting with the Section head of Personnel regarding some Section II transfers from Rome to New York. He was every inch Napoleon Solo: suave, confident, professional and charming. I stood for a moment observing him, never noticing Mr. Waverly come up to stand alongside me in that corridor.

"You did a good job, Mr. Kuryakin," he praised as his eyes gazed in the same direction as did mine.

I started at both his unexpected presence and the unexpected compliment.

"It was mostly the good job of the U.N.C.L.E. psychiatrists," I hedged.

"They did their part of course," agreed the Number 1 of Section I.

Though U.N.C.L.E. was never able to pinpoint the exact drug that was used by Thrush on Napoleon, they were able to come up with mental blocking procedures to aid in future any enforcement agents who might be injected with the chemical in the line of duty. The knowledge that he now had such techniques as part of his learned arsenal against any similar assault had removed the last of the uncertainty from Napoleon's psyche. And at that point he had fully crossed over the empty sill from that previously barring and since broken mental window.

"Mr. Solo is a very proud man, and much more private than is recognized by the common wot and weal. Do you think he would ever have let anyone other than you shatter any part of his carefully maintained image?"

"No sir," I had to admit.

"Then you prove my point, Mr. Kuryakin. The psychiatrists may have eventually gone in and unsnarled all the internal wiring, but they would never have gotten access to that wiring if you hadn't first punched the prerequisite hole in the wall."

"And you had no doubt I could do that, sir?" I queried.

"I know you to be a very efficient agent," he huffed, "one who uses whatever tools are at hand to the purpose, and certainly not one who is oblivious to the powerful machinery of friendship. Carry on, Mr. Kuryakin," he then finalized as he traveled on his way further down the hall, leaving me with my jaw dropped halfway to the floor.

The Old Man had never missed a trick in his life and likely never would.

Napoleon turned toward me with a winning smile.

"Come on, tovarisch;" he inveigled, "time to greet the transferees."

I nodded and followed him into the reception area.

The agents in question were just getting their badges pinned on by the female operative at the receiving desk. Napoleon walked up to the two men, a warmly welcoming smile on his face, and extended his hand to first one and then the other in a friendly handshake.

"Ciao, mi chiamo Napoleone Solo."¹

There are some words that in any language fall upon our ears like the sweetest of music. And me, I had just heard the most delightful of symphonies.

—THE END—



¹ Hello, my name is Napoleon Solo.