

**Author's Note:** Originally written for the **HODOWE: Vernal Equinox Challenge** and evokes the idea of an association between light, fire, creation and renewal.

It is a sequel (sort of) to my fanfic story [CHIMERA](#), and thus reading that story first is recommended.



Reason, an ignis fatuus in the mind,  
Which leaving light of nature, sense behind,  
Pathless and dangerous wandering ways it takes,  
Through error's fenny bogs and thorny brakes;  
Whilst the misguided follower climbs, with pain,  
Mountains of whimsy heaped in his own brain.

*John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester  
"A Satyr Against Mankind"*

## IGNIS FATUUS

BY [LAH](#)

**Night of the Vernal Equinox, 1965  
Bay of Chaleur, Canada**

Napoleon gave his shoulders a purposeful shake, shifting some of the clinging moisture droplets off the water-repelling material of his windbreaker. It had been misting for the past half-hour

and Solo, with the instincts of someone attuned to sailing, knew a serious storm was in the offing.

“If it takes much longer for the good doctor and his Thrush escort to travel across the bay, they’ll be in for a good soaking and so will we.”

From his place beside his partner in their small and currently becalmed motor boat, Illya Kuryakin only shrugged. He didn’t even bother to lower the binoculars with which he was scanning the water for any sign of the transport vessel on which Dr. Tau Fu Gunsis, the brilliant but somewhat impracticable astrophysicist, was expected by U.N.C.L.E. to be a willing Thrush passenger.

“Have you spotted anything?” Napoleon then asked a bit irritably. He hated it when Illya got into one of his ‘no conversation’ moods on a mission.

“If I had spotted anything, Napoleon, I wouldn’t keep it myself,” responded Illya, also a bit irritably.

Napoleon sighed. “The things we have to do to protect naive geniuses from themselves.”

“It’s understandable that Dr. Gunsis could be lured in by Thrush. No one in the scientific community has given any credence to his discovery. Only Thrush seems interested.”

“And that’s the thing, Illya. Since reputable scientists have almost to a man... or woman... scoffed at his claim, perhaps Waverly is simply making a mountain of a molehill with this plan for us to ‘kidnap’ Dr. Gunsis out of Thrush hands.”

“Ours is not to question why, my friend,” Illya reminded him with a bit of an ironic smirk.

The rain started in earnest at last, pouring down in obscuring sheets. “Ours is but to get drenched in doing the deed,” grumped Napoleon.

“This rain is making it difficult to see,” Illya complained in turn as he squinted through the binoculars.

“And far be it for us to miss the boat.”

Illya groaned at his partner’s trope as he swept his frame of visual reference through the binoculars from one side of the bay to the other. It was no good though; he could barely make out the line of demarcation between the dark water and the equally dark sky.

Then in the distance... Yes, a light... Surely such bright illumination could only come from the cabin of a boat?

“There!” he exclaimed. “There to the right!” The Russian handed the binoculars off to his partner so the American agent could verify his observation.

Napoleon took the binoculars in hand and raised them to his eyes, scanning the area where Illya pointed. Then he shook his head. “That’s not our man.”

“What do you mean?” demanded a somewhat aggravated Illya. “It’s a boat, yes?”

“Yes and no,” Solo replied cryptically.

“Napoleon,” Illya’s words came forth clipped and terse, “it either is a boat or it’s not.”

“When you put it that way, I suppose it’s not,” admitted the other man as he lowered the binoculars.

“Are you going to explain yourself?”

“It’s just the Baie Chaleur Fireship, Illya.”

“The what?”

“You know: ghost light.”

“You mean an ignis fatuus?”

“I suppose that’s what scientists call the phenomenon, yes.”

Illya squinted toward the greenish-white light seemingly riding on the waves now only about fifty or so yards to the right of their anchored vessel. Then he grabbed the binoculars back from Solo and tried to bring into sharper focus whatever was so persistently glowing.

“My grandfather used to take me salmon fishing on the nearby Restigouche River,” Napoleon spoke on as Illya continued to scour the rainy vista before him through the binoculars. “When I was a boy tales of pirates fascinated me and on a particular evening, just as a storm hit, I swore up-and-down I saw a pirate ship out on the bay. One of the old salts my grandfather had hired to help out on the fishing trip assured me what I had seen was just the fireship.

“He told me the legend; how centuries ago a band of pirates during the night of a severe storm ‘rescued’ from the turbulent waves a lady of Port Daniel whose tiny boat had capsized in the bay. Soon learning she could garner them no ransom as she had no immediate family, the brigands decided to be rid of her in the easiest way, by throwing her back into the tempest-tossed waters to drown. Reportedly her last words were: ‘For as long as the world is, may you burn on the bay.’

“Only hours later the pirate ship was itself caught in the full furor of that horrendous storm. Whale oil-filled lanterns wound up setting the wooden deck ablaze. All aboard perished in the flames. And so now,” Napoleon summed up the essence of the tale, “whenever a fierce storm rises, the light of that long-gone pirate ship is still seen by onlookers as it burns on the bay.”

“Fulfilling the lady of Port Daniel’s final curse upon her callous murderers,” remarked Illya.

“Or perhaps providing her final blessing upon others traveling the bay, protecting them from the cruelty of the lawless,” Napoleon countered.

Illya lowered the binoculars once more as he turned to stare at Solo. “And you believe this legend?”

Now it was Napoleon who shrugged. “Whether one believes or not, the light remains.”

A heavy gust of wind at that moment rushed not only rain but water from ensuing waves on the choppy bay into the eyes of the two men, temporarily blinding them. And in that instant of seeming blindness, it rose before them in a radiantly brilliant glow: the fireship. Upon the bow, long pale-brown hair swept back wildly by the blustery storm, the image of a rail-thin female materialized. But this female was surely not more than a barely pubescent child: her golden eyes, impossibly huge in her small, narrow face, lighting up the darkness almost like twin flames of abruptly struck matches...

---

*For a second or ten he was completely disoriented. Then recognition of where he was and what he was doing returned to him. He was in the lab of Dr. Rimheac to see a demonstration of something the man inexplicably called a chimera.*

*This little girl? This somehow intensely sad little girl? A threat to humanity?*

*A glass enclosure separated her from him and his partner. Separated her from all of the outside world.*

*His hand pressed against the glass was mirrored by her much smaller one on the opposite side.*

*“Are you all right, honey?” Napoleon asked. “How long have you been imprisoned here?”*

*She just stared at him with those enormous golden-hued eyes of hers. She looked so desperate; it all but broke his heart.*

*“You’re unable to speak, aren’t you? Doesn’t matter. I can understand perfectly well what you can’t say: You want to be free.”*

*From somewhere inside his own head he would have sworn on everything he believed sacred that a childish voice pleaded, “Save me!”*

*...Or maybe that was just what he wanted to hear...*

---

Illya lowered the binoculars once more as he turned to stare at Solo. “And you believe this legend?”

Now it was Napoleon who shrugged. “Whether one believes or not, the light remains.”

A heavy gust of wind at that moment rushed not only rain but water from ensuing waves on the choppy bay into the eyes of the two men, temporarily blinding them. And in that instant of seeming blindness, it rose before them in a radiantly brilliant glow: the fireship. Upon the bow, long pale-brown hair swept back wildly by the blustery storm, the image of a rail-thin female materialized. But this female was surely not more than a barely pubescent child: her golden eyes, impossibly huge in her small, narrow face, lighting up the darkness almost like twin flames of abruptly struck matches...

---

*For a second or ten he was completely disoriented. Then recognition of where he was and what he was doing returned to him. He was in the lab of Dr. Rimheac to see a demonstration of something the man inexplicably called a chimera.*

*This little girl? This somehow intensely sad little girl? A threat to humanity?*

*A glass enclosure separated her from him and his partner. Separated her from all of the outside world.*

*His fist pressed against the glass where her forehead pushed against the opposite side.*

*“What has been done to you, little one?” Illya asked. “Why are you secluded here?”*

*She just stared at him with those enormous golden-hued eyes of hers. She looked so hopeless; it all but broke his heart.*

*“They took away your ability to speak, didn’t they? It’s all right. I can understand perfectly well what you can’t say: You want to be free.”*

*From somewhere inside his own head he would have sworn on everything he respected that a childish voice importuned, “Destroy me!”*

*...Or maybe that was just what he expected to hear...*

---

A flash of memory? Or but a spark of imagination? It mattered not to either man as it was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving behind no trace whatsoever. Lightning strikes do tend to affect the consciousness like that.

---

***A week later***

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

“We had to make a choice, Napoleon,” Illya put forth the facts plainly. “You tried to convince Dr. Gunsis to abandon Thrush and arrange for lawful regulation of his project, yet was he too personally attached to the wonder of his discovery to see reason. And you and I both know that, under Thrush control, there would be no successful containment of a... force of that magnitude.”

Illya had needed to search for a term adequate to describe Dr. Tau Fu Gunsis’ creation: a confluence of subatomic particulars from space that, in the controlled environment of a lab, had conjoined to make a living organism beyond human understanding. But that the organism had been in the main hazardous to human life had quickly become apparent, and that hazardous element is what had interested Thrush.

“Yet it was still life, Illya, albeit life we couldn’t understand.”

“It was flawed creation, Napoleon, in that there was no counterbalance to offset it. If we could somehow have gotten Dr. Gunsis to realize this, perhaps it would have been possible to allow it to be. Yet he was... too much an experimenter. In the end, fire was the only way to ensure all the cultures he was so recklessly morphing into species outside the realm of nature’s system of checks-and-balances were totally annihilated.”

“I know you’re right, Illya,” acknowledged Napoleon with a small sigh. “But Dr. Gunsis wasn’t like most Thrush scientists. He just seemed... Well, you know: childishly and therefore rather foolhardily enthusiastic over the possibility of a new and entirely foreign form of existence. I don’t believe there was any purposeful ill intention on his part.”

“We did our utmost to get him out of that lab.”

“I know that too.”

“We had to consider the greater good.”

Napoleon nodded. “Yet sometimes the mind’s commitment to the greater good is very tough on the heart,” he nonetheless noted.

“And just as often the heart is renewed by that commitment.”

Strange how out-of-nowhere a peace enveloped Napoleon’s spirit. It was as if all the desperation he had felt at the necessity of destroying Dr. Gunsis’ unexpected versions of alternate life, and then as the man locked himself with his embryonic creations in his lab as flames engulfed both the organisms and the premises, provided a personal trial by fire to reinforce the compassion in his soul.

Strange how out-of-nowhere a calmness swathed Illya’s spirit. It was as if all the hopelessness he had felt at the discovery of the nature of Dr. Gunsis’ creation of alternate life, and then at the realization only one way existed to ensure natural life was protected against the vagaries of that essentially artificial creation, provided a personal trial by fire to re-energize the courage in his soul.

“Amen to that, Illya,” stated Napoleon bluntly. “Amen to that.”

“Well, saying amen is a bit foreign to me,” gibed Illya with an impish grin, “but I have no issue with adding a hearty indeed.”

Ignis fatuus as a natural phenomenon do not occur indoors. Thus the folks who swore they saw an arc of green-white light stretch over the figures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin as they made their way to Mr. Waverly’s office to verbally provide their final report on the CELESTIAL STRAINS OF LIFE AFFAIR were surely indulging in a bit of shared whimsy. Merely a reflection off one of the metal walls and metal ceiling, no doubt.

Still, the observers remained divided on whether that rather unusual occurrence should be taken as a blessing or a curse.

—THE END—

