

Author's Note: I am most grateful to *elme* and her **MFU 50 Mini-Bang** on **LiveJournal** for the impetus to finally finish this story that had been in the works for over four years. Special thanks also to *avery11* for her invaluable help with the French dialogue within this piece. (Just as an added note, any remaining mistakes in the French passages or any in the one Portuguese passage within this story are entirely my own.) And a deep bow of appreciation again to *avery11* for her wonderful artwork.

I will note here that this story uses many of the Thrush villains from the series, and – where I thought it might be helpful to remind folks of the original series' origin of the character – I have footnoted the episode in which said villain first appeared.



Art by Avery11

Charm is the quality in others that makes us more satisfied with ourselves.

Henri Frederic Amiel

THE STICKING IN MUD AFFAIR

BY [LAH](#)

Summer 1969

A Thrush science facility in rural New Jersey

Napoleon Solo peered down through the metal framework of the abruptly ending catwalk, where he presently stood, to the lake of mud below. There really was no place else for him to go but down into the entirely uninviting muck. His enemies would soon realize, if they hadn't already, that he had made his escape from the subterranean room in which they had imprisoned him. So he had to get out of this Thrush scientific playground as fast as possible.

This burrow-like chamber was itself underground, narrowing as it extended northward. Just within his range of sight Napoleon could see a small egress door in the much lowered ceiling of that northern end of the tunnel. Its intended purpose eluded him, but the ceiling in that area was surely

low enough for him to access the door... assuming, that is, the mud was not over his head in depth there. It was a risk to be sure, but he really was out of options.

With a discontented sigh, he sat on the catwalk and removed his shoes. He tossed them over the side into the mire below. He would sink the shoes fully down into the mud once he had taken the plunge himself. It surely would not do to leave any clues as to how he had made good his exit; that is, if he was able to actually make good such an exit.

Thrush had relieved him of all of his agent gadgetry and his suit coat, a certain thread under the left lapel having caught their attention. (An U.N.C.L.E. agent could never have enough primacord, after all.) They had taken his tie at the same time, presumably because they considered it far too useful as a makeshift rope. Thus was he forced to come up with another way to ensure he didn't lose the slip of paper he had come here to get in the first place: a list of operative designations associated with various Thrush personnel recently "activated" in this facility.

He had stolen that all-important piece of paper, one of many carbon copies of the original, right off the teletype in the main office of this Thrush complex. Carefully peeling that copy from the center of the six-fold form, Solo had subsequently left a replica blank sheet in its place, making it appear as if the particular piece of duplicating material above had been too light-exposed to properly transfer the image. The copy's current hiding place, in a secret pocket in the cuff of his right trouser leg, had thankfully gone undetected when he was searched after being captured. (He still didn't know what kind of alarm system he had triggered or when he had triggered it, but Thrush muscle had swarmed him just as he was almost clear of the complex.) He had memorized the twenty-five top-most entries immediately upon retrieving that list of course, but the full register contained over a hundred such entries.

Pulling off one sock, Napoleon retrieved the tightly rolled paper from his trouser cuff. Though hidden, that secret pocket was a bit too likely to give up its contents to the sucking mud. He couldn't chance leaving it there. Pushing the paper into the toe of his removed sock, Napoleon knotted the material securely just above the top edge of the rolled list. Then he pulled off his other sock and knotted it to the top of the first, finally tying the whole about his neck and tucking it under his shirt.

Glancing down once more at the river of mud, Napoleon let loose another discontented sigh before carefully lowering his body from the metal framework of the catwalk as close to the muddy surface as he could manage. Then he released his grip and dropped into the mud. He landed safely on his feet, bending his knees momentarily to cushion the impact of the approximately five-foot freefall. Solo found as he straightened that the depth of the muck at this point was only slightly above waist level and that his bare footing was sure on the bottom of this crater. In fact that bottom was smooth rather than rough, suggesting a manmade depression of some sort.

"At least it doesn't stink," he muttered through tight lips as he moved toward his tossed Italian leather shoes and pushed them downward into the sludge, sinking them quickly out of sight. And it was absolutely true that this mud didn't stink at all. In fact it didn't even have the odor of clean but wet dirt. It actually had a rather citrusy scent that was unexpectedly pleasant if rather too intense.

However Napoleon really had no time to ponder the smell of his surroundings. He trudged northward toward that espied egress door, the depth of the mud increasing as the tunnel narrowed. He suspected the bottom of the crater gradually sloped downward, but he didn't have time to ponder that much either. He had to get to that door and hope that somehow he could open it and make his way out.

At the point where the door – a circle barely more than an average-sized man's body width – was directly above his head, the mud was chin-high on Napoleon. Luckily the ceiling was low enough that, if he extended his arms fully upward, he could just reach the handle, a turn-lock similar to that used on watertight hatches in submarines. It wasn't an easy feat for him to manipulate it as necessary, but somehow he unfastened it, finding to his relief the door then slid across rather than needing to be pulled down or pushed up. Taking a quick breath, Napoleon took a little leap, caught the edge of the open portal with his hands and hauled his body up and through.

He found himself in a tightly confined and upwardly sloped tunnel. With no idea where it might lead, he maneuvered flat on his belly through that channel, using elbows, knees and bare toes to propel himself forward. After more minutes than he would have liked, Napoleon reached a dead-end that he presumed (or more hoped) would provide him a final way out. Another watertight door, but the handle for this one was likely on the opposite side, since there was none on the side where he currently lay in the uncomfortably cramped space. However, there was some kind of electronic bolt on this side that appeared to work on a combination lock.

Well, it was a shot in the dark without his U.N.C.L.E. equipment to aid in the endeavor, but Napoleon considered the possibilities of the combination. He remembered a seemingly random set of numbers from the upper edge of the list he had retrieved. Perhaps a project number? And there had also been an activation date.

Putting these tidbits together, Napoleon utilized a combo of the presumed project number and the activation date, totally guessing where zeroes were to be omitted, and breathed a sigh of relief as the bolt audibly popped open. He would say a little prayer of thanks later to Lady Luck for letting him get those guesses on the zeroes correct, but right now he had to get out of here.

Cautiously Napoleon listened at the seam in the door for any sounds of activity beyond. Once satisfied that all seemed quiet outside the portal, he determinedly laid his palms flat against the metal and pushed with all the strength he could muster away from the bolt end. With no handle on his side, getting the door to slide out-of-the-way was not easily accomplished, but at last it was done. He then looked out from that open portal at what appeared to be a loading dock.

Thankful that it was not a fully enclosed space, but rather only covered by a wooden canopy structure, Napoleon slithered forward until he could bend at the waist with his upper body fully outside the portal. Then he reached his arms down and hand-walked further forward until his lower body was free of the shaft as well. He collapsed to the ground on his belly with a bruising thud, but all-in-all he was in good physical condition, if uncharacteristically dirty, as he made his way as stealthily as possible toward the open-air end of the loading dock.

Encountering no Thrush personnel in the process, he soon found himself jogging through open fields. Solo made his way in the direction where he had landed the small helicopter he had used to get to this off-the-beaten-path area, optimistically positive that light aircraft hadn't been discovered in the meanwhile by his enemies.

Act I: He can handle it...

Solo's luck held and the helicopter was right where he had left it. His muddy shirt and trousers were less than comfortable, sticking as they did skin-close to his body. But he had no change of clothes available, not even a flight suit coverall. It was odd how the mud hadn't dried at all during the approximately five-and-a-half mile jaunt across sun-heated fields to his secreted aircraft. Despite that sun and that heat, the mud was as sticky and moist as it had been within the crater itself. But again he didn't have time to give this additional oddity more than a passing thought.

Situating his mud-slicked body into the pilot seat of the small helicopter, Napoleon proceeded to maneuver the craft airborne.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent had no particular fear about the helicopter being spotted by Thrush. The reason he had used such a craft for this mission was because there was a small airfield nearby that specialized in copter pilot training. Thus nondescript craft like that he was currently flying zipped around this area with enough regularity to make them a non-suspicion-arousing sight.

When he was what he considered a safe distance from the Thrush facility to risk communication with U.N.C.L.E. HQ, Napoleon made radio contact with base. "Silent Rover looking for a path home."

"Leash-and-Collar to Silent Rover: Acknowledged. Make your approach via the following coordinates." After providing the needed technical information, the flight comptroller asked more casually, "Unearth any juicy tidbits?"

"Yes to that," responded Solo with a grin unseen but surmised by his partner Illya Kuryakin. "I have a true feast to set upon the revolving table of a certain old gentleman."

"You retrieved the list?"

"In its entirety, Illya. And whatever is about to go down in that facility must be big. There are over a hundred operative aliases, indicating personnel of the non-grunt variety in Thrush, on that list."

Illya let out a low whistle. "Now to figure out what about that particular nest is resulting in so many birds-of-a-feather flocking together."

"First things first though," demurred Solo. "Soon as I drop this chopper on the roof, I'm heading down into the locker-room for a shower."

"Oh come now, Napoleon. The weather's not quite that unbearably humid."

"It just so happens, Mr. Kuryakin, that the only way I could extricate myself from that puzzling nest with its usual brand of Thrush jailer-birds was through an underground tunnel filled neck-high with mud."

"Did you say mud?" Illya tried none-too-successfully to suppress the tone of sheer amusement in his voice.

"Yes, M-U-D, mud," emphasized Napoleon. "Thus currently I am a mucky mess from collar to bare toes."

"I'll meet you on the helipad on the roof ...with a camera!" Illya baited his friend.

"Ha ha. Your uproarious sense of humor overwhelms me, tovarisch. But do meet me so I can hand off the list to you for subsequent hand-off to Mr. Waverly while I go and grab a much needed wash-up and change of clothes."

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of missing out on this unique photo opportunity. Kuryakin out."

"I'll give him a unique opportunity to personally sniff the asphalt of the helipad if he so much as aims any device in my direction that even suggests a likelihood of photographic capabilities," promised Napoleon grumpily.

True to his word, Illya was waiting at the helipad as Napoleon brought the copter down on the roof of New York headquarters for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. By this time Napoleon was extremely uncomfortable; the skin on his neck and particularly that on his feet and ankles was burning and itching. And he felt a bit short of breath and sick to his stomach as well. He surmised this last was probably from the unusual intense citrusy odor of the mud. In any case, he couldn't wait to jump into a shower and get all this muck off his body. He shut down the motor of the chopper, pushed open the pilot-side door and stepped his bare feet onto the smooth if too-warm asphalt, ducking his head a bit to be sure and clear the whirring-down blades of the helicopter.

"You weren't kidding when you said you were a mucky mess," commented his partner with a lopsided smirk as Solo headed toward him.

"Yeah, well whatever must be done to ensure the success of the mission," muttered the disgruntled Napoleon as he removed the tied-sock container holding the list from around his neck. He scratched at his prickly nape in the process and also tried to deepen breaths that he now found coming in rather short huffs. "*What the hell?*" he mentally questioned the surprising phenomenon. "*I'm not physically exerting myself here.*"

The American's seeming breathlessness was not going unnoted by his Russian companion. "Napoleon," Illya questioned as the other man started untying the pouch he had made of his socks, "you left that compound... what? ...a couple of hours ago?"

"More or less."

"And you had to hike some distance to get back to where you left the copter, right?"

"Right," agreed Solo as he scratched again as his itchy neck and took a deep breath before resuming undoing the knot in his socks to retrieve the rolled-up list.

"Then how come the mud covering you is still wet mud and not just dried dirt?"

"How the hell should I know?" Napoleon responded with unusual irritability. "You're the one who always has the scientific explanations for these kinds of things."

Illya leaned forward and sniffed at the muddy substance covering his friend from throat to toe, cautiously ensuring to himself make no physical contact with any of that substance. Then without explanation he took out his communicator and assembled it into transmitting mode.

"Channel E: Kuryakin here. Have a wheelchair brought up to the helipad on the roof to transport Mr. Solo to Medical at once."

"Will do, Illya. Is Napoleon hurt?" came the concerned female voice over the pen.

"Not hurt exactly, Wanda," answered Illya, "but quite possibly in medical distress. Advise the attending orderlies to wear Hazmat suits and have emergency resuscitation equipment on hand. Kuryakin out."

"What?" Solo demanded with an exaggerated blink and an unexplainable wheeze. His bad temper seemed to be making him even more breathless and he didn't like that one bit. To top it all off he was now rather dizzy and the nausea was increasing in intensity.

"Whatever is covering you doesn't smell like normal mud, Napoleon," explained his friend simply.

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Ilyya. So Thrush decided to compost a couple dozen barrels of citrus rinds into the mud under its complex. That’s no call for summoning the Medical storm-troopers.”

Solo hastily gasped for a lungful of air, though he had no idea why. Determinedly he continued undoing the knot in his socks, though his hands were not all that steady to be honest. Thus the knot was proving unexpectedly difficult for his fingers to manipulate.

“All I need is a hot shower and some clean clo—” His voice broke off abruptly as it seemed suddenly impossible for him to get enough breath to continue speaking.

Fortunately at that moment two orderlies in hazardous material gear made their way onto the roof.

“Get him in that chair and on oxygen!” shouted Kuryakin in a totally no-nonsense voice. “Now!”

The two orderlies immediately manhandled the now verbally unprotesting and physically unsteady Solo down into the wheelchair. One strapped an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Napoleon still held the sock pouch carrying the retrieved list within tensed fingers, though his hands now lay useless in his lap, shaking uncontrollably. Mr. Waverly would just have to wait for that information until the lab could remove the paper from its mud-covered pocket under controlled-environment conditions.

Ilyya followed the two orderlies, one pushing the wheelchair carrying his friend, from the helipad to the elevator that took them from the roof into the operational premises of U.N.C.L.E., including the organization’s specialized medical facility. However, he knew he would personally have to make a detour at the Continental Chief’s office and explain the situation before he could himself head to Medical and badger the doctors about whatever might be wrong with Napoleon.

Lillie Coté gazed approvingly at her reflection in the full-length mirror as she fastidiously corrected the angle of one of her waist-length raven curls where it fell over her right shoulder. From the porcelain smoothness of her perfect golden-olive skin to the subtle cosmetically shadowed intensity of her slate-gray eyes and the rose-blossom-red glossiness of her generous Cupid’s bow mouth, she was facially stunning and she knew it. And her body? Well, that was simply to die for and frankly many men had. Depending on her mood, she used the males who found themselves instinctively physically attracted to her as apparatus for advancement or paraphernalia for pleasure. And sometimes as both at once, for Lillie Coté was a woman consumed by two great appetites: power and sex.

Behind her the comptroller for this particular Thrush project fumed. How he did dislike this woman. He couldn’t deny she possessed an absolutely brilliant scientific mind that was incredibly valuable to Thrush. Nor ignore that a very important member of the Thrush ruling Council had an overly indulgent penchant for her. Still, the idea of firmly placing his hands around her slender column of throat and squeezing off all life-giving oxygen from that luscious body stayed fixed like a lighthouse beacon in his mind as he spoke. “The plans for the various entertainments during the stay of our important guests are now finalized. Though honestly, madam, I do consider them a bit too... bacchanalian.”

Lillie laughed somewhat mockingly. “Bread and circuses, my dear Omvet. One must never underestimate the universal appeal of bread and circuses.”

“That philosophy didn’t wind up saving the Roman Empire,” frustratedly commented Jason Omvet.

“The emperors of ancient Rome didn’t have the Ultimate Computer,” she parried. “Nor me,” she then added with a self-appreciative smile at her parallel self on ready display in the silvered glass in front of her.

Lillie brushed a minute speck from the shoulder of her clingy, pure-white linen ensemble as she queried, “What about that U.N.C.L.E. agent Fabhcun and his merry band of falconers caged and then carelessly let fly the coop?”

“No further sign of him has been found within the local environs,” admitted Jason uncomfortably.

“And that is a very bad thing, my dear Omvet,” plainly judged Lillie. “And bad things cannot go unpunished.”

“No madam.”

“I’m so glad you see the reality of that.” Picking up a brooch of black and white diamonds that mimicked the attacking thrush image used on standard patches of the supra-nation’s minion uniform, Lillie took ample time to pin the expensive bit of jewelry on the bodice of her dress before giving Omvet his further orders. “Choose two of the men who were part of the guard contingent on duty during the U.N.C.L.E. agent’s escape. They will play in the MUD for my enjoyment this evening before execution in the morning.”

“Yes madam.”

Something in Omvet’s tone definitely displeased the lady. She turned to the comptroller and raised one elegant eyebrow as she questioned, “You take issue with my order?”

Jason fidgeted but finally blurted out, “Madam, the Microorganism Ubiquity Depredator – the MUD – is not for play. It has cost Thrush millions of dollars and many months of research and experimentation to develop, and—”

“Everything should have multiple uses, Omvet,” Lillie cautioned him in a silky tone that yet carried a distinctly ominous threat. “I would think Central very approving of such a show of... efficiency. And in any case the MUD is **mine**, and thus **I** will decide just how it is to be used.”

“Yes madam,” Jason bit back any further protests. He was no fool. He knew when he was hopelessly pushing against a force he could not even budge, let alone topple.

“Efficiency in all things, my dear Omvet,” Lillie purred as she turned once more to the mirror, removed the brooch and repositioned it a mere smidge higher on the left side of her breast, which placement her expression revealed she found much more to her personal satisfaction. “Therefore, after suitable playtime in the MUD, see the two... chosen ones are dispatched professionally. A single point-blank shot to the back of the head should get all done with straightforward competence. I see no need for any of our own to suffer needlessly.”

Jason simply nodded his acquiescence to her instructions as he turned and headed toward the door of the room.

“Oh and Jason,” she stopped his immediate exit as she purposely used his first name to highlight her final directive.

“Yes madam?” Omvet waited with barely concealed irritation upon her words.

“Make sure the two chosen are attractive to the senses of a lady of my discerning tastes.”

Jason swallowed the bile of his personal loathing as he answered obediently, “Yes madam.” He then took his leave as quickly as he thought prudent.

Some twenty-four hours after Solo’s medical emergency on the helipad, Illya Kuryakin was summoned to a meeting in Waverly’s office. When he made his entrance, several scientists from U.N.C.L.E.’s Section VIII, some decoding specialists from Section IV, and a couple of physicians from the Medical sub-division of Section VI, were already seated around the Continental Chief’s round conference table.

Mr. Waverly acknowledged the presence of the Section II operative with a nod of his head and a comment of, “Mr. Solo is doing much better, so I’ve been told.”

Illya settled himself into an available chair as he spoke. “Yes sir. He’s breathing well and has been taken completely off supplemental oxygen. His blood pressure has risen back into the normal range, and he’s not suffering from any more spells of dizziness or mental confusion or having further problems with muscular coordination. The skin rash is still causing him a good bit of discomfort, especially on his feet and ankles, but that is actively responding to current medical treatment and should be all cleared up in a few days.”

One of the MDs at the table stated, “Mr. Solo experienced a particularly severe, though somewhat delayed, allergic reaction. We have now isolated the specific substance that caused said reaction.”

It was apparent the physician was somewhat peeved that Kuryakin considered it appropriate to himself give a full medical summation of the CEA’s physical condition. Waverly watched with critical eyes and listened with attentive ears as the atmosphere in the room seemed to take on a chilled edge.

Yet the Russian Section II agent seemed completely oblivious to this cooling of ambiance as he pressed, “Something in the mud he was covered with I take it?”

The doctor nodded. “Chlorine to be exact.”

“Napoleon doesn’t have an allergy to chlorine,” Illya said certainly. He knew well the other man’s health flashpoints, as any good enforcement agent did of his field partner. “A mild sensitivity: yes. But a full-blown allergy of a type to cause a bout of anaphylactic shock: no.”

“He does now have a full-blown allergy of that type to chlorine,” the physician made his point as succinctly as possible. He certainly did not appreciate having his medical diagnosis questioned by a man who routinely carried a gun rather than a stethoscope.

“Triggered by?” inquired Illya with a certain amount of stubbornness as he had no intention of taking what the doctor said at face value.

“Triggered by the unique properties of that mud.” One of the Section VIII scientists verbally stepped in to defuse what seemed on the verge of becoming an all-out confrontation between the other two men. This scientist, Dr. Shillet by name, both liked and respected Illya Kuryakin, even if he sometimes saw the Russian’s penchant to personally verify every morsel of technical research and information provided by the personnel of other sections as, perhaps unintentionally, somewhat arrogant.

“Summarize the wherefores of this phenomenon for us, if you would, Dr. Shillet.” Mr. Waverly skillfully took back control of the meeting by prompting for these specifics from the Section VIII staff member before Illya could jump in to do so himself.

“This mud is a biochemically engineered compound, the purpose of which is more or less to act as a powerful disinfectant. In our tests in the lab we found it destroyed bacteria much more proficiently than any similarly intended substance currently known. The specifics of our tests also show that the focus of the compound is all forms of cyanobacteria.”

“Blue-green algae?” Illya sought confirmation.

Dr. Shillet nodded. “That is the common name, yes, Mr. Kuryakin. Though cyanobacteria are not eukaryotic algae—”

“Merely a series of aquatic organisms capable of photosynthesis,” interjected Illya rapidly. His mind was already running through the destructive potential of the mud and how Thrush might intend on utilizing it. Thus he hadn’t stopped to consider how rude his interpolation might come across. “Yes, I understand that, doctor.”

“And now so do we all.” Waverly subtly chastised the enforcement agent for his interruption of the research scientist’s report.

Illya grasped the sharply disapproving nature of his Chief’s subtle reprimand and clasped his hands meekly on the table like a disciplined schoolboy, ready to listen in silence and not further disrupt.

“Indeed, Mr. Waverly, indeed,” Shillet acknowledged the older man’s statement. “Cyanobacteria provide the first-line basis of the nitrogen cycle. Thus as a species it is essential to the survival of plant-life in general and supports the bottom-most link of the food chain. Not to get too technical about all this, but the simple fact is: destroying cyanobacteria in massive quantities could essentially alter life on earth as we know it.”

“And this mud can destroy these cyanobacteria in such massive quantities?”

“The straightforward answer to that, sir, is yes. We don’t yet understand all the properties of this compound, but that it is deadly efficient at what it does is undeniably true.”

Mr. Waverly took his favorite pipe in hand as he asked the next question, the one Illya was himself anxious to ask. “And this is related to what happened to Mr. Solo in what way?”

“Allow me, Dr. Shillet?” ventured the second of the physicians in the room. Shillet nodded his acquiescence and the other man put forth the medical side of the issue. “Though cyanobacteria are the main target of the compound, it nonetheless can adversely affect other forms of bacteria to some extent. In the case of Mr. Solo, the mud ‘disinfected’ his skin to such an extreme degree that the natural PH balance of both the epidermis and underlying dermis was thrown off. The reality that his skin no longer had sufficient numbers of beneficial bacteria to keep in check reaction to the irritant-in-question led to the exacerbation of his mild sensitivity to chlorine, a substance heavily present in the mud, into an intense hypersensitivity.”

“Unfortunate,” pronounced Waverly bluntly. “Is this intense hypersensitivity to chlorine on Mr. Solo’s part permanent?”

“For the present we must consider it so, yes sir,” the physician made known. “Though a gradual desensitization process has been known to diminish or even eliminate this particular allergy, such a

process must be undertaken slowly – often over many years – and offers no guarantee of ultimate success. The PH of skin is very individualized and, though certain dietary supplements and external lotions can aid in bringing the extremity of the current PH imbalance of Mr. Solo's epidermis and dermis to a neutral condition, it just isn't possible to artificially restore that balance to its previous state."

"Most unfortunate," Waverly upped the level of his disquiet.

"Definitely so," agreed the physician. "On a positive note, however, many people successfully deal with severe hypersensitivities on a daily basis. And chlorine, though ever-present in our environment – especially in our industrialized society, is usually existent in that environment only in very low levels. Definitely nowhere near the high concentration that was found in the mud. Mr. Solo should, therefore, be able to manage this allergy quite effectively, and thus it should have but a negligible impact on his abilities as a field operative."

"That at least is good news," agreed the Continental Chief.

"Currently Mr. Solo is being prescribed a regular regimen of antihistamines that should keep the allergic reaction under control in most situations," the first physician advised the Number 1 in Section I.

"And you'll see to it that he sticks to that regimen, Mr. Kuryakin, particularly when in the field," Mr. Waverly in turn advised Solo's field partner. "None of this misplaced Section II machismo mentality about abstaining from prescribed medications."

Illya's face reddened as much in irritation as embarrassment at the Old Man's remark. The rest of the group, all members of sections other than Operations and Enforcement, were virtually clueless about what faced an active agent in the field. Mr. Waverly was not so, however. Thus that the Continental Chief would put him in a situation where the others gathered here were mentally snickering at Waverly's pointed admonishment toward him both annoyed and astonished Illya. Nonetheless he responded dutifully with a submissive "Yes sir."

"We'll see that Mr. Solo's home is equipped with a proper water chlorine filtration system as well," noted Dr. Shillet.

"Best have a similar filtration system installed in my apartment too," Illya 'suggested' perhaps too emphatically.

Shillet only nodded however, seeing the logic in that. He certainly was no stranger to the way many enforcement agent partners tended to gravitate toward close social companionship. And Solo and Kuryakin were universally known throughout the ranks of U.N.C.L.E. to fall well into the category of drinking buddies and even mutual caregivers when the situation required it.

"Section VIII will provide Mr. Solo with a portable kit," continued Shillet, "that includes sodium thiosulphate crystals in a proper proportion to safely de-chlorinate water he uses for washing or drinking when away from home."

"And Medical will include in that kit," furthered the second Section VI physician, "several premeasured vials of epinephrine and syringes to use for intramuscular injection of that drug just in case the worst happens and he suffers another episode of anaphylactic shock."

"You gentlemen seem to have the special needs of Mr. Solo's physical condition well in hand," Mr. Waverly complimented the competence of the medical and scientific personnel on his staff.

“We’ve tried to provide for every contingency, sir,” Shillet modestly assured his Chief.

“Indeed. Well done, gentlemen.”

“May I ask a question of the scientific personnel, sir?” Illya queried politely.

“Go ahead, Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly magnanimously allowed with a wave of his unlit pipe in the Russian’s direction.

“Dr. Shillet,” Illya addressed the scientist directly, “in lab tests, the mud was not found to be patently harmful to anything other than certain forms of bacteria. Yet, if the concentration of chlorine is so out-of-the-ordinary in this mud, why isn’t it toxic to organic life as a whole?”

“That’s an interesting point, Mr. Kuryakin. It has to do with how the chlorine has been purposely bound with the atomic particles of other elements in the mud. We don’t quite understand it all yet, but let me assure you this is quite a scientific breakthrough. Whatever biochemist developed this for Thrush is nothing short of a genius in the field of molecular interaction.”

Illya kept his opinion on that to himself, but mentally all he could think was that Thrush had enticed yet another mad mastermind into its ranks. There was no doubt that the prospect of unlimited funding and state-of-the-art equipment for research lured those types to the supra-nation with alarming regularity. *“And Napoleon and I are always on the frontlines against the catastrophic possibilities of this kind of genius,”* he mused unhappily. Some days being a U.N.C.L.E. Section II agent seemed strangely akin to making a career of trying to control the spread of sheer insanity in the human population.

“Wasted genius,” determined Mr. Waverly with a shake of head. The Chief ended this particular avenue of conversation as he purposely turned his attention (and thus that of all gathered) to the two decryption specialists from Section IV seated at the table. “Mr. Rochias, Miss Consantitus: what have you to tell us about the list that Mr. Solo retrieved from the Thrush site?”

“It is more than a simple list, Mr. Waverly,” the woman decoder informed her top-level superior. “The way the operative designations are specifically arranged is a type of cipher in and of itself.”

His interest piqued, Illya leaned forward as he asked, “You have translated the imbedded cryptogram?”

“The majority of it, though a few portions are still elusive.”

“I would like to take a look at it,” Illya readily made his request.

The Section IV operatives disguised their displeasure at the implication that an agent who did not particularly dedicate himself to the field of cryptography as they did might be able to decipher the code more quickly than they could.

“All in good time, Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly himself responded to Illya’s request.

Again the Old Man’s words left Illya feeling reproved. He didn’t understand what was going on. Why was Mr. Waverly treating him like this during a multi-sectional meeting?

“Perhaps, Mr. Rochias,” the Continental Chief again directed the discussion to suit his own designs, “you and Miss Consantitus will summarize what you have found thus far?”

“Yes sir,” Rochias jumped into the conversational mix. “The substance that Mr. Solo... umh... accidentally brought to our attention has an official title of Microorganism Ubiquity Depredator.”

“M-U-D, MUD for short?” surmised Illya. Waverly gave him a silent glare and he meekly waited for the Section IV personnel to continue.

“Yes, MUD is the acronym apparently,” Consantitus conceded the point. “Also apparently the ‘activation’ of all the seemingly high-level Thrush personnel at the particular facility where the MUD is being produced and stored is in readiness for a demonstration of some sort to commence in exactly a week’s time.”

“Some of the aliases on the list,” interjected Rochias, “we are presupposing are bogus, entered just to complete the cryptogram about dates, credential verification, and other details. Yet I will venture that those bogus designations aren’t known as such per se by any flesh-and-blood Thrush. The development of the cipher, from what we can determine, was independently initiated by the Ultimate Computer. Thus it is likely that, for security purposes, the invented operative labels were subsequently stored as genuine personnel data in that computer with regard to access by an interactive human. The probability is high that only the machine itself can rightly distinguish between the real and the fake.”

“Therefore Thrush Central itself may not know that some of those supposed attendees of the gathering at the facility are ‘ghosts’, so to speak?” Waverly wanted confirmation.

“Exactly so, sir.” Consantitus agreed with her colleague’s conclusion.

“How can we be sure of this?” Illya demanded to be told.

“We can’t be sure of anything, Mr. Kuryakin,” Rochias conceded somewhat testily. “But Section IV has been working on deciphering the nuances of this message for the past twenty-four hours. Because of the patterning of various designations included, what I have summarized is our considered opinion. We do have some expertise and experience in this area, you know. It’s not like we deduced this because it sounds technologically trendy.”

“I’m sure Section IV has considered and re-considered the possibilities of this peculiarity.” Waverly once more verbally attempted to end any escalation of tension.

“Excuse me, sir,” huffed out a much exasperated Illya, “but am I correct in surmising that we intend to make use of this possibility of certain designations on the list not being that of ‘real’ Thrush personnel in order to infiltrate the confab at the facility?”

“That would seem a convenient route for access,” determined Consantitus.

“Presuming that somehow the Ultimate Computer doesn’t ‘rat out’ our infiltrator,” interposed Illya, “and that we correctly surmise which attendee is a useable ghost.”

It would be an enforcement agent whose life would be put on the line with this very dicey plan; thus Illya felt he had every right to place his concerns squarely on the table. With Napoleon still in Medical and thus not participatory in this meeting, Section II issues fell into his purview as Number 2 in Operations and Enforcement.

But inexplicably Mr. Waverly was having none of it.

“Mr. Kuryakin, it is **my** decision whether we risk this form of access into the Thrush summit or not,” the Continental Chief spoke authoritatively. “I appreciate that no plan will be without flaws, and you may be absolutely confident that I am not in the least unmindful of those flaws. Yet sometimes it must be understood that the only currently workable plan is indeed a flawed one.”

Stunned into silence, Illya could only tighten his jaw and wonder what was going on in the Old Man’s head. “*All enforcement agents are expendable*,” he glumly reminded himself as the Continental Chief pronounced the consultation at an end.

“I am not familiar with every primed alias on this list,” stated Lillie Coté directly to-the-point to her project’s comptroller, Jason Omvet, as she perused the paper she held.

“Of course not, madam. For every Thrush to have knowledge of the operational identification of every other Thrush of rank would never be prudent.”

Lillie squinted at Omvet. “Indeed,” was all she said in comment. That one-word comment, however, was enough to remind Omvet that this woman had some intimate connections that gave her more knowledge than it was likely prudent for a Thrush of heretofore middling rank to possess.

Jason mentally controlled the physical squirming of his body. He would not be cowed by this woman, no matter what. “And of course some of these... nicknames are not assigned to true physical persons at all,” he placated calculatingly.

Lillie cocked her head at him, making it obvious she expected some explanation of his statement.

“The Computer had to... create certain credentials for false personae in order to complete the encrypted message this list contains.”

“And do we know which are these ‘created personae’?”

Jason shook his head emphatically. “Only the Ultimate Computer itself knows.”

Lillie was amused by that assertion. “My dear Omvet, computers don’t ‘know’ anything. They store and coordinate data, and thus can arrange and rearrange that data into a multitude of scenarios. But not even the Ultimate Computer has the ability to think.”

“Madam,” cautioned the somewhat miffed Omvet, “the Ultimate Computer is one of a kind. You yourself have said so.” Jason had great faith in the uninfluenced circuited genius of said Ultimate Computer.

Lillie now could not suppress her laughter. “Oh Jason,” she cautioned in turn, “do not be drawn into the fantasy of romanticizing the capabilities of the Ultimate Computer. My MUD is also one of a kind, but I do not mistake it as being anything beyond the tool it is. Real power, my dear Omvet, lies always in the hands and minds of the humans manipulating the tools. Never forget that.”

“In this case, madam, no human hand or mind is manipulating the Ultimate Computer.”

“And that is a scenario ripe for disarray. Mark my words, Omvet.”

“Central itself has set up the parameters for this scenario.” Jason dutifully reminded her.

“Because like you the esteemed members of Central see the Ultimate Computer as more than a means to an end. Yet I assure you it isn’t any form of Holy Grail, and thus there is no need to worship at the base of its imaginary pedestal.”

“I will adhere to the procedures set in place by Central.”

“Just like a tamey warbling little Thrush,” Lillie derided her comptroller as she handed the attendee list with its encoded message back to him. “Yet I bid you remember that machines have no artistic appreciation for the musical trilling of birds, no matter how insistent the song.”

Jason meekly accepted the list from her hand with a contradictory confrontational stare; yet he wisely kept any challenging words unvoiced.

Two days later...

Napoleon sat glumly at the small dining table in his apartment drinking a cup of what he found to be overly bland coffee. “You usually brew a better cup of joe than this, Illya.”

His partner, also seated before the small table, smirked. “I boiled the water and cooled it, then let the percolator boil it again to make the coffee. Had to be sure I eliminated most if not all of the chlorine content,” he playfully teased the other man.

Napoleon sighed discontentedly. “I feel like a goddamn invalid,” he made the expected complaint.

“Napoleon, I was simply being extra cautious, if a bit purposely facetious. You are, after all, only just out of Medical after that rather nasty bout of shock caused by your chlorine allergy. Generally just the fact that the water is boiled at the time of brewing would be sufficient.”

“If this ‘hypersensitivity’ winds up taking me out of the field,” began Solo, “I swear I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” challenged Illya. “This is not something you can shoot or sweet talk into submission. But you **can** exercise control over it, as the medical professionals have already explained to you. And, as long as you are willing to do that, it certainly will **not** take you out of the field.”

“Yes, as long as I carry with me kits with certain crystals and vials of a particular drug along with a couple of syringes.”

“Napoleon, your self-pity is becoming irritating.”

“Well, excuse me, tovarisch,” stated Solo with a definite sarcastic edge to his tone, “for not being pleased as punch at suddenly having developed a physical handicap.”

“Physical handicap?” Illya snickered. “Don’t you think that description rather melodramatic, my friend?”

“We’ve finished the installation of the filtration units in both bathrooms, Mr. Solo,” noted an U.N.C.L.E.-authorized maintenance man as he made his way into the kitchen from the hall bath. “Just the one in here to go and we’ll be done and out from under your feet.”

Napoleon nodded. “Thank you, Fred. You and your assistant really work fast.”

“I’ll check the chlorine concentrations in the resulting tap water once you’ve finished with the last installation,” submitted Illya.

Fred shrugged. "Sure, Mr. Kuryakin, if that will make you feel better about the filtration system being up to snuff. But you know Mike and I do resultant testing as part of final evaluation after setup. Thus I can state without hesitation that Mr. Solo's tap water where the units are installed is now completely chlorine free."

"Illya's just overly solicitous of my health, like any trusted field partner." Napoleon gentled the unintended sting of Kuryakin's stated intention of himself checking the results of the filtration system. "No reflection on your work, Fred, as I'm sure you and Mike did your usual efficient job."

"Hey, making sure you Section II guys are set up as needed is a pleasure rather than a chore. What you enforcement agents do on a regular basis..." Fred shook his head in awe. "Really something to write home about, you know? Yet you don't get to so much as hint at any of it even to family and friends, do you? So me, who knows a tiny bit about what others outside U.N.C.L.E. never will, I show my appreciation the only way I know how: by using my own meager skills to the very best of my ability when required to ensure your safety and comfort."

That brought an honest smile to Napoleon's lips. "And we Section II guys probably don't say it often enough, but that is truly appreciated on our part, Fred. Having a home chock-full of this or that specialized equipment could make household living like maneuvering through a constant squall, but you always make sure it's smooth sailing."

Fred grinned a bit sheepishly as he reddened in embarrassment at the sincere compliment.

"We'll take our coffee into the living room, Fred," Illya said to ease the awkwardness of the moment for the maintenance man, "so you and your assistant can finish up in here undisturbed."

As he headed toward the couch in the other room, Illya was inwardly marveling at Napoleon's natural talent for making others feel... important, good at their jobs and worthy of gracious acknowledgment in that regard. It was a social gift he had to admit he did envy his partner.

"Hey Fred, while you're puttering around under the kitchen sink," quipped Napoleon as he stood to follow Illya's lead into the living room, "how about adding a scotch dispenser to the mix?"

"Glenlivet or Talisker?" queried Fred with a smile.

"Hell, there are two taps, so why not both?" responded Napoleon with a little wink before he made his ultimate retreat to the couch, leaving the maintenance worker gleefully chuckling to himself.

"Look at it this way, Napoleon:" Illya gamely took back up the former subject of their conversation, "You now have a legitimate reason to demur from jumping into swimming pools."

"I never demur from jumping into swimming pools," protested Napoleon. "Or lakes or rivers or streams or bays or even oceans." Illya's response was only a small scoffing noise. "Okay, so I might take an extra moment to... prepare," admitted Solo uncomfortably.

"Yet you always manage, don't you?" forwarded Illya. "And you'll manage now, my friend."

"This is different, Illya. I can't overcome this by just taking a deep breath and mentally sublimating my gut instinct. Yet I absolutely will not let this physical weakness become something that critically costs others, particularly you, in the kind of dangerous situations in which we so often find ourselves."

“Napoleon, I do realize – because that to which you are allergic is not something easily avoided like cat hair or rose blossoms – you have natural doubts about how you will cope in the field. I, however, have no such doubts. I tell you now that I will expect no less of you as a partner than I have in the past, and that I am unequivocally certain I will get no less. I know you: You are determined and resourceful. Those traits will ensure your success in handling this added twist in the make-up of your innate survival sense.”

Napoleon exhaled a long breath. “Thanks, Illya.”

“Not a problem,” Illya assured him readily. “Maybe you could put in a good word for me to Mr. Waverly regarding how capable I am at pep talks.”

Napoleon gave him a lopsided grin. “What’s that remark about?”

Illya sighed. “I don’t want to make an issue of it as it is now over and done. And quite likely it was just... an emotional hypersensitivity on my part to the situation as it unfolded.”

“But?” prompted Napoleon with a raised eyebrow.

Illya glanced at the American. Realizing he had inadvertently let the cat out of the bag, he uneasily accepted he didn’t have much of a choice but to fully identify the ‘animal’ to his partner.

“While you were recovering in Medical,” began Illya with noticeable reluctance, “Waverly held a multi-sectional meeting about what had been discovered regarding the nature of the substance in which you were coated when you returned to HQ, as well as the list you had retrieved from the Thrush facility in New Jersey.”

“And?” pressed Solo, knowing very well that he needed to be persistent in order to get out of the less-than-gregarious Russian exactly what was bothering him.

Illya sighed again. He really shouldn’t have made any mention of his personal dissatisfaction with what had gone on in the Continental Chief’s office a couple of days ago. However, now that he had ventured into the topic, he knew his partner would give him no peace until he spilled forth specifics. “Mr. Waverly was, shall we say, rather less than pleased with my various questions and comments to the other section personnel during the meeting.”

“Were those questions and comments relevant to the discussion?”

“No doubt of that. Still, the Old Man seemed dead-set on letting me know my particular participation in the dialogue at certain points was not appreciated.”

“By him specifically?” Napoleon asked for clarification.

“Well, more I suppose he was focusing attention on the possibility others in the room might not be appreciative of my... forwardness.”

“Ah.”

To Illya, Solo’s single syllable verbal feedback seemed to indicate that his partner understood more of the situation than he did himself. “I did not say nor do anything wrong, Napoleon,” he therefore declared somewhat defensively.

"I'm sure you didn't, Illya." Napoleon appeased his friend's automatic reaction of self-justification. "But can I make an observation and not have you take it as any form of criticism?"

Illya crossed his arms over his chest, a gesture of emotional self-protection Napoleon was sure the man himself didn't even recognize on any conscious level.

"Go ahead," the Russian bid the American.

"There are often ways and means of both saying and doing things that may perhaps seem a bit roundabout, but that can achieve better results than more straight-to-the-fore measures. Understand too that Mr. Waverly never does anything idly; so maybe you need to unbiasedly consider why he might have done as he did."

"But I really have no idea why!" disputed Illya with some heat.

"You're a smart Russian:" stated Napoleon a bit cryptically, "You'll figure it out."

The exchange was cut short at that moment by the two-tone trill of an U.N.C.L.E. communicator. Both agents removed their devices from their suit coats to find it was Solo's pen doing the persistent signaling.

"Solo here," Napoleon spoke into the instrument after having quickly assembled it into transmit mode.

"Mr. Solo," Waverly's familiar voice sounded through the speaker, "I trust you are fully recovered from your recent medical difficulty?"

"Yes sir," Napoleon replied.

"Good to hear," Waverly fulfilled and then dismissed the social pleasantries. "Is Mr. Kuryakin with you?"

"Yes sir," Illya spoke toward the microphone.

"Excellent. Then I can inform you both at once that I want you in my office as soon as possible. No more than half an hour, gentlemen. Don't keep me waiting. Waverly out." And the Old Man was off the line.

"Duty calls, I.K.," Napoleon cheerfully commented as he disassembled his communicator and stored it back in his inside jacket pocket.

"So much for you getting a day to recuperate at home," Illya, with a little half-smile, ragged his friend.

"I don't need any more recuperation time," Napoleon insisted. His vocal tone was so sharply adamant that it really gave Illya an unexpectedly unsettling moment of pause.

When Napoleon and Illya entered Waverly's office some twenty minutes later, the cryptologist Agent Consantitus from Section IV was already seated at the Old Man's revolving table.

"Mneme," Napoleon warmly greeted the Greek woman with an equally warm smile.

“Napoleon,” she returned in kind both his warm greeting and smile. “Mr. Kuryakin,” she then more formally acknowledged the presence of the other Section II operative.

“Miss Consantitus,” responded Illya just as formally.

“Do be seated, gentlemen,” Mr. Waverly cut through the polite niceties. “We have had a rather fortunate turn in events that should aid us in pursuing this MUD affair.”

“Oh?” prompted Napoleon easily as he and his partner seated themselves in their usual chairs at their boss’ round-table-like desk.

“Most fortunate indeed, Mr. Solo,” further forwarded Waverly. “A certain Thrush has had his wings, shall we say, clipped with the result he is now being housed in a cage of our making.”

“Who would this be, sir?” Illya inquired curiously.

“One Dunnock Stiles by name.”

Napoleon glanced toward his partner for confirmation that his own unfamiliarity with the Thrush was shared. After Illya’s subtle head shake granted that assurance, he made mention directly to Waverly, “Not a Thrush I know, sir, at least not by name.”

“Oh, a minor bird in terms of the power structure to be sure. Most of Thrush itself, I would warrant, is unfamiliar with the man. Extremely wealthy and even more extremely reclusive, most consider Dunnock Stiles but a front representing in one pseudonym actual multi-ownership of a massive conglomerate that encompasses many types of businesses. Even we had trouble verifying that the identity belongs to an actual flesh-and-blood human being. Yet flesh-and-blood he is, and his inherited trust owns a chemical plant in the Boston area that has for some years contracted to supply various Thrush labs in the Mid-Atlantic and New England states. Thus...” Mr. Waverly pointedly looked in the cryptologist’s direction.

“He is on the list of invited attendees for the gathering at the MUD facility in New Jersey under code name Snyder Nelson,” gamely supplied Consantitus.

“And we can be sure of this how?” Illya wanted to make absolutely certain.

Mneme bristled slightly, just enough for Napoleon to notice. Thus the American agent stepped adeptly into the conversation. “Yes, Mneme, do explain to me – a man who admits to understanding the hard steel of a gun more readily than an inked stream of symbols – some of that voodoo in which you and the other code sorcerers in Section IV mysteriously indulge with such black-magic flair.”

This gentle wheedling contained an assertion that wasn’t quite true and everyone in the room knew it. Section II agents were expected to have a more-than-working knowledge of cryptology, and that more-than-working knowledge in both Napoleon and Illya extended far beyond the norm of most field operatives. But Solo’s ploy was to cajole the woman in a teasingly charming manner, and thus pet down the mental hackles raised in her by Illya’s perhaps less-than-tactfully worded question.

That methodology worked as the Section IV agent laughed lightly. “No voodoo or black-magic in this case, Napoleon. The Thrush in question came to us with the electronic credentials for entrance into the meeting conveniently imbedded under the skin of his left forearm. It was a rather simple matter for Section V to discover those credentials during routine prisoner screening, and a not much more complicated one for Section IV to subsequently decode them.”

“Organizational efficiency at its finest,” Napoleon declared with a little wink in Consantitus’ direction.

Again Illya found himself wondering how Napoleon could, in essence, ask for the same information for which he himself had previously asked, and yet his partner get an answer minus the territorial “huffs and puffs” that so often accompanied any such answer he himself received. He knew Solo had the “gift of gab” as it were, but the why of how consistently this sort of thing happened was honestly something of a mystery to him.

“And I’m assuming Section IV has come up with a method to duplicate these credentials under the skin of another, that other being an U.N.C.L.E. agent?” Illya queried undeterred.

“That would be simple indeed, Mr. Kuryakin,” conceded Mneme stiffly, “but the actual strategy for using this find is indeed much more complicated.”

Kuryakin raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yes. You see the credentials for Stiles could be replicated exactly, but that plan could easily backfire if but one of the other attendees at the Thrush conference had personally encountered the man before. No, the best bet is still to use one of the ‘ghost’ personae on that attendee list as the means of infiltration.”

Napoleon, during the last two days of his stay in Medical, had of course been reading the briefing reports on the nature of the cryptogram contained in the list he had retrieved. Thus he was completely up-to-speed regarding Consantitus’ reference to a ‘ghost’ persona. “You’ll manufacture correct credentials for one of the ghosts?” he therefore hazarded an educated guess.

Mneme nodded.

“And the Ultimate Computer will single out those manufactured credentials in less than the blinking of an eye,” insisted Illya rather categorically.

“Mr. Kuryakin,” Mr. Waverly sternly chided his second-best field agent, “could you at least wait until the whole plan has been vetted before voicing such unconditional objections? Thank you.”

“*Ouch!*” Napoleon mentally winced for his partner. The Old Man’s outright verbal castigation of Illya came as something of a shock. Usually Waverly would let Kuryakin straightforwardly intersperse his reservations concerning a particular strategy during point-by-point revelation of that strategy, even if those interspersed reservations did make others involved in the discussion squirm a bit. Something was up, but at the moment Solo was at a loss as to just what it might be.

Agent Consantitus continued in an admittedly somewhat smug tone. “In response to Mr. Kuryakin’s unconditionally stated objection: Yes, I agree, the Ultimate Computer would single out those manufactured credentials quite readily **if** that was the sum total of what was to be done. But let me assure you, Mr. Kuryakin, that such is **not** the sum total of what we propose.”

“Could you elaborate for us, Mneme?” Napoleon astutely jumped in to ask before Illya could do so and perhaps again insert a burr under the saddle of the cryptologist.

“Certainly, Napoleon. The Ultimate Computer has set up this cryptogram within certain pattern sets. Those pattern sets are the true key, for the machine’s logic needs them as verification of its own elaborate coding. Thus, in order to have the manufactured credentials of a ghost persona appear as valid, the pattern inherent in that part of the cryptogram must be accurately offset.”

“And to do that you take the real credentials of Dunnock Stiles, code-name Snyder Nelson, and duplicate them on the person of an U.N.C.L.E. agent with just enough of a twist for the computer to see an invalidation of the pattern and thus seek for the completion of that set somewhere else,” Napoleon speculated easily.

“I thought you didn’t have the mind of a scientist, Napoleon?” Mneme ribbed the CEA with a playful smirk.

“He has the mind of a chess-player,” giped Illya a bit sullenly. There was no doubt he was sulking from Waverly having ‘put him in his place’. “You do realize, to offset such a complex pattern, you will need to ensure you choose the proper ghost? One definitely in the same pattern set as Stiles?”

“Of course I and all the cryptologists in Section IV realize that,” granted Consantitus in readily recognizable exasperation.

“Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly now stated very distinctly, “are you somehow under the delusion that U.N.C.L.E. hires incompetents for any but Section II positions?”

“*Ouch!*” thought Napoleon once more.

“No sir,” Illya conceded but with some undeniable truculence.

“Then please give more credence to the probability that these crucial caveats have not gone undetected and thus unprepared-for by the pertinent operatives in other sections of this organization.”

“Sir, am I not to make mention of these ‘crucial caveats’ in an attempt to get positive feedback on what exactly has been done to prepare for them?” snapped a now totally frustrated Illya.

“Of course you are to make mention of them in such an attempt!” snapped back Waverly. “Yet you need to do so from the perspective of actually requesting such feedback. Not challenging those clarifications before they are even heard.”

Napoleon placed a steadying hand on Illya’s forearm, subtly reminding him to keep his temper under control. At that action, Illya took a deep breath, crossed his arms over his chest and regained his silence.

“Continue, Miss Consantitus,” Mr. Waverly, discipline restored to his own satisfaction, subsequently advised the cryptologist.

“We have been interpreting the pattern sets and believe there are two possibilities with regard to which ghost could be suitably employed in a bait-and-switch scenario with Stiles’ credentials check. We’re further analyzing those two possibilities to hopefully select the very best fit.”

“Hopefully,” muttered Illya under his breath. Waverly’s glare in Kuryakin’s direction was impossible to misinterpret.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Mneme, because God knows I truly am no scientist or computer programmer,” Napoleon spoke both because there was something on which he needed confirmation and to defuse the current situation with regard to his in-full-Russian-snit partner. “But in order for this to work at all, doesn’t the... purposeful mistake in Stiles’ credentials have to be discovered rather quickly? Definitely before the ghost’s credentials are even scanned into the computer, right?”

“Absolutely right, Napoleon,” verified Consantitus with a nod.

“Then what you need to impersonate Stiles is a skill.” He ventured and received another nod from Mneme in ready comeback. “I’m guessing that’s me?” queried Solo as he glanced toward Waverly.

Now it was Waverly who nodded. “That’s the general idea, Mr. Solo. In this case, because of your previous capture in that facility, you are known to the security personnel. You’ll use a bit of a disguise of course; we’ll just ensure it’s none too effective.”

“Meanwhile Illya, with a much more effective disguise, goes in as the ghost.” Napoleon finalized his understanding of the operation.

Illya’s mope seemed to fade upon the instant. “Sir, you can’t seriously be considering sending in Napoleon as an overt foil in this situation? Not with that MUD under the compound and his distinctively acquired hypersensitivity to chlorine?”

“I’m not intending to take another swim in the stuff, Illya,” placated Napoleon. “And you said yourself that the doctors are sure I can successfully control the allergy.”

“Under normal circumstances, yes, but around that MUD? We have no clue how near to the substance you’ll be if they imprison you again in those subterranean tunnels. There might be physical or at the very least fume leakage into all the underground rooms. Having to endure the likelihood of torture and drugging at the hands of Thrush once you are captured is risk enough without the added medical threat of you unexpectedly going into anaphylaxis.”

“Mr. Kuryakin,” Mr. Waverly said frankly, “every precaution will be taken to ensure Mr. Solo’s hypersensitivity remains unexacerbated under the circumstances. However, because of his previous capture within that facility – a facility that is employing in key positions Thrush personnel previously unknown to us – it is imperative that he be the one to act as the aforementioned skill.”

“Sir, I know we are all expendable in the line of duty,” persisted Kuryakin, “but this seems to be a purposeful step over that line by the organization.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“I can handle it, tovarisch,” Napoleon persisted in his turn. “I do know how to look after myself.”

“Sometimes I wonder!” disagreed Illya hotly as he rose from his chair. He turned and headed toward the pneumatic door without waiting to be dismissed.

Waverly halted this dramatic action that bordered on insubordination with a firm if unadorned query of “Mr. Kuryakin?”

Gritting his teeth, Illya took a deep breath and turned back to face his superior. “Yes sir?”

“You will work with Miss Consantitus on the final determination of the ghost identify you will assume for the mission. That will be all.”

“Yes sir,” acknowledged the all-but-boiling-over with indignation agent before he turned once more on his heel and rapidly completed his exit.

“Miss Consantitus, you are free to go as well.” Waverly subsequently dismissed the cryptologist.

“Yes sir,” she too acknowledged the Old Man’s orders as she rose from her chair. Matching Napoleon’s parting smile with one of her own, she then exited the office of the Number 1 in Section I as well.

Once it was only the two of them in that office, Solo stated pointblank to Waverly, “You’re being awfully hard on Illya, sir. He was only voicing the questions and considerations that any experienced enforcement agent would voice about this kind of mission, even if he did voice them a bit less... sensitively than either of us would like.”

“I am well aware of that, Mr. Solo.”

“Have you then some enlightenment you can offer me on the particular subject?”

“Not at this time, Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon let out a disappointed little huff of breath. “All right, sir. I’m assuming I’m dismissed as well?”

“For the moment.”

Napoleon rose from his own chair and turned toward the pneumatic door, his manner a bit puzzled and far less than content with the Old Man’s evasive reaction to his frank articulation of disquiet at the organizational head’s high-handed treatment of his partner.

“Mr. Solo?” Waverly again used his verbal authority to halt the imminent departure from his private domain of one of his operatives.

Napoleon turned back to face his superior. “Yes sir?”

“You needn’t be so concerned. He can handle it you know.”

Napoleon thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets as he dejectedly accepted this assertion by his superior with a desultory “Yes sir.” Then he too turned on his heel and left the premises of the Continental Chief’s inner sanctum.

There was but little time before the Thrush confab at the facility in New Jersey was to take place. With only four days to prepare, and one of that precious span of days nearly half-gone, there was no leeway for dawdling. Thus, less than an hour after the meeting with Waverly, Solo had been summoned to Medical to have the slightly altered electronic credentials of one Snyder Nelson embedded under the skin of his inner left forearm. The procedure wasn’t exactly painful, but neither was it particularly pleasant, and the skin in the area of the implant was left reddened and sore to the touch. It would heal in less than 24 hours, but for the moment, as Napoleon returned to his office to once again read through the contents of the mission folder, he wasn’t exactly at his most alert as his attention focused on the physical discomfort he was currently experiencing.

The pneumatic door to his office opened at the nearness of his badge as it always did. Even before it had automatically closed behind him, a hand wrapped around his throat and his body was slammed none-too-gently against the nearby wall.

“What the hell do you mean by agreeing to this?” demanded Illya in a much less-than-friendly tone.

“Dammit Illya, what the hell do **you** mean by physically accosting me like this?”

Illya's hand remained at Solo's throat, keeping him pinned to the wall as he spoke on. "This is an unnecessary risk you are taking."

"It certainly isn't unnecessary," debated Napoleon. "It's the best way into the Thrush conference on this MUD and you know it."

"It certainly isn't the only way," challenged Illya.

"We don't have the luxury of time to ponder workable alternatives and you know that too."

Since his hands were free, there was no doubt Solo could effectively get Kuryakin away from him with a well-placed punch to the gut, but he thought it far better not to do so. Far better to let Illya work through whatever stress was possessing him at the moment, even if that meant enduring a bit more physical discomfort.

"Further exposure to that MUD could very likely kill you!" the cause of that anxiety bubbled out into words from the Russian.

"Exposure to a Thrush bullet could very likely kill me too," Solo reminded his partner. "Every time we go out on a mission, death is a very real possibility from many sources. And in any case," he added in a lighter tone as he stretched his neck upward, "Thrush won't need to do the job themselves if you wrap your hand any tighter around my windpipe."

"Sorry," contritely apologized Kuryakin as he eased his fingers from around his partner's throat. He then went to the leather sofa in the room and plopped down on it dejectedly.

"What is it, Illya?" queried Napoleon with real concern as he idly rubbed along his Adam's apple. "It isn't like you to be so... contrary about the requirements of an assignment."

"I don't know," admitted Illya with a small sigh. "I just have a bad feeling about this."

"Hey, going with a gut instinct is my M.O.," cheerily teased Napoleon as he sat on the couch beside his friend. "You prefer the logical approach; remember?"

Illya smiled weakly. "Mr. Waverly seems less-than-thrilled at the moment with my logical approach."

"Don't let the Old Man's cunning spymaster routine get you down. You know as well as I do that he is building toward something with these summary rebukes he is giving you."

"Maybe he wants to send me packing back to the Soviet Union," suggested Illya only half in jest.

"And maybe you should stop being so damn broody," suggested Napoleon in turn, though perhaps with more than a little edginess in his tone.

"I don't brood."

Napoleon snickered in response to that statement. "You do realize that's like me saying I don't date?"

Illya turned very determined blue eyes on the face of his partner.

“You do realize, if that MUD kills you, I will ferret out every one of the Thrush in that facility, no matter how high or low in the organization, and personally kill each and every one? No mercy bullets; no capture; no deals.”

Napoleon’s hazel eyes widened in shock. “Whoa, Illya, calm down! I’m not going on a suicide mission! I have every intention of getting out of that facility alive. And I’ll have you on the inside to aid me in doing just that.”

“I can’t stop your allergy from killing you, Napoleon.”

“I’ll handle the allergy, Illya. Like I said in Waverly’s office: I’m not intending to take another swim in that MUD. You can take that as a promise as I’m perfectly aware I can’t do anything so cavalier under the current circumstances. I’m getting a double dose of antihistamine shots before we leave for the mission. And Section VIII is going to conceal thiosulphate crystals in fake moles and scars on my body, in case I have need of those to de-chlorinate water to drink while I’m imprisoned.”

“And epinephrine?”

“I can’t hide vials of epinephrine or syringes any place that Thrush won’t search when I’m taken prisoner, tovarisch. But that is only a worst case scenario need anyway.”

“I’ll take those with me.”

“Illya—” Napoleon began to object.

“I’ll say I’m allergic to bee stings,” asserted Illya with resolute plausibility. “I’m going in as a fictional persona; thus I can make up a convenient background. If Thrush tests the vials, they will just find they contain the epinephrine I tell them they do. So no reason for the birdies to suspect anything.”

“All right,” acquiesced the CEA, “if that will put you more at ease.”

“Don’t condescend to me, Napoleon,” Illya noted with sharpness in his voice. “I’m simply taking the logical approach you insist is my M.O.,” he added in a much more playful tone.

Sensing the slackening of his Number 2’s unusual underlying tension with regard to the mission, Solo smiled. “Hey, we’ll flush all the MUDdy Thrush slime right into the sewers, tovarisch.”

Illya rolled his eyes at Napoleon’s silly metaphor, all the while intent on a design that would allow him to keep right on hearing those misbegotten figures of speech from the lips of his partner once this particular mission was complete.

Act II: It’s ~~not~~ nice to fool the Ultimate Computer...

“Let’s run the pattern series through the computer again,” forwarded Illya uncompromisingly.

“Mr. Kuryakin,” responded a rather irritated and definitely exhausted Mneme Consantitus, “we have verified the resultant sequence a dozen times since we decided it was the proper setup over six hours ago. And that was only after it took us some twelve hours to arrive at the sequence in the first place. Frankly I think it is time we accepted what we have is the best fit.”

“Miss Consantitus, must I remind you that the fate of the world could well rest on this sequence truly being the ‘best fit’, as you call it? And as well that we are deliberately relinquishing an enforcement agent into enemy hands in order to utilize this access scenario into the Thrush summit at the MUD

facility? We owe it to that agent, as well as to humanity as a whole, to be as sure as scientifically possible on the probable success of this course of action.”

Illya would never admit to the cryptologist, or indeed to anyone at all, how worried he was about Napoleon's purposeful placement into Thrush captivity as part of the tactical approach for getting inside the MUD confab. Yet that worry was a continual knot in his stomach now as the hours crept closer to the inevitability. There was really no telling what Thrush might decide to “do” with Solo once they had him in custody, though it actually played into U.N.C.L.E.'s favor that Napoleon was who he was. It was highly unlikely that those at Central would consent to an immediate death sentence for an U.N.C.L.E. operative of Solo's status and reputation. Being North American CEA and likely successor to Waverly's position, as well as a longtime thorn in Thrush's side, made it much more likely the members of the supra-nation's Supreme Council would want Napoleon simply held at the MUD facility until they could transport him someplace where he would be most thoroughly questioned and his capture giddily lorded over by the top echelon of the Hierarchy.

U.N.C.L.E.'s (and Illya's) intention was to have Solo well out of enemy clutches before he was so transported of course. Assuming everything ran to plan. But then again when had the scope of any mission ever run entirely to plan? And Illya was only too viscerally aware of that obdurate conundrum.

“You need not stay any longer, Miss Consantitus,” Illya more than hinted in a rather clipped and definitely icy voice. “I can run the pattern progression a final time by myself.”

Mneme Consantitus was so infuriated by Illya Kuryakin's overbearing attitude, she wanted to scream. He acted like no one other than himself was concerned about the results of the affair or the safety of Napoleon Solo. She too worked for U.N.C.L.E. and wholeheartedly believed in the ideals of the organization. She too wanted to outmaneuver Thrush in this latest world-threatening and power-grabbing endeavor. And she too liked Solo and considered him a friend; thus would she never want to see the man hung out to dry in order to accomplish any mission goal.

“The primary responsibility for the pattern progression is mine, not yours, Mr. Kuryakin. Thus, if there is a need to run the series yet again, I will handle that need.”

“Indeed, Miss Consantitus,” spoke Mr. Waverly, having quite unusually entered the precincts of the computer lab and caught Mneme's last assertion in the process.

“Good evening, Mr. Waverly,” the cryptologist acknowledged the unexpected presence of the Continental Chief within the working domain of Section IV.

“Sir,” Illya equally acknowledged his superior's presence, if in a bit terser vocal tone.

“I take it, Miss Consantitus, that you are fully satisfied that the pattern sequence in question is up to snuff?”

“Yes sir,” Mneme didn't hesitate to forward. “It's been checked and sextuple-checked. Within the framework of what we can determine of the Ultimate Computer's setup of the positive-versus-negative cipher models, this sequence offers the best chance of success in the forced reconfiguration of the credentials for a distinct ghost persona.”

Waverly nodded; then turned his gaze toward his Section II operative. “And I take it that you are not yet fully satisfied as to this specific pattern being the one necessary to force such a reconfiguration, Mr. Kuryakin?”

"I just want to absolutely ensure we are not missing anything, sir."

Again Waverly nodded. "And have you reason to believe we might be missing something in particular?" he then demanded in no uncertain terms of the enforcement agent.

Ilyya flushed slightly. He didn't really have any logical reason to suspect such a thing. He just had a gut feeling.

"No sir," he reluctantly admitted.

"Then I suggest, Mr. Kuryakin, that you trust in the expertise of Miss Consantitus in this matter and get on with actually setting up the details of the ghost persona you intend to use in the undercover operation. All that ghost currently has is an alias that should be accepted by Thrush; you need to make the man come across as real with a believable background."

"Yes sir," Ilyya accepted his boss' decision, as well as the sting of the implied reproof at his own dogged assiduousness in continuing to doubt the cryptologist's experienced conclusion on the subject of the actual pattern progression.

Yet accepted or not, that reproof bothered Ilyya. He just couldn't put his finger on the why of Waverly's current curt manner toward him. And he also couldn't help the somewhat self-pitying contemplation that the Old Man would likely have judged a simple 'gut instinct' as plausible reason for Napoleon to prolong the testing process on the pattern progression.

Such thoughts gained him nothing but personal chagrin, however, and he had an assignment to tackle. A very difficult assignment where the life of his field partner and best friend could well rest on there being no missteps in the mission as it had been "blueprinted" by the definitive architect of all things U.N.C.L.E.: Alexander Waverly.

Lillie reclined on a towel-covered wooden lounge chair within the confines of her oversized private steam room. Seated with his legs sprawled lengthwise across the surface of a narrow likewise wooden bench along the wall to her right was the Thrush MUD project's Security Chief, Emile Fabhcun. And, despite the nakedness and relaxed physical demeanor of both participants, what was taking place was a business meeting.

The steam room was Coté's particular indulgence. Water for it, and indeed for all uses within the compound as a whole, was furnished not from any municipal facility, but from a sparklingly fresh stream located on the property. As a chemist, Lillie was only too familiar with the substances used to treat public water resources, and she much preferred her own bathing and drinking water free of any of those substances. She was positive the untreated purity of the steam in this sauna kept her skin in its undeniable state of perfection. Thus she made use of the luxury as often as possible, including for conferences with underlings.

Her own nudity in the presence of others did not in the least discomfit her. She considered her body an asset and was never loathe to flaunt the admittedly remarkable quality of that asset. Others' nudity in her presence she deemed a voyeuristic pleasure. She had no qualms about frankly assessing the quality of others' physical assets in such a natural state, and in fact quite enjoyed doing so on a regular basis.

"Explain to me, Emile, why this U.N.C.L.E. agent escaped your hands too quickly for me to even get a cursory look at him?" Lillie inquired with a smooth dagger-sheathed-in-silk vocal tone.

“He was a slippery one, madam,” admitted Fabhcun a bit uncomfortably.

“That isn’t an answer, Emile.”

Emile shrugged. “What answer would you have me give, madam? My security forces did not fully do the job they were hired to do. You have already seen to their representative punishment.”

“A shame the security detail had to lose two such fine physical specimens to that punishment, Emile,” commiserated Lillie. “Yet they did beforehand provide worthy entertainment.”

“And I am grateful to you for making their subsequent deaths easy on them,” Emile gave her honest thanks. In the end his men had not suffered. One quick bullet to the head – after they had concluded an exhibition of nude mud-wrestling for Lillie’s diversion – had quickly concluded the fullness of their sentence.

Now it was Lillie who shrugged. “My purpose was simply to discipline for failure of duty, not torture for sadistic gratification. I am not a cruel woman, Emile.”

“No madam,” acknowledged Fabhcun coolly.

Coté was indeed something of an enigma to the Security Chief. True, she was never exactly pitiless in her pursuit of personal power, but she certainly did have her private peccadilloes. Those peccadilloes centered on an overt desire to exercise a rather intense degree of control over men in particular. The mud-wrestling was part and parcel of that, leaving open the possibility that perhaps a much entertained Lillie would pardon the miscreants who performed for her delight. The ready display of her own naked form was also part of that desire: letting men see but not touch. Only she was permitted to touch. Her intimate encounters inevitably involved bound or chained males who were thus left completely at her mercy to achieve final sexual satisfaction.

This last Emile knew through personal experience, for he had several times served as a “consummational” party in the lady’s carnal marathons. Thus he recognized that she sought no more participation in such activities by her bed-partners than what their male genitalia could provide. She did not want soft caresses or sweet kisses. Her lovers were never permitted free use of their hands and, if she sought the employment of a man’s mouth in the venture, it was strictly to stimulate her own female genitalia or less often her breasts. There was never any equality to her excursions into physical passion. The man was there to service her needs and that was the sum total of his involvement in the proceedings.

Emile found it difficult to fathom that Coté’s sexual method so much appealed to a member of the Supreme Council of Thrush that said Council member had quietly sponsored her rather meteoric rise to power within the supra-nation. But then there was no accounting for taste in such highly individual matters. And that Lillie was possessed of a brilliant and rather innovative mind centering on her chosen academic field of chemistry surely had played some part in the Councilman’s fascination as well. Basically it must have appeared to the highly placed administrator that “possessing” Lillie was like having a tight rein on two prized horses: one to serve the private needs of his bodily spearhead and the other to serve the scientific needs of the organization he politically spearheaded.

“I don’t like loose ends, Emile,” forwarded Lillie now in very much a not-to-be-trifled-with voice. “And this one is large enough to flap in the merest breath of breeze. You can’t even say for sure exactly how the U.N.C.L.E. man managed to leave the compound, or if he by any chance took with him a sample of the MUD. We can ill afford at this moment in time, a moment so close to the

revelation of the full capabilities of the substance, to have U.N.C.L.E. dipping their toes in our private puddle.”

“I assure you, madam, the security forces have received additional training and will not fail to locate and successfully detain any further interlopers, be they from U.N.C.L.E. or elsewhere.”

“Assurances are all well and good, but results remain a necessity.”

“I do understand that.”

“I surely hope you do, Emile,” Lillie now cautioned with purposeful intent. “Though I would revel in watching one of your fine physique play in the MUD for my recreation, I would detest having to end any such sport with a bullet to the back of your head. In the interests of just punishment for repeated failure, you do as well understand.”

“Yes madam,” Fabhcun responded submissively, his voice smooth but his thoughts far more disturbed.

“Imperfections can haunt forever, Emile,” she advised further. “Thus it is best to achieve perfection whenever possible. Keep your security forces mindful of this and never forget it yourself.”

Fabhcun nodded shortly.

“Now, let us put all such unpleasantries aside,” Lillie turned the conversation toward a more personal subject, “and instead anticipate far more pleasurable possibilities. Come to the Gazerie at midnight, Emile, and we will indulge in the intricacies of bodily contact rather than the mundanities of verbal communication.”

“Yes madam,” Fabhcun acquiesced once more, though he knew such bodily contact would be more to Lillie’s particular predilections than his own. *“Ah well,”* he thought resignedly, *“it’s not like I will in the end be denied sexual release. And she is indeed a talented if selfish bed-mistress.”*

“I insist you run my credentials through the system again!” The very Bostonian inflections of a currently strident male voice echoed through the reception area of the Thrush satrapy in New Jersey.

“We’ve already double-checked those credentials of yours,” responded Jason Omvet in a tone that left no doubt as to the deadly seriousness of this matter. “The result remains the same: the Ultimate Computer does not recognize them as authentic.”

“It’s those half-arse codenames you let that silly machine assign!” insinuated the man with the unrecognized credentials, his distinctive accent becoming broader with every word. “Snyder Nelson does not exist in reality, I grant. Yet Dunnock Stiles does and I am most certainly he!”

“And Dunnock Stiles is more than likely an adversary of this organization,” insinuated Omvet in turn.

In extremely effective disguise as Georgian microbiologist Khveli Palavandishvili, Illya Kuryakin observed in silence the commotion being raised by one Dunnock Stiles, aka a purposefully less effectively disguised Napoleon Solo. His partner was playing his role of shill to the hilt, even letting the tonal quality of his faked accent fade in-and-out. Thrush would break completely through Solo’s masquerade in short shrift, just as had been so carefully planned. Until that happened, however, Illya had to keep in the background, ensuring he would be one of the last individuals to undergo the

credential check. It was imperative he give the Ultimate Computer time to recalibrate its patterning with regard to those machine-generated certifications. Doing so would provide the one chance of his own ID replacing that of Dunnock Stiles in the programming model, and thus hopefully result in the calculation of his fraudulent but precisely designed authorization code as valid.

"I want to speak to the one in charge of this clambake," demanded Stiles.

"You don't need to speak to any higher authority than me," Omvet stated in an icy manner.

"I will speak with him, Omvet," Lillie Coté forwarded easily as she moved toward the two men currently in verbal confrontation. "After all, we don't want our guests assuming we choose to rudely ignore personal complaints, now do we?"

"No madam," conceded Omvet, though admittedly through somewhat clenched teeth.

Omvet's apparently less than sanguine attitude toward the Coté woman's authority was something of which Illya took especial mental note.

"Mr. ...Stiles, is it?" Lillie directly addressed the current complainant. Stile-ish Napoleon nodded shortly. "Mr. Stiles, the plain facts are that the Ultimate Computer does not acknowledge you as real and therefore we cannot acknowledge you as Thrush. Rules are rules, you understand."

"Those rules were established via the circuitry of a goddamn machine, no matter with what higher 'thinking' processes Thrush accredits the contraption. Though perhaps the Ultimate Computer, with its supposed kinship to the realm of all human experience, is simply preoccupied at the moment with sensations caused by an unexpectedly stimulating electrical short," Dunnock insinuated to the breathtaking Thrush 'lady-in-charge' with something of a 'wink-wink' suggestive smile.

Lillie herself smiled a small half-smile of fascinated amusement. She didn't know who this infiltrator was, but she had to admit he did have a certain physical appeal. Though she generally preferred men with somewhat darker coloring than this tawny-haired, steel gray-eyed specimen, there was still no denying he was indeed a fine example of male pulchritude. A trim and toned body, broad shoulders, a well-shaped chest; and a truly devastating smile: yes, he would more than suit for her private purposes. Having him at her mercy as a captive until it was decided exactly what to do with him would serve as a means to treat herself to a truly delectable indulgence.

In the midst of the gathered Thrush in the room one woman gazed assessingly at the possible spy, finally squinting hard as if to aid in seeing him in a different light. Something about the overall carriage and general demeanor of this man was penetratingly familiar...

"Anything is of course possible, Mr. Stiles," Coté allowed. "But for the present I'm afraid you must be set aside from the mill and fray here and provided accommodations in a more secure location. Fabhcun," Lillie summoned forward her head of security from where he waited nearby for her instructions, "please escort Mr. Stiles to a private room in the lower section. I will myself speak in depth with him later this evening."

"Yes madam," acquiesced Emile Fabhcun, giving no outward sign he was fully aware what that late-night exhaustive conversation between Lillie and her male detainee would entail.

"You are a lady of utmost civility," spoke Stile-ish Solo warmly as he pretended he didn't understand that 'private room in the lower section' was nothing more than a polite designation for a prison cell. He then took gentle hold of Lillie's hand, bowed over it and kissed it chivalrously.

Such action was all it took to confirm the suspicions of that particular female in the crowd who had been doing the squinting appraisal. “Napoleon Solo!” that female now exclaimed with absolute certainty.

“*Zvonki ada!*”¹ Ilyya mentally exclaimed. “*Angelique!*”

It was not truly unexpected that the blonde Thrush femme fatale should be amongst the gathered enemy agents and scientists. Ilyya knew she had a high standing as an effective field operative amongst the Hierarchy. And she was not the only foe in the crowd personally known to Solo and Kuryakin, or who had directly engaged in dealings with the two U.N.C.L.E. agents. Still, because of her rather seesawing relationship with Napoleon, Angelique more than any other Thrush could prove to be something of a wildcard in this endeavor. Thus Ilyya knew he would need to literally monitor every word he spoke within her earshot.

A bit of uneasiness, part genuine and part sham, passed quickly over Napoleon’s countenance as Angelique made her way toward him. Intuitively he recognized this happenstance could ultimately work to his advantage as it could guarantee he wouldn’t be summarily shot in some underground dungeon after Cote’s cross-examination was complete. Angelique would undoubtedly make it known that Central itself would want to deal with him.

Solo faked an attempt at slipping away as his sometimes sexual aficionada but always moral adversary moved closer. Fabhcun immediately had a pair of his “falconers” take firm hold of Napoleon’s arms while a third pressed the long barrel of an automatic rifle into the U.N.C.L.E. agent’s lower back and yet a fourth positioned the business end of a semi-automatic pistol against his temple.

“*Good,*” thought Solo, “*at least these Thrush are enough on the ball that my little capitulation drama shouldn’t come off as staged.*”

Angelique stood directly in front of the masquerading Solo now. “Despite what those Clairol ads enthusiastically espouse, Napoleon, you definitely should not live your one life as a blond,” she criticized his physical camouflage.

“Not my color?” gibed Napoleon with a nonchalant smirk.

Angelique shook her head. “A very poor choice, darling. As are those gray bits of plastic behind which your meltingly gorgeous brown eyes are hiding. Both are much too dull to do justice to a man of your exciting physical attributes.”

Lillie Cote did not in least like being upstaged. Especially not by another female. Particularly not by another female who had “physical attributes” that could compete with her own for male attention. Above all not by another female who was being overtly flirted with by a male on whom Lillie had decided to stake a sexual claim.

“Who is this woman, Omvet?” inquired Lillie imperiously.

Consulting his list of Thrush personnel who had already passed through the credential-affirming process, the comptroller responded, “Angelique La Chien; codename: Hellicala Queen.”

¹ Akin to the exclamation “Hell’s bells!”

Jason Omvet privately recalled this particular invitee had arrived with an extraordinary collection of crystal-bottled perfumes and expensive jewelry. Undoubtedly the stock-and-trade of a notorious femme fatale.

Illya had to resist smirking at the mention of that codename for the spider lady. Thrush had come up with some real humdingers in that regard, the codename of Phil Havana for his own very Eastern European persona not the least absurd amongst them.

“Hellicala Queen?” Napoleon queried of Angelique as he raised one dubious eyebrow.

“No smart remarks, ...Snyder,” was Angelique’s quick comeback.

“Perhaps, Miss La Chien,” snapped out Lillie with unconcealed hostility, “you would be good enough to inform the rest of us as to the true identity of this man?”

“I’m shocked you failed to register his true identity yourself, Miss Coté,” snapped back Angelique with obvious hostility of her own. “Thrush Central does routinely update their dossier on him with recent photos. This,” she indicated with a slight nod of her head in the direction of the supposed Dunnock Stiles, “is none other than Napoleon Solo: Chief of Enforcement of U.N.C.L.E. North America and constant thorn – actually more like an entire thorn bush – in the side of Thrush.”

“I’m flattered by the compliment paid to my agently prowess,” avowed Napoleon with a little nod of his own.

“I would much rather pay compliment to another form of your prowess with which I am equally familiar,” insinuated Angelique as she tapped one long fingernail against his chin. “But where is that oh-so-masculine cleft in that stalwart chin of yours? Here, let me fully reveal all your infamous handsomeness.” With an audible rip, she tore from the lower portion of Solo’s face the jaw-line softening putty appliance concealing the aforementioned distinguishing feature.

Napoleon winced at the momentary sting caused by the forceful removal of that masking appliance. “Tender as always with your ministrations, my sweet,” he commended her sarcastically.

“What can I say? You bring out my naturally compassionate nature, darling,” rejoined Angelique with a characteristic crooked smile. “Or rather my naturally passionate nature.”

“Are we simply to take your word on this man being so prominent a member of U.N.C.L.E.?” demanded Lillie with even more blunt hostility.

“Really, Miss Coté,” spoke a cultured male voice from the crowd, “do sheathe your feline claws.”

Illya immediately recognized the voice of Victor Marton² who, during the initial arrival protocol outside the facility, Kuryakin had previously pegged as part of the gathered contingent. The administrator of the Parisian Hierarchy satrapy had actually traveled through the inner compound gates in the same limousine as the undercover U.N.C.L.E. agent, not a comfortable experience in the least for the outwardly unruffled Number 2 of the Command’s Section II in the Northwest. Of course Marton’s appearance here left Kuryakin to ponder how the Thrush had managed to get clear of the charges brought against him by the French government, to which jurisdiction U.N.C.L.E. had extradited the man a few years ago.

²THE FOXES AND HOUNDS AFFAIR

“Mr. Victor Marton; codename: Tom Cravino,” spoke Omvet in response to Lillie’s raised eyebrow in his direction. There was no mistaking the esteem evident in the comptroller’s voice as he provided this information.

Marton moved forward toward the small group gathered at the check-in station as he spoke even more to the point. “I can also vouch for this man’s identity as Napoleon Solo.”

“So good of you to stand guaranty for me, Victor,” cynically acknowledged Napoleon.

“Always pleased to do so for one of U.N.C.L.E.’s finest.”

“So flattery is to be the order of the day?”

“Undoubtedly followed by an additional edict of torture, young man. So do enjoy the moment.”

Marton then directed his next remark toward the facility’s older comptroller. “Young people are always far too willing to fast forward through current pleasures, don’t you find?”

“Indubitably, Mr. Marton,” responded Jason Omvet with an affirmative nod. He knew Marton, had worked in the background on several of his projects, and had much respect for this Thrush bureaucrat.

Without warning, Emile Fabhcun strode directly in front of Solo, pushing both Angelique and Marton rudely aside as he did so. He grabbed a handful of Napoleon’s tawny-dyed hair and used that rough grasp to pull Solo’s face upwards so to view it in a better light.

Napoleon winced. “Hey now, the color may be fake but the hair is real enough, and most definitely attached to my scalp!” came his protest.

“This is the man who infiltrated the premises a week ago, madam,” Fabhcun addressed Lillie as he maintained his grip and ignored Solo’s gripe. “The one we detained in the tunnel guard room and who subsequently escaped the facility in a most unfortunate turn of events.”

“Now the manure will strike the fan,” thought Illya as he kept to his less than central spot in the crowd.

“Ah, the one I was provided no opportunity to personally meet,” Lillie subtly chastised her Security Chief.

Emile chaffed under that public censure but merely replied stoically “Yes madam” as he at last released his punishing clutch on Solo’s hair.

“Mr. Solo does have a penchant for slipping through Thrush fingers,” Marton commiserated with the rebuked Fabhcun.

“Well, he will not slip through mine,” pledged Lillie boldly.

“Do give that promise to your Council lover, darling,” Angelique even more boldly taunted Coté. “I’m sure he will be most suitably impressed.”

So the woman in command of this satrapy had high connections, ascertained Illya, cataloguing all this information in case it was later of use. But apparently, from what he could gather of the attitude

of other Thrush personnel here, she also had little actual experience in the area of counterintelligence: a vulnerability to be sure.

“Might I suggest,” forwarded Marton with an easy smile, “that you scour the outer perimeter for Solo’s usual partner in crime? Slight, blue eyes, blond hair cut in one of those longish styles that British pop group has made popular, rather disagreeable in demeanor, and likely carrying a backpack full of explosive devices. One on the inside; one on the outside: that’s the usual scenario for an U.N.C.L.E. infiltration mission.”

Illya found Marton’s description rather amusing. However he was grateful beyond measure that the well-regarded Thrush was instigating a search for him beyond the confines of the attendees at the confab.

“My falconers will hunt him out.” Now it was Fabhcun undertaking an imprudent guarantee.

“See that they do,” coldly stipulated Lillie in a thoroughly not-to-be-trifled-with tone. “In the meanwhile, Fabhcun, have them take this high-flying U.N.C.L.E. spy into custody. I hope, since the last regrettable incident, your men have acquired the wherewithal to employ a true cell for such purpose? The guard room is not adequate for the detention of prisoners. I would hate to have to enforce that knowledge with another example from amongst your security forces.”

Emile only stood straighter at the reproof. “All will be done rightly, madam.”

“This time,” came Lillie’s sour retort.

As several security guards manhandled Solo away from the checkpoint, Lillie required further of Fabhcun, “Do have this captive restored to a natural state fit to grace the Gazerie.”

Emile knew what that meant. He nodded shortly and followed in the wake of those of his men departing with Napoleon in tow.

“I’m glad there were no more, shall we say, melodramatic incidents,” commented Illya as Palavandishvili to the man who had completed the check-in procedure just after him. They were the last to undergo credential confirmation and both had passed through unscathed, much to Illya’s inner relief.

“When Thrush collides with U.N.C.L.E., melodrama generally abounds,” remarked the other man. The man’s code-name was Cody De Torte, but Illya had recognized him immediately as Dr. Stroller³ of the supposed fencing school in Mexico that had in reality been training Thrush young ‘super’ agents. “With the likes of Napoleon Solo, even more so,” Stroller further commented with acid evident in his words.

Illya decided to test the quality of his cover by speaking further to this man who could very possibly finger him as another U.N.C.L.E. in Thrush clothing. It was necessary if he was to move about freely during the conference.

“Had you then previous contact with this U.N.C.L.E. agent who was so theatrically rooted out?”

“I had the displeasure... briefly,” Stroller conceded with a small frown. “He and his partner were responsible for the failure of one of my pet projects, unwittingly abetted by a foolish young woman.”

³ **THE TEST TUBE KILLER AFFAIR**

“Aren’t most young women foolish?” joked Illya with cool aplomb.

“At least when it comes to young men,” agreed the Thrush more than readily.

“A state of being with which I am long past being familiar,” lamented Illya as he ran a hand through his artificially grayed hair with its center-parted and slicked-down styling.

“An undeniable truth for me as well,” Stroller commiserated.

“Dr. Khveli Palavandishvili,” Illya introduced himself as he extended his hand, “microbiologist.”

“Dr. Stefan Stroller,” the other man responded with an introduction of his own and a brief handshake, “genetic biologist.”

“You are German, yes?” ventured Illya as if simply out of curiosity regarding the man’s obvious accent.

“In der Tat⁴,” stated Stroller. “I’m afraid my native inflection still gives me away though I have lived for many years in Mexico. And you? Your name is distinctly Eastern European, but your accent is decidedly not. Portuguese perhaps?”

“You are correct. The name is Georgian,” admitted Illya, “but I lived in Lisbon from the time I was a small child, only recently returning to my native country.”

“You were permitted to return from the West to a Soviet Bloc nation?”

“Portugal’s Estado Novo is hardly what I would call completely Western in ideology.”

“Yet the regime is very anti-communist.”

Illya shrugged expressively. “With Thrush, all things are possible.”

Stroller nodded sagely. “I assume the Council had some need in your country then?”

“The Council had the need and I had the desire. So my return to the land of my birth worked to both our advantages.”

“In der Tat,” Stroller acknowledged with a slight, sly smile.

Illya set his eyes directly on those of Stroller, those blue eyes of his that had been overlaid with lightly green-tinted contact lenses to change the color to a rather unique and arresting shade of aqua.

“Do you think there is any coffee to be had? I had a long flight and, as a less than youthful traveler, I’m rather lacking in energy at the moment.”

“There is a buffet breakfast set out in main dining hall, so I was told,” Stroller provided the information without a single qualm. He certainly did not seem to recognize Kuryakin.

“Ah, then let us get directions there. Coffee and perhaps some eggs and toast enjoyed with agreeable company would not sit ill with me.”

⁴ Indeed

Stroller, a truly not very sociable man, considered for a moment and then agreed with a “Nor with me.”

And it was thus that Illya accepted in fact his disguise had effectively passed muster.

Napoleon had been thoroughly strip-searched and force-showered by Thrush many times in past captivities. Such handling wasn't something in any way unfamiliar to him. But this time... Well, this time there was a noticeable difference in the treatment.

After being ordered at gunpoint to remove his shoes and socks, he was marched into a cubicle that was open front and back with two perpendicular walls on the right and left composed of at least five inches of uncannily clear and perfectly transparent acrylic. Situated just far enough apart to reasonably stretch a man's arms outright completely, each wall held a rubberized cuffed restraint into which one of his wrists was duly confined, leaving him with his arms fully extended to each side. His legs were then shackled into similar rubber cuffs, one attached by an approximately foot-length chain to each of the walls. The wide-spread stance was not patently uncomfortable, just rather awkward. His clothes were then carefully cut away (as it would not do to possibly trigger some hidden explosive or suicide device) until he stood buck naked in the enclosure.

A continuous spray of surprisingly warm water cascaded over him from the ceiling high above as several particularly muscular and startlingly equally as nude as he Thrush male minions began the process of scrubbing him down, leaving no inch of skin untouched. The scrub-down itself was a common enough procedure when the enemy suspected that the scars or moles on an U.N.C.L.E. agent's body might be concealing some special espionage paraphernalia. Yet they used, of all things, loofah sponges, leaving his entire body displaying a healthy and somewhat glistening glow from their industrious endeavors.

Then his head was vigorously shampooed and rinsed at least two-dozen separate times. It finally came to him that this was being done to entirely remove the demi-permanent dye from his hair. Did they think the lightener contained some unique spy-ly element? Or perhaps they simply wanted absolute visual confirmation that he was indeed Napoleon Solo?

Lastly, after the shower spray subsided, Solo's physique was rubbed with a fresh-scented oil: eucalyptus by the smell of it. Now that made no sense at all to Napoleon for he was a prisoner, not a prize. But then again, if Thrush intended to use some form of electrical device on him, his still moist and glossily lubricated skin would likely provide a superior conductor of current.

He waited stoically for whatever was to come, determined to hold out long enough to give Illya sufficient time to gain the knowledge needed to somehow decommission the MUD project. That would be at least some days, he knew. Thus he realized only too starkly that he couldn't prematurely “crack” under whatever form of torture Thrush had in store for him. Hearing the clack of high-heeled footsteps somewhere close by, he took a deep breath and turned his gaze to what his auditory instincts informed him was the direction of the sound.

A hidden door slid open into the white-tiled room and the woman who had spoken to him at the check-in station made her way within. She was dressed – or rather marginally clothed – in a white chiffon evening gown that left nothing to the imagination, its material so sheer as to be all but completely transparent. No undergarments of any kind disguised even the most intimate portions of her anatomy. The tall spike heels of her white leather pumps clicked sharply upon the terrazzo blocks of the floor as she walked fully around the minimalist shower enclosure. The stiff-lipped little man with whom Napoleon had also conversed at the check-in point and whom he thus assumed

some sort of official presence on this project had followed the Thrush femme fatale into the chamber and now stood to one side, clipboard readily in hand.

“Nice,” commented the woman with a pleased if somewhat self-satisfied smile as she surveyed Napoleon from every angle. “Very nice indeed,” she finalized as she completed her circuit by giving his front a head-to-toe visual inspection.

“Should I be flattered?” queried Napoleon with all his usual nonchalance.

“I shouldn’t bother,” declared the stiff-lipped fellow bluntly. “What is deemed ‘nice’ today definitely will look much less so once Central finishes with you, Mr. Napoleon Solo.”

“Yet Central is not to have him until our soiree is complete, Omvet,” Lillie reminded her comptroller just as bluntly. “And in the meanwhile he is mine to do with what I wish.

“I’m sorry I didn’t myself recognize you as the infamous U.N.C.L.E. agent you apparently are, Napoleon,” Lillie now directed her conversation to Solo as the aforementioned infamous U.N.C.L.E. agent took note of her particular accent. “May I call you Napoleon?”

“I don’t see why not, since you are already intimately familiar with so much of me,” remarked Solo with a smirk.

“Ah yes. No hidden secrets as it were.”

“No physical ones anyway,” admitted Napoleon somewhat tauntingly.

“Central can probe for the rest,” she assured him. “They enjoy that. Myself, I enjoy other kinds of probing.” Her smile left little doubt what those ‘other kinds of probing’ might be.

Solo wasn’t in the least nonplussed. He could exploit sexual persuasion tricks as well as anyone, and he had absolutely no qualms about doing so with any Thrush woman when necessary. Or even when not strictly necessary. Perhaps this assignment would prove easier than he thought ...and have some pleasant side-benefits as well. “*Whatever must be done to ensure the success of the mission,*” he mentally snickered to himself.

“Comme vous êtes maintenant familiarisé avec mon nom, puis-je connaître le vôtre?⁵” questioned Napoleon with the utmost confidence.

Lillie smiled at him once more. “Vous êtes connaissez avec le dialecte Québécois?⁶”

“Je viens par celle-ci naturellement. Ma grand-mère maternelle était un citoyen du Québec.⁷”

“Pourtant, vous vous êtes américain?⁸”

“Oui.”

⁵ As you are now familiar with my name, am I to become acquainted with yours?

⁶ You are versed in the dialect of Quebec?

⁷ I come by it naturally. My maternal grandmother was a citizen of Quebec.

⁸ Yet you yourself are American?

Jason Omvet cleared his throat pointedly. Discussions with an U.N.C.L.E. agent in a language not all the Thrush underlings present in this room would understand could lead to suspicions of collusion.

"I am Lillie Coté," the woman now introduced herself in English.

"And should I have previously recognized you for some infamously within Thrush?" giped Napoleon readily.

"If you didn't before, you soon will," she guaranteed him certainly.

"I look forward to that."

Lillie nodded playful acknowledgement to Solo's dagger-in-sheath verbal taunt and then turned on her stiletto heel to go. "Make him ready for his nocturnal visit to the Gazerie," she threw over her shoulder as she exited.

On his own way out, the man called Omvet passed just close enough to Solo to advise him, "I wouldn't look forward to that."

Leaving Napoleon to wonder exactly for what the heck he was to be made ready and what the hell was the Gazerie.

Angelique watched discontentedly as the scantily clad Lillie circulated among her "distinguished guests".

"I hope a certain esteemed someone didn't pay too hefty a price for that outfit of hers," she remarked offhandedly to Victor Marton, who was sharing a dinner table with her. "Not much material was put to use in its construction, after all."

Marton smiled smugly. "Are you jealous of our charming hostess?"

"Cette salope prétentieuse du Québec? Peine.⁹"

"Votre préjudice parisienne montre, ma belle espion.¹⁰"

"La garce me choque, même avec son accent.¹¹"

Marton gave an eloquent shrug. "Meilleur de se rappeler qu'elle a des amis haut placés¹²"

"Sans oublier les lieux bas.¹³"

"I seem to recall that you are not loathe to take advantage of such 'low places' yourself," chided Victor with a little laugh.

⁹ That pretentious bitch of Quebec? Hardly.

¹⁰ Your Parisian prejudice is showing, oh fair spy.

¹¹ The trollop offends me, even in her accent.

¹² Best to remember she has friends in high places.

¹³ Not to mention the low places.

“Yet I do so with more subtlety,” Angelique reminded him sulkily.

“Don’t make such a moue,” Marton cautioned her. “It will be noticed and commented upon to a certain party, you can be sure.”

“I am a better covert operative than she,” complained the still pouting Angelique.

“Unquestionably. But that isn’t her strong suit. She is a truly brilliant biochemist.”

“And that makes her worthy of heading up her own Thrush facility? Her own major project?”

“Yes,” Victor candidly declared.

Accordingly Angelique maintained her moody brood as she continued to focus her eyes on Lillie. After a few more minutes of silently envying Lillie’s current position within the organizational pecking order though, Angelique’s attention was caught by two middle-aged men just entering the large hall for dinner.

“That cold fish Stroller seems to have taken a special liking to the little Eastern European with the long name.”

“Hmmm?” inquired Marton with a tilt of his head toward her.

“You know, the one with the out-of-place Portuguese accent,” she furthered as she languidly inclined one hand in the direction of the two men now seated – actually reclining since the dining hall was fitted in the ancient Roman fashion of couches set beside low tables.

“Ah, Khveli Palavandishvili,” Marton provided the name after a quick look in the direction she indicated.

“A.K.A. Phil Havana,” Angelique provided in her own turn with a lopsided smirk.

“He’s rumored to be quite the brilliant microbiologist.”

“Every Thrush scientist is rumored to be brilliant. That supposition gets tiresome.”

“Well, you wouldn’t expect Thrush to seek out scientific minds that were anything less than brilliant, would you?”

“Less brilliant ones might wind up more cooperative in the long run.”

“And less useful in the ultimate undertaking of controlling the world. My dear, you simply must learn to accept that certain... inconveniences can be more than worth a bit of ennui.”

“While certain conveniences can effectively and quite without real damage lessen the necessity for any such ennui.”

“Thrush’s brilliant and beautiful biochemist is heading this way,” Marton warned quietly as Lillie glided toward their table. “Best keep a civil tongue in your mouth if you want to literally keep that talented tongue of yours safe behind your luscious lips.”

“I am well aware how to play the game,” Angelique assured him through teeth clenched as much to hide from prying eyes the content of her speech as well as the agitation of her emotions.

“Monsieur Marton,” Lillie airily greeted Victor, extending her hand to him as he stood to acknowledge her presence. “It is a true pleasure to meet you at last. You are such an essential part of Central since your release from jail, and have been well spoken of in high places,” she hinted with a bit of a collusive sparkle in her eyes.

“Miss Coté,” Victor cordially responded to her perhaps provoking greeting as he bent over her hand and kissed it in continental fashion. Marton recognized instinctively that all Lillie was trying to do with her somewhat less-than-courteous salutation was make apparent that she possessed, because of her particular arrangement with a certain Supreme Council member, access to details many others in Thrush did not. Angelique was right in one respect: this young woman knew next to nothing about employing subtlety. Thus Marton did not let Lillie’s seeming impertinence faze him. He too was well aware how to play the game. “*Too green to the spheres of global conspiracy and politiques supranationales clandestines*¹⁴ for the status she’s been granted,” he mentally decided even as he verbally cooed “Le plaisir est entièrement la mienne.”¹⁵

Angelique hid her eye roll by turning her head as she coughed slightly.

“And...,” Lillie took particularly belated notice of Marton’s female companion, who retained her reclining position on her couch, “Hellicala Queen, isn’t it?”

“Angelique La Chien.”

“Ah yes,” acquiesced Lillie. “All these codenames: so confusing. Pardonnez mon erreur naturel.”¹⁶

“*Natural my derriere*,” thought Angelique as she smiled in feigned understanding of the ‘natural’ mistake. “Mais bien sûr,”¹⁷ she magnanimously allowed as the lilt of Lillie’s Quebecois French irritatingly grated her nerves.

“You have outdone yourself with these preparations,” Victor complimented Coté as he indicated the lavishly appointed dining room where attractive and barely-dressed servers, male and female, were busily rotating between the intentionally intimate, small, low tables with trays of sumptuous delicacies of every description.

“Ah, this is but the tip of the iceberg, monsieur,” she accepted his praise with a dazzling smile.

Marton nodded endorsement of her statement. “With the pièce de résistance being the demonstration of the Microorganism Ubiquity Depredator of course.”

“All in good time, though I do believe the MUD will indeed amaze all present.”

“I look forward to such amazement,” Marton continued his smoothly gracious patter. “To think you accomplished all this: the conception and production of the MUD, the elaborate details of this most unusual summit itself, and still managed to net Napoleon Solo as well.”

“That was a fortunate catch indeed,” agreed Lillie brightly, “one that does provide me quite a unique opportunity.”

¹⁴ covert supranational politics

¹⁵ The pleasure is entirely mine.

¹⁶ Do forgive my natural mistake.

¹⁷ But of course

Angelique eyed Lillie assessingly. Something about her words and her manner when making reference to the current captive state of Napoleon didn't sit right with her. And she was suspiciously certain that Coté's 'unique opportunity' in reference to Solo had nothing at all to do with any attempt to glean U.N.C.L.E. secrets from her prisoner.

"Napoleon can be a bit difficult to keep penned, so Thrush has always found," she warned Lillie simply to see what the other woman would say to that.

"Can he?" Lillie nonchalantly inquired. "Well, I have my own method of keeping male captives under control, Mademoiselle La Chien. Indeed, I have always found it quite effective... and enjoyable," she added pointedly. She knew a prior relationship seemingly of a sexual nature existed between this Frenchwoman and the U.N.C.L.E. agent, and she certainly was not above taunting in that regard.

"Just keep your wits about you and don't ever let him get the upper hand, even in seemingly inane verbal exchanges," Marton warned in his turn. "He has quite the facile tongue."

Lillie only smiled a very self-satisfied smile at the Frenchman's caution.

"And do keep an eye peeled for that annoying partner of his," Victor furthered. "They do seem to have some shared instinct between them regarding when one or the other has gotten into danger of any sort."

Marton's mention of Illya set Angelique to wondering. Just where was the wayward Russian? Someplace close by she was sure. There would be no way Kuryakin would let Solo remain confined in a Thrush cell if he could help it. No way at all...

With that stray thought Angelique's eyes wandered again to the table where Stroller and his dinner companion were starting on their meals. She squinted at the Eastern European scientist for a long moment. Something about the way the man set to his food seemed alarmingly familiar. But then that was surely a ridiculous suspicion since Palavandishvili had passed the extraordinary credential check by the Ultimate Computer with not even the most mundane of precautionary red flags being raised. Perhaps it was just an Eastern European peccadillo, that particular way of utilizing a knife and fork. Yet...

"I think I will just have a word with Dr. Stroller and that microbiologist," Angelique politely prefaced her departure from present company. "Perhaps they could explain to me all that technical chatter we endu... were treated to during the informational presentation about the MUD earlier this afternoon."

Lillie's eyes narrowed at Angelique's less-than-politely caught (and certainly deliberate) verbal miscue regarding her own initial explanatory discourse regarding her distinctive creation.

"The creator of the MUD is right here to explain it all to you again," suggested Marton with a little smirk, suspecting as he did how Angelique desperately wanted to get free of Lillie's presence.

"I wouldn't dream of monopolizing your attention like that, Mademoiselle Coté," Angelique sweetly assured the other woman, "not when you have so many important guests. And I'm sure those two rather less-than-young men would appreciate a bit of attentive feminine curiosity to liven up their dull dinner conversation."

"Very noble of you to consider that, I'm sure," responded Lillie somewhat tartly.

With nothing more than a responding nod, the blonde Thrush agent rose off her dining chaise and sashayed toward Stroller's table, leaving Victor Marton attempting to hide his amusement at the ill-concealed rivalry between Angelique and Lillie.

"Dr. Stroller," Angelique greeted the German geneticist easily, "it has been some time since last we met."

"Not that long," disagreed Stroller pointedly. "I seem to recall you being most prominently at the meeting last year when Central decided to terminate my super-agent development program."

"Was that only last year?" breezily questioned Angelique. "Ah well, I didn't really play a part in that final decision, you do realize."

"No, you didn't. However you did tell those who did play a part that you thought my approach regarding the male/female training of such young men to be doomed to the same failure as what happened with young Martin," protested Stroller grumpily.

"I only gave my opinion in the matter, Dr. Stroller," clarified Angelique. "You must remember I am no scientist and make no such pretensions. That opinion was formulated from another perspective entirely."

Stroller's only comment was a curt grunt.

"Yet we are all Thrush, yes?" Angelique played the organizational trump card. "And thus we all want to ensure every possibility is taken into account. To ensure the ultimate success of our mutual goals, no?"

"I suppose so," relented Stroller less-than-enthusiastically.

"So there is no real reason for discord between us. And I do hear your current project is showing much more promising results."

"Yes," admitted the German.

Stroller's mood brightened noticeably, leaving the disguised and heretofore ignored Illya to wonder what exactly Stroller's new project might entail. Perhaps he could coerce some details out of the man later.

"Won't you introduce me to your companion, Dr. Stroller?" pressed Angelique. "I've heard such interesting things about him."

"Have you?" inquired Stroller rather absently. "This is Dr. Khveli Palavandishvili from Georgia via an upbringing in Lisbon," he offhandedly introduced the disguised Kuryakin.

"Angelique La Chien: originalmente de Paris embora atualmente vivendo em Nova York,¹⁸ the Thrush femme fatale introduced herself as Illya rose to take her extended hand. "Tenho medo de não falar qualquer Geórgia ou da Rússia, e meu Português é muito rudimentar."¹⁹

¹⁸ Angelique La Chien: originally from Paris though currently living in New York.

¹⁹ I'm afraid I don't speak any Georgian or Russian, and my Portuguese is very rudimentary.

“As I’m afraid is my French,” Illya lied smoothly. “So perhaps it would be best to keep our discourse in English?”

“Yes, likely that would be best,” Angelique agreed with a ready if crooked smile, “Dr... I’m afraid your long surname is a bit beyond the parlance of my tongue. Might I just call you Phil in reference to your codename of Phil Havana?”

“If I in turn might call you Helli.” Illya voiced the verbal dig with the most innocent of smiles.

Angelique laughed a definitely less-than-amused laugh. “Perhaps Khve might be more suitable?”

“Most definitely, Angie,” conceded Illya in all seeming ingenuousness. Secretly he was reveling in Angelique’s palpable if unvoiced discontent with that nickname. “But please do take a seat.”

“Most kind of you, Khve.” She gracefully glided herself down onto one side of Illya’s dining couch, purposely curling her slim legs up under her to leave just enough room for him to perch on the opposite side of the chaise.

Angelique employed her subterfuge tactic of asking for a ‘non-scientific’ explanation of what had been revealed about the MUD in the address given by Lillie earlier in the day. Stroller took easily enough to that line of discussion and Illya was able to contribute enough to keep plausible his cover as a microbiologist. With the way Angelique was studying him – most particularly the way he was handling his silverware, Kuryakin knew it was vital to successfully “keep up appearances”. It wouldn’t do for her to point him out as an U.N.C.L.E. interloper at this Thrush conference. Not when he still had so much to do in order to succeed in the mission to stop any use of this new biological weapon by the ruling powers of the supra-nation.

Napoleon gazed about the “accommodations” where he was currently being kept. This wasn’t in any way a standard Thrush prisoner’s cell. It was absolutely spotless and everything within its confines was either white or colorless. There was no door and the bars at the front of room weren’t really bars, rather surprisingly widely-spaced columns composed of some sort of clear acrylic, quite thick but still perfectly transparent. The floor and the three remaining walls were all white marble tile: pristinely polished and thus highly reflective. The ceiling itself was entirely mirrored.

Napoleon considered the possibility that this might actually be some kind of lab. Yet that didn’t seem quite right either, as the setup was that of a confined living quarters. A scrupulously clean and rather tall white marble commode was set in the farthest right-hand corner of the place with an oddly translucent but beautifully appointed pedestal sink near enough for ready convenience. A small table and chair, again of clear acrylic, sat opposite in the farthest left-hand corner. No medical instruments appeared anywhere at hand, nor was there any form of visible cabinetry that could serve as storage for such. Yet there were cameras aplenty. Solo’s trained eye caught these right off. They were placed both high and low in the room: on the ceiling, on the floor, in the columns and in the raised platform situated beneath him.

As for his present situation, he was attached by tightly-fitted cuffs of some clear yet malleable plastic by both wrists and both ankles to what he assumed to be the area’s sleeping cot. Only it wasn’t a cot exactly: rather it was a transparent nylon net stretched between four white-lacquered posts. Stationed like pivotal pieces of a bizarre art centerpiece on an elevated dais in the middle of the room, the posts swirled and curved upward to the ceiling in a very modernistic yet elaborately intricate design. The mesh of the net itself was a wide-spaced open weave, its deceptive tensile strength demonstrated by the fact it held his weight without much evidence of any central dipping. That nylon lattice was as well rather high off the stage floor, definitely higher than average mattress

height. He was still naked as a jaybird and the lead Thrush security man, the one called Fabhcun as he recalled from Lillie's previous address of the fellow, had injected him with something once he had been firmly secured in place. He had no clue what the drug was or what it was supposed to do, but at the moment it was making him feel... well, rather horny to be honest.

He thought of Illya's probable snarky comment on that particular phenomenon: *"Thrush should know by now they don't have to administer a pharmaceutical for you to achieve such a condition, Napoleon."*

That reflection brought a momentary smile to his lips. The smile quickly faded, however, for every spy instinct he possessed was informing him in no uncertain terms that he was being most attentively observed. "And that would be a surprise exactly why?" Solo muttered softly to himself.

Yet the idea of some Thrush mucky-muck staring at him in his nude and semi-aroused state annoyed him intensely. Not that the members of the supra-nation had ever shown any shred of human decency for the personal embarrassment of their captives. Still, Napoleon felt particularly degraded by the eyes of the unknown spectator.

"Buck up, Solo," he mentally chided himself. *"You've endured far worse and come out fine in the end."*

And he had; of course he had. He just wasn't as surely confident as he usually was of enduring to the end whatever was to happen next.

Act III: Bread, Circuses and Peccadilloes

"Miss Coté has certainly chosen with a discerning eye. There is just no denying these men are absolutely superb physical specimens," Swooshie Smith, more properly known by her real name of Minerva Witherspoon²⁰, declared admiringly.

Angelique scrutinized with a soupcon of discernable disgust the plump older woman who was lasciviously ogling the male wrestlers, fifty in all, sporting in the mud for the entertainment of the gathered crowd. "It does seem Mademoiselle Coté prefers her spectacle to be spectacular in that particular."

"You needn't look down your nose at me, Miss La Chien," Miss Witherspoon advised the Thrush femme fatale with something of a withering glance. "Appreciation of a fine-looking male body doesn't dull with age you know."

"I surely don't know," minced Angelique.

"Ah, but someday you will," Witherspoon assured her a bit sourly. "Everyone grows old: no exceptions, even for those who make their mark in the sway of things by supplying sexual bait to trip up enemies."

And that is what nearly all of Thrush assumed of her, Angelique knew. Her cleverness as a covert operative was always permeated with this assumption, and her successes always credited more heavily to such than was warranted. Oh, she knew how to use flirtation and seduction to advantage, no question. She definitely was not foolish enough to deny her body played a

²⁰THE SUBURBIA AFFAIR

significant part in her usefulness to Thrush. Yet she had other valuable skills as well, even if those didn't include being the supposedly "brilliant scientist" the supra-nation rapaciously coveted.

Angelique decided to ignore the irritation of the woman lying on the couch across from her. Instead she focused her attention on the opposite side of the huge auditorium where most of the men were congregated enjoying the "spectacle" provided by fifty female mud wrestlers. Lillie Côté was nothing if not ecumenical in all aspects of her orgiastic exhibition.

Victor Marton was betting with several of his cronies on the outcomes of various matches and he now crowed with obvious delight over winning a particularly large stake. A crooked little grin highlighted Angelique's face as she rose and made her way toward her French compatriot.

"A run of good luck, I take it?" she inquired easily.

"Very good!" enthusiastically acknowledged Marton. "What about you? Will you be sauntering away with les poches pleines²¹ courtesy of this night's entertainment?"

"I haven't been gambling on any of the meets."

"But you should, my dear. It is the most involving way to thoroughly enjoy the competitions. Though of course the visuals in-and-of themselves are quite sufficiently engaging," he added as his gaze caught and held in its prolonged focus the toned and slickly mud-covered nude body of one of the most successful of the female competitors.

"But such engaging visuals cannot on their own gain beings the favor of Central," Angelique submitted bluntly.

Marton's eyes narrowed. "Still stewing over la position élevée²² of the lovely Lillie, my dear?" he pointedly confronted her.

"Perhaps," Angelique conceded. "But more I was thinking on la perception de ma propre position²³ within our organization."

Victor laughed lightly. "You have no worries with regard to engaging visuals, my gorgeous Angelique. Do you not agree with me on that, Dr. Palavandishvili?" Marton questioned the Georgian scientist who was standing near at hand, something Angelique found a bit surprising. The gray-haired, Old World-mannered microbiologist simply did not strike her as someone who would be intrigued by either the avaricious energy of the gaming or the lust-inducing display of the mud wrestling.

Khve smiled coolly. "I had not thought much on it since it is the lady's kindness that initially gained my most favorable notice. She has indeed treated me like a long-lost brother."

Something in the comment struck Angelique's brain almost a dazing physical blow. What was it about this man? What was pecking on her mind about him like an annoying little bird – a thrush per se?

²¹ bulging pockets

²² the elevated position

²³ the perception of my own position

“But now permitting myself the opportunity to take in her other noteworthy assets,” willingly espoused Kuryakin-cum-Palavandishvili as he looked Angelique up-and-down, “she indeed need not fret in any such regard.”

Angelique smiled politely if a bit chillily at both men. “I have many other qualities useful to the pursuits of Thrush.”

“No question, ma chère,” readily agreed Marton. “As does Lillie. Pourtant, il ne fait aucun mal pour une femme d’avoir un visage et le corps admirable, ma mignon. Des armes physiques n’ont pas toujours besoin d’avoir des bords tranchants pour être efficace.”²⁴

“Ni ne seuls les corps féminins fournissent ces armes physiques efficaces,”²⁵ Angelique voiced her frank response. “Il suffit de considérer les méthodes de collecte d’information utilisées par Napoleon Solo afin de démontrer ce point.”²⁶

Was that a smirk she saw on the face of Palavandishvili? But he didn’t really understand much French... or so he had said.

“Ah, but the majority of higher-ranking Thrush are male, my dear,” challenged Marton just as frankly. “Thus Solo’s methods have a considerably more limited range.”

Angelique’s only response to that was a quite noticeable pout.

“And pray tell what has our accomplished and appealing hostess,” Khve-ish Illya took ready advantage of the casual dropping of Solo’s name into the conversation, “done with that vociferous U.N.C.L.E. interloper?”

“Oh, I imagine she’ll find something exciting to do with him,” Marton surmised without much internal reflection, “until Central makes its claim on him at least. Doubtful it will require his rather exceptional talent at continuously talking while revealing nothing though. I do hear tell she likes her own form of physical entertainment of an evening, and that her adoring Council sweetheart finds the resulting visuals very engaging indeed.”

Illya bit his tongue to keep from asking for more specific information. He had his duty within the framework of this mission and Napoleon also had his. And Illya simply couldn’t risk blowing his cover by showing too much curiosity (or any suspected concern) regarding the fate of a captive U.N.C.L.E. agent.

The sharp click of spike heels on marble tiles drew Napoleon’s attention to the transparent columns that weren’t exactly bars as Lillie Coté entered though the gap in one set of those pillars.

“What? No secret entrance for the jailer?” Solo teased his captor.

“This is not a cell, Napoleon,” Lillie assured him.

²⁴ Still, it does no harm for a woman to have a face and body worthy of admiration, my lovely. Physical weapons do not always need to have sharp edges to be effective.

²⁵ Nor do only female bodies provide such effective physical weapons.

²⁶ One need only consider the information-gathering methods employed by Napoleon Solo to demonstrate this point.

“Yet I am bound like a prisoner.”

“You are, shall we say, a hostage in the Gazerie, captive to my whims.”

“The Gazerie?” Solo repeated the unknown term.

“Yes. A playroom of sorts,” acknowledged Lillie with an enigmatic smile. “A place of recreation and delight.”

“Delight for whom?” questioned Napoleon warily.

“Oh, your lack of enthusiasm does disappoint me. And I must warn you that I do not cope well with disappointment.”

“Would you mind revealing with what I likely will be required to cope?”

Lillie smiled that enigmatic smile again and then unceremoniously removed in one easy motion the barely-there sheer gown she wore. Standing before him completely naked but for her spiked-heeled white pumps, she stated straight-to-the-point, “My most intimate desires.”

Solo smiled his best seductive smile. “I could do that more creatively unbound.”

“That is not one of my desires,” countered Lillie. “And I guarantee you I have enough creativity for both of us.”

That said, she climbed up onto the hammock, positioned her legs with knees bent on either side of his torso and half-sat/half-squatted on his chest. Spreading her vulvae with the fingers of one hand to reveal her bright pink clitoris, she used the fingers of the other hand to massage that intimate part of her anatomy. Napoleon’s eyes were glued to those fingers, his already half-hard penis standing up at full attention. Lillie swayed with her movements, throwing back her head and making uninhibited sounds of enjoyment: guttural groans and husky moans and sibilant sighs emitted through tightly clenched teeth.

Napoleon’s brain was fogged by his own body’s physical wants. He knew he had to stay mentally on-point, but this was territory where his rational command could easily abandon him. The drug in his system was making everything but the uncompromising condition of his cock beyond his state of focus at the moment.

Abruptly Lillie turned her body around, so she faced the lower portion of his torso, and slid down closer to his standing penis. She then guided her thoroughly wet clitoris up and down the length of that organ. Napoleon knew his climax would soon explode from him. But then Lillie did something, manipulated his testicles to semi-deflate the fullness of his erection.

In the blinking of an eye she was licking and mouthing his penis, urging it back toward full stiffness. Napoleon closed his eyes. He couldn’t move from his manacled position and Lillie was using his body however she wished. He could hear a mechanical whirring now and again. The cameras changing position to get a better look at the proceedings? He wasn’t sure, but he suspected this was fact.

He lost all track of time. His body was aching from Lillie’s numerous semi-abortions of his erection with her tactics of manipulating his balls when he came too close to orgasm to meet her current desires. Finally she mounted his cock and began to ride him, her backside still to him. This was rough and hard; she obviously was ready for him to ejaculate at last. And Solo wished, oh how he

wished, he simply wouldn't oblige her. But between her ministrations and the injection of the drug, his body was too aroused to fail in fulfilling this final desire of Lillie Coté. She had exactly what she wanted of him, to his utter humiliation.

In a chamber high above the Gazerie a Thrush Supreme Council member smiled smugly as he stared at the multiple monitors displaying the action below from just about every conceivable angle. His remarkable double-whammy of a mistress was indeed – as he had suspected would be the case – providing him truly extraordinary delights: the cerebral marvel of the MUD and the emotional degradation of Napoleon Solo.

"A small amount of the MUD, about 150 liters, slightly more than five cubic feet, was introduced into this streambed approximately three weeks ago," expounded Lillie in her most factual scientist manner.

The elite congregation of Thrush personnel she addressed were assembled outside the New Jersey facility at a community-remote location relatively close-by the inner research compound. Around them a circular screen, set up especially for this gathering, ran a video showing the condition of the streambed prior to its treatment with the MUD. Illya, standing amongst the throng in his disguise persona of a supra-national credo-espousing microbiologist, was careful to hide his inward disgust at what was displayed before him. This once active ecosystem was surely dying: plant-life withering; the water all but devoid of aquatic activity. Judging by the video, this environ was previously an active haven for eastern mud salamanders. But now Illya noticed no trace of the amphibian's vivid red coloring amid the mostly decaying vegetation.

"How long before the ecosystem is entirely destroyed?" asked Dr. Stroller with noticeable enthusiasm.

"A matter of mere months," the MUD's creator provided the requested information.

"Efficient work, Mademoiselle Coté," Victor Marton praised the lady, though with noticeably less enthusiasm than his colleague.

"Thrush would of course never accept less, Monsieur Marton," Lillie responded with a cool smile.

"And there is no counteragent available?" Khve-ish Illya ventured. The question seemed a reasonable one, and therefore should not raise suspicions regarding him. Except perhaps in the mind of one particular platinum-blond Thrush femme fatale.

"Intense ultraviolet light," admitted Lillie factually. "But the intensity actually required is way beyond what this stretch of wooded wilderness would ever naturally receive."

"So the results are, therefore, permanent?" Miss Witherspoon sought final confirmation.

Lillie nodded. "Virtually. Even should, by some freak of nature, the necessary intensity of ultraviolet light ever reach this area, the ecosystem would by that point be so compromised that recovery would be all but impossible."

As the others gathered murmured their expressions of admiration, Illya controlled his urge to gag. Thrush playing with the very foundations of life itself. How like those of the supra-nation to believe one of their own somehow commendable for creating the means to wield such unrestrained and unnatural power.

Angelique yawned, doing nothing to censor her jaded reaction to the session of “show-and-tell” going on about the “laudable” capabilities of the MUD.

“Am I boring you, Mademoiselle La Chien?” inquired Lillie with a distinctly chilled edge to her vocal tone.

“Not at all, Mademoiselle Coté,” Angelique reassured the other woman, though with a smile equally as chilly as Lillie’s previous tone. “I just have never been one to much value the beauty, or lack thereof, of the great outdoors.”

“Mon compatriote parisienne préférè à employer ses talents considerables dedans²⁷,” Victor Marton remarked with a wink-wink sly smile to Lillie.

“Vraiment?²⁸” was all Lillie responded in return.

Illya watched this exchange with hidden amusement. It was crystal-clear these two quite deadly Thrush females did not in the least like, or even respect, one another.

“Should we travel back to the compound now, madam?” Jason Omvét interjected into the conversation this mundane question of Lillie. “Luncheon is to be served in approximately two hours and our guests, I’m sure, will wish to tidy up before the afternoon meal.”

“Yes, Omvét, let us make our way back,” conceded Lillie. “After all, we wouldn’t want to subject Mademoiselle La Chien to any more of the great outdoors than she can graciously tolerate.”

Angelique politely nodded her supposed appreciativeness while her eyes narrowed in complete animosity toward the other woman ...causing Illya to find it necessary to inwardly suppress an impulse to laugh right out loud.

Napoleon Solo awoke to find himself a continued prisoner within the Gazerie. The location of his incarceration confused him as Lillie had herself stated that this was not a cell. Yet here he still was, albeit freed from the hammock bed now and instead confined by a manacle on one ankle that sported a long lead chain. The length was sufficient for him to traverse much of the area of the Gazerie, coming up only about six feet shy of the transparent columns that weren’t really bars.

He couldn’t know of course that Fabhcun, as Security Chief of the facility, has objected strongly to the U.N.C.L.E. agent not being subsequently moved to a more standard lockup after his night of fulfilling Lillie’s “most intimate desires”. But Lillie had been adamant. A certain someone wanted Solo kept where he could be observed at will. And Fabhcun, well aware of the identity of the certain someone, had reluctantly obeyed Lillie’s orders in this regard.

So, after the demeaning activities of the previous night, Solo had been drugged once more. This time with a powerful sedative. While he was thus unconscious, a contingent of Fabhcun’s “falconers” had removed the bindings that kept him still in the hammock and fitted him with the more movement-friendly chained ankle manacle. He had not, however, been clothed in any way, or even provided any type of physical covering, and thus remained fully naked as he took stock of the limitations of his captivity.

²⁷ My Parisian compatriot much prefers to employ her considerable talents indoors.

²⁸ You don’t say?

Napoleon was still keenly aware of the multitude of cameras mounted seemingly everywhere in the Gazerie. He knew he was being watched. To what exact purpose, he wasn't sure, but he suspected it had less to do with logistical security and more to do with voyeuristic curiosity on someone's part. He didn't much appreciate the idea of that. Under normal circumstances he likely would have searched for something to use to pick the lock on the manacle, so he feigned doing this for his observer's benefit. Yet he knew in this case he had to stay put until he received some signal from Illya that the mission had been completed. As to what exactly would constitute the ultimate completion of that mission, he remained acutely uncertain.

On edge and unusually self-conscious regarding his nudity, Solo walked the circuit permitted by his ankle chain again and again. He was all but jumping out of his own skin. Memories of the night before haunted him, filling him with humiliation and confusion. He had bedded Thrush ladies many times before, but that had been different. They had never used him like Lillie had, and he had never used any of them in such a manner either.

Sex could be an effective weapon to be sure, and he had employed it as such when necessary and had it employed on him as well. But never with such complete indifference on the part of one party for the... Well, he couldn't say feelings... Maybe the correct concept was dignity. The dignity of either party. He had never crossed that line himself, and had never had it crossed by others with regard to him ...until last night by Lillie Coté.

"She is absolutely insufferable," complained Lillie of another Thrush femme fatale.

"She has done more than competent work for the Hierarchy," countered her male companion during this private luncheon.

"Fatuously bedding U.N.C.L.E. agents," counter-countered Lillie dryly.

"To be sure," conceded the man. "But her results with regard to obtaining information through such means cannot be denied, bien-aimée."

"And what information has she obtained through such means from Napoleon Solo?" baited Lillie quite pointedly.

The man laughed lightly. "None. Or at least none that U.N.C.L.E. did not in the end wish us to know for reasons of their own. Many within the organization have questioned her marked predilection for Solo, I do admit. It teeters on the edge of acceptable risk versus possible reward. Angelique, however, thrives on games of cat-and-mouse. It is how she performs her best work in our behalf. Therefore I and my associates tolerate her debatable penchant ...for the present.

"Well, I dislike having to tolerate her haughty persona," Lillie grumbled, "with her disapproving moues and snide insinuations".

"Then put her in her place, ma chère," suggested the man with a sly smile. "You do have a viable means available to you," he furthered as he glanced toward the monitors showing Solo in his enforced confinement in the Gazerie.

Lillie's eyes followed those of her Council lover. Then she smiled a languidly lethal smile. "Use her possibly problematic peccadillo against her?"

"It can be said, my darling Lillie, that your particular form of consort with the enemy is... more on point with Thrush goals," acknowledged this member of the Supreme Council. "Humiliating an

U.N.C.L.E. agent provides an extremely invigorating emotional high for those of us who have to deal with these all-too-capable men in a much different capacity. To see the suavely composed and tactically gifted Napoleon Solo debased in such a simple manner. No torture or deprivation that only serves to reinforce his personal heroism and adamant commitment to the causes of the Command. Just...”

The Councilman halted his words, his face showing his almost euphoric elation at this turn of events.

“Sex on my terms,” provided Lillie with a definite gleam in her eye.

Her companion nodded and smiled approvingly. “Angelique could undoubtedly benefit from a demonstration on how sex can be wielded as a scalpel to eviscerate an U.N.C.L.E. agent’s obstinate pride,” he finalized.

“Miss Coté has abandoned us today for other premises it would seem,” Illya remarked offhandedly to Jason Omvet. The Russian had immediately taken note of Lillie’s absence from this afternoon’s luncheon two days after the dramatic reveal of the adversely affected streambed. He had as well previously taken note that Jason Omvet, while ever dutiful as his position demanded, displayed a secretly disapproving attitude toward Lillie Coté and her extravagant circus of a Thrush scientific achievement conference.

“She had a more private engagement,” responded Omvet dryly, his tone seemingly neutral. Yet Illya detected its quiet undertone of... Well, it was difficult to put a name to that undertone. Not bitterness. Not exactly censure. Something on the periphery of both emotions, yet never completely falling into the full depth of either.

After what had been disclosed about the MUD during various presentations and expositions by its creator, Illya knew this mission could not be of a generic “destroy the production source and the stored resource” variety. Release of any stored MUD from the compound would amount to virtually sabotaging the surrounding environment. He had to find a way to seal the MUD inside the facility until it could be properly dealt with by U.N.C.L.E.’s science division. Explosives could work, if – and that was a big if – if they were properly placed. But to suitably set such pyrotechnics required knowledge of the structure of the storage tanks. And Lillie hadn’t yet so much as walked them through that part of the fabrication of the MUD.

“I found Miss Coté’s demonstration regarding the MUD the other morning quite intriguing,” lied Khve-ish Illya quite smoothly.

Jason nodded. “The MUD has the potential to give Thrush complete control of the world’s food supplies by cherry-picking which locations are contaminated and which are not.”

“And controlling the world’s food supplies means having the world’s human population kowtowing to our global designs in order to keep their bellies full,” supplemented Illya with a ready smile.

“Indeed.” Omvet returned the smile, the idea of future undeniable earthly supremacy of the supranation acting as a dopaminergic endorphin to his very Thrush soul.

“Though quite a large amount of the material will need to be produced to accommodate any such plan of action.”

“Of course, Doctor. Yet we have stored under this very building more than enough to begin the process on a quite sufficient level.”

“Oh?” prodded Illya innocently. “Miss Coté has not yet given us any tour of the storage area. Perhaps that is on tomorrow’s agenda.”

“No,” Jason negated any such expectation. “Miss Coté prefers the visuals the MUD provides when covering the bodies of the nude wrestlers she insists on having as entertainment. The grand view of it as an ocean of impending devastation escapes her abilities of optical appreciation.” And now the undertone of censure was definitely less hidden. “Storage of the material does not interest her. She monitors the production and then assumes whatever is created will be stockpiled as necessary.”

“That seems a bit short-sighted,” suggested Illya.

Omvet merely shrugged.

“But then again I suppose such is no more than an indication of how great is her faith in your talents to oversee such details.”

“I do my job,” Omvet downplayed his own importance with all proper mild-mannered comptroller humility.

Still, there could be no doubt Omvet preened with pride at such a compliment paid his efficiency. Illya surmised the man felt undervalued by the undoubted mistress of this project. That he perceived his part in this great coup of Thrush science as being constantly disregarded by Lillie Coté ...and likely by Central itself.

“And do it very well, I’m sure.” Illya laid on the praise a bit more thickly.

Omvet smiled a much warmer smile now as he suggested, “Perhaps, Dr. Palavandishvili, you would like to view the storage system?”

“I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble,” demurred Khve-ish Kuryakin with all seeming deference to the possibility of posing a burden to the other man.

“Nonsense, no trouble at all!” Omvet was all but beaming. “I think you will find a tour of the ways and means used to contain the MUD equally as intriguing as any dissertation on the properties of the substance itself.”

The fifty male and fifty female wrestlers were energetically grappling with each other in the MUD. Mixed competitions were on the entertainment menu during this evening’s meal. This provided for some rather salacious visuals to be sure as the slicked nude bodies tumbled and gripped one another in manners certainly not in accordance with any rules of Hoyle. Angelique La Chien, however, was indifferent to the entire spectacle. Not that she didn’t enjoy a spicy peepshow now and again. It was just that this was all so... well, to be honest, it was all just so Lillie Coté. And she frankly couldn’t stand anything at all about the other woman. Even her expertly coordinated “circuses” thus left Angelique nothing more than irked and apathetic.

“You are rather listless tonight, ma chère,” noted Victor Marton of her unhidden mood.

“All this,” remarked Angelique with a wave of her hand toward the wrestlers. “Don’t you find it rather ostentatious? As well as somewhat tasteless? Are we citizens of ancient Rome to be lulled by such bacchanalian fests?”

Marton chuckled softly. “Since when have you objected to being feted with extravagant pageants?”

Angelique’s only response was a disinterested shrug of her shoulders.

Marton tilted his head as he assessed her openly. “You are so much jealous of Mademoiselle Coté?”

“She is not half the operative for the organization that I am,” hissed out Angelique somewhat defensively.

“Her talents are not yours,” agreed Victor readily, “but then yours are not hers either. There is room for you both within the higher echelons of Thrush.”

“She rides her lover’s trousers to preeminence!” protested La Chien.

Marton quickly raised a finger to her lips. “Be cautious what you say, Angelique,” he advised in a tone barely above a whisper. “Never assume it goes unheard.”

Angelique’s response to that warning was a wicked nip to the finger Victor had raised to her lips.

“Oh putain de merde!” exclaimed Marton as he moved his digit away from her offending teeth and shook it vigorously. “I offer sound advice and you react like a rabid bitch! I’ll forsake you to your own devices then. Do not come crying to me when they leave you stranded in deep waters ...or stuck neck-high in mud so to speak.” With that final counsel, Victor bounced up off his couch, turned on his heel and sought out more gracious companionship at another table.

Blissfully alone, Angelique ruminated on something that she had been privy to this afternoon: the satrapy comptroller Jason Omvet providing that strange little Georgian-cum-Portuguese microbiologist with a tour of the MUD storage tanks. She supposed it wasn’t all that odd that Palavandishvili should have an interest in seeing those. Still, no one else had requested such a tour. In general the gathered Thrush were intent upon understanding the results the MUD could achieve, not the specifics on how it was being stockpiled. The overriding tendency was to assume organizational bean-counters like Omvet would efficiently manage such daily-grind details.

She had secretly trailed the two men as far as she could. Not wanting to give herself away, she had to refrain from following them into some of the highly restricted areas of the underground warehousing station. Yet she had seen and heard enough to get a sense that Palavandishvili was asking some very particular questions about the MUD storage facility. Omvet had apparently been so flattered by the man’s obvious interest that such inquiries hadn’t raised any red flags with him. But the same was not true of Angelique. Her instincts were warning her there was something amiss in all this. That something was positively itching at her brain, but it was an itch she couldn’t find a means to scratch... at least not yet.

“Miss La Chien?”

The questioning voice summoned Angelique out of her private thoughts.

“Monsieur Omvet,” she greeted the comptroller with a winning if crooked smile.

“Your presence is requested,” the man furthered.

“Requested?” queried Angelique in some bewilderment. “Requested by whom?”

Omvet stood straighter. “That I cannot say.”

Victor’s warning shot through her brain with all the intensity of a speeding bullet... *“Be cautious what you say... Never assume it goes unheard.”*

“You are to follow me,” Jason stated directly to the point.

“I suppose I have little choice,” she agreed with a much less winning and even more crooked smile.

Omvet made no reply. So Angelique simply rose from the couch at what had become a private dinner table and followed his lead out of the noisy dining hall with its crowd of unnoticed revelers.

The tour of the MUD storage tanks had proven useful to Illya, actually much more than simply useful. It had provided him with confirmation that the unique setup of the tanks could allow, with careful placement, for detonation of explosive charges to effectively seal the tanks output conduits. The process would be something of a gamble, and Illya didn’t like that he had to bet on doing all just right to insure the local environment would not be permanently poisoned. But there really wasn’t another way. Any outward threat to the facility and the tanks could be summarily emptied into the environs in a truly amazing short span of time: minutes as opposed to hours. (A fact of which Omvet was justly proud.) There wouldn’t be time for an U.N.C.L.E. scientific response team to staunch the flow before massive damage was done. No, the proper placement of explosives to seal the tanks into themselves was the only way forward. He would just have to depend on his years of experienced expertise and extensive training in that regard to make it actually work.

The first tally point of this plan though was actually getting in hand the explosives required to do the deed. With that in mind, the disguised Illya “took a stroll” around the compound, being sure to greet each guard on duty and chat amiably with more than one of them. He had done this right from the first night of the conference, so that it wouldn’t seem an odd thing for him to do on any given night. He knew where it was “safe”, relatively speaking, to access his communicator shielded by a special signal diverter Section VIII had recently created for the instrument.

“Open Channel D.”

“Channel D open.”

“What have you to report, Mr. Kuryakin?” Waverly’s voice immediately interrupted the usual course of channeled communications with Headquarters.

“Sir, this is going to prove somewhat tricky,” stated Illya bluntly. “The storage facility for the MUD has been well thought out. Raiding the compound won’t be a solution for keeping the stockpile from being released into the wilds.”

“Your solution, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“There is only one, sir. I will have to set charges to seal the outlet routes for the MUD, burying it in an enclosed steel tomb, so to speak.”

“If that is the only means, then do it, young man.”

Unknown to his superior, Illya bit his lip in private consternation. Sometimes Mr. Waverly could be very cavalier with regard to his expectations of his operatives successfully doing whatever had to be done.

"I intend to, sir," Illya granted in an even tone of voice that gave no clue as to his private trepidation in this regard. "To that end, I will need certain explosives made available where I can retrieve them."

"Of course, of course. Run the list by Miss Rogers, as well as give her the location where such materiel can be safely stowed for your later pickup. Provide us intelligence on when you are ready to collapse the tanks, and a raid of the compound will be coordinated close upon that act."

"Yes sir."

"We also need the formula, Mr. Kuryakin. We cannot have Thrush moving elsewhere to create more of this hazard."

"I doubt, sir, that the formula has been shared with anyone by its creator. She is rather proprietary of her power."

"A she is it? Well then we will have to insure that the woman is captured during our raid. Something else you will need to see to, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Yes sir," responded Illya simply. He had expected that.

"And you must ascertain positively that the formula has not been provided to others by its creator."

"Yes sir." Illya kept up his duty-bound responses.

"You have your orders, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Sir, if I may," Illya put in quickly before Waverly could summarily sign off.

"What is it?"

"I have some concerns ...about Mr. Solo."

"Mr. Solo can take care of himself," came Waverly's brusque retort. "He knows how to keep Thrush off-balance."

"Of course, sir," Illya conceded less-than-willingly.

"Carry on. Waverly out."

And the communication line went dead.

Angelique was escorted by Jason Omvet into a well-appointed suite of rooms on the uppermost floor of the compound building. The apartment was grandly furnished in an undeniably impressive style. No cost had apparently been spared in its decoration. It also displayed a great deal of high-tech gadgetry, the purpose of which Angelique could only surmise.

"You are to wait here," Omvet informed her simply.

“For?” she queried.

Jason didn’t answer; he merely bowed and made his exit.

“For me,” came a male voice from behind Angelique.

She turned to address the speaker. Her recognition of him was immediate, though truth be told she had never before set eyes on him. However, she wasn’t a fool. She knew how to put two and two together to make four... or rather in this particular case one and one to make two.

“You flatter me, sir, with such a private invitation,” Angelique remarked with one of her trademark crooked smiles.

The man chuckled. “All my invitations are private, my dear Angelique. I know better than to make a public spectacle of myself.”

“Pity you haven’t yet managed to teach your... protégé shall we call her? Your protégé such circumspection. She seems overly fond of acting as the master of ceremonies at a three-ring circus.”

“And you object to circuses?”

Angelique gave an elegant shrug. “It depends on the occasion, I would think.”

“And you do not believe the creation of the MUD and the future manipulation of human populations it can herald for Thrush to be such an occasion?”

“Science is not my forte. I prefer much more... up close and personal means of manipulating humans to benefit Thrush.”

The man chuckled once more. “So I am aware,” he granted easily.

“Am I to be punished for my lack of enthusiasm for the expanded boundaries of Thrush science embodied in the MUD?” Angelique asked point-blank.

“Oh no, my dear,” the man assured her. “Thrush needs many means of manipulation. Scientific advancements are but one such means. I am fully familiar with your record of success in the more up close and personal means of manipulation, I do guarantee you.”

“That is uplifting to hear. My spirit soars.”

The man smiled. “Never without sarcasm.”

“It is my method of coping with nerves.”

“And I make you nervous?”

“Isn’t that your intention?”

The man only smiled again in response.

“Come; sit,” he invited her after a somewhat uncomfortable (on her part) long moment of silence. With a casual wave of his hand, he indicated a white satin sofa set almost in the very center of this main ‘living room’.

With a gracious nod of her head, Angelique accepted the invitation. She knew better than to bolt or otherwise upset the very delicate balance of this appartment. Once seated, she crossed her legs at the knee, revealing a goodly portion of creamy-fleshed thigh. The man took notice but again said nothing. This woman was nothing if not bold.

“As I have stated, Angelique,” confided the man in an easy tone as he sat himself beside her on the settee ...up very close indeed, “Thrush has need of many means of manipulation, not just scientific ones. Yet I fear you view Lillie through a jaundiced eye. You should understand that she knows well how to use less... technological means of human manipulation. Consider the U.N.C.L.E. agent we have currently confined. The great Napoleon Solo himself: a man with the mind of a chess player, the heart of a lion and the soul of a dreamer.”

“A do-gooder, like all agents of U.N.C.L.E.,” summarized Angelique quickly. She did not like this turn in the conversation. Her unease was growing exponentially... though she sublimated it behind a nonchalant exterior.

“Unquestionably. And all Thrush must admit such men will suffer much for their beliefs,” counter-summarized the Supreme Councilman. “Torture of various kinds seems only at times to strengthen their convictions. Yet there do exist... assaults shall we call them? Assaults that can effectively throw off-balance their noble self-assurance.”

“Indeed?” inquired Angelique with a calm she was far from feeling.

The man nodded. “Let us see a demonstration of just such an unbalancing assault, shall we?”

With that he reached over to the coffee table and pressed a button that brought down directly before them a large projection screen. Angelique could swear she had never seen such a large monitor within a private establishment. Another few button presses and other smaller screens surrounded the couch in a virtual forest of audiovisual technology. Sensually riveting images appeared on the screens as definitely attention-grabbing vocal “noises” filled the room. What was displayed was video feed from seemingly every conceivable angle and perspective of a naked Napoleon Solo secured in place on a hammock-like bed while an equally naked and definitely in control Lillie Coté performed very one-sided carnal “assaults” on him. What was heard were the guttural expressions of Lillie’s unbridled physical pleasure in the performance of those assaults.

Angelique kept her face an indifferent mask, but her soul was filled with... with anger. Anger: fierce and raw. She had herself slept with Napoleon many times. Used her body to try and wheedle secrets from him. Yet she had never exploited his sexuality as callously as Lillie was doing; worked him like some erogenous toy to fulfill her private erotic peccadilloes.

From the corner of her eye, Angelique observed the high-and-mighty Supreme Councilman as he took in every detail the voyeuristic milieu afforded. He was panting and all but drooling. A damn peeping Tom: that was all the man was. Someone who watched because he more than likely couldn’t do. He was not worthy of the respect he received from those of Thrush. He was a poor pathetic excuse for a man. And Angelique would never forget that. She too was a master manipulator, though her power-ensconced companion seemed to not be currently taking this indisputable fact into account.

When the “demonstration” was over and the screens returned to their hidey-holes, Angelique rose casually from the sofa. She kept her feelings: her disgust, her scorn and chiefly her anger, carefully concealed.

“I thank you for the evening’s entertainment,” she mouthed the nicety with all seeming meekness. “It was most enlightening.”

The man smiled. “I had hoped it would be.

“Yet not likely in the way it has been,” thought Angelique inwardly as outwardly she gave the man her best crooked smile in return.

Napoleon Solo had lost track of exactly how many days (and, more to the point, nights) he had been locked up in the Gazerie. Was it five? Six? A full week? He had had no contact, even of the most abstruse variety, with Illya. He thus had no clue how the mission was progressing ...or even if it was progressing at all. He felt fully trapped in a scenario in which he had not the minutest fleck of control and his spirit was inexorably drifting toward despair.

“That’s a ridiculous reaction, Solo,” he mentally scolded himself. *“You know things could be much worse. They could be torturing you in a hundred different sadistic ways.”*

But that internal rebuke did no good. Thrush might not be beating him into unconsciousness with fists and billy clubs or juicing him into senselessness with electric current; nonetheless he felt tortured in a much more capricious way. Beatings and juicings at least had an obvious goal. What the ultimate goal was in Lillie Cote’s sexual muggings, Napoleon remained unsure.

To be honest the drug with which he was being regularly injected to ramp up his libido wasn’t helping his emotional stability either. The concoction left him edgy, ready at the slightest stimulus to all but jump out of his own skin. The only reason he slept at all was because his captors provided a drug for that purpose as well; a heavy barbiturate that knocked his metabolism for a loop with all the force of a prizefighter’s left hook.

“I gotta get out of here,” he thought desperately. *“Illya, come on, buddy. Let’s get this all over with... please.”*

But there was of course no one to hear his silent and somewhat frantic plea.

The tromp of heavy boots turned Napoleon’s attention from its inward focus to an outward one as he watched Emile Fabhcun approach the non-bar barring translucent columns of his non-prison prison. Stopping short far enough away to not come within arm reach of Solo, Fabhcun carelessly slid a tray of food toward the ankle-chained man. “Mealtime,” the Thrush Security Chief stated tersely.

“Breakfast, lunch or dinner?” pressed Napoleon with a crooked smirk.

“Does it matter?” Fabhcun responded coldly. “Just don’t spill any of the hot stuff on yourself, nature boy,” he further commented in reference to Solo’s constant naked state.

“Would that irritate the lady of the house?” Napoleon recklessly grasped at this straw. Dropping down to his knees, he lifted from the tray a plastic cup holding coffee by the look and smell of the contents. He then purposely spilled it over his seemingly now permanently half-hard penis. The liquid was lukewarm at best.

Now it was Fabhcun who smirked. "Sorry, nature boy, but Miss Coté knows exactly how to allow for contingencies born of desperation."

"I'm not desperate," protested Solo. "After all I have a clean room, a comfortable bed, and adequate food from my captors. Why would such treatment lead to desperation on my part?"

Fabhcun continued smirking. "No clue, nature boy. Not the slightest."

With that the Thrush Security Chief turned to go, but then turned back for a moment to observe smugly, "Oh, you'll notice you also have plastic cutlery as well as plastic dishware. Sorry if you find it difficult to cut your meat, but we all have our frustrations, no?"

Bursting into a round of rather raucous laughter, Fabhcun finally departed the premises ...leaving Napoleon again alone with his ever-growing desperation.

Illya was getting desperate too, though for entirely different reasons. The confab was rapidly drawing to a close. In fact some of the Thrush invitees had already said their farewells to the "hostess" and made their departures from the compound. And he hadn't yet found an avenue to pick up the explosive stash from the hidden location. For the last few nights Dr. Stroller had insisted on joining him in his nightly "constitutional". He knew he couldn't try too overtly to dissuade the German in this as that would do nothing but put himself under suspicion. So he waited... the clock ticking and his patience growing thin.

His concern for his partner was now an insistent needle piercing the calm of his waking brain. He had seen neither hide nor hair of Solo since the man had first been captured during the check-in procedure for the conference. He had only heard innuendoes about Solo's possible treatment, nothing concrete or verifiable. He didn't even have a clue where exactly Napoleon was being held. And if he was frustrated by the lack of opportunity to secure and plant the necessary explosives, Illya was equally frustrated by the lack of information regarding Solo's current predicament.

Thus was he today taking a possibly unwise risk by "strolling" after breakfast rather than his usual routine of doing so after dinner. This at least kept him clear of Stroller's company as the German biologist had taken to enjoying a dip in the compound pool after the morning meal. Accordingly Illya made his way to the area where he expected the explosives to be hidden with perhaps less caution than he would normally employ. He wanted to get this done quickly, before he was missed by this or that Thrush who had "befriended" the mild-mannered Georgian microbiologist Khveli Palavandishvili during the course of this combination Thrush scientific exposé and bacchanalian fete. The disguised Illya had, after all, gone out of his way to be approachable and friendly as one never knew what unexpected intelligence might come by way of casual conversation.

Undetected by the admittedly somewhat distracted U.N.C.L.E. agent, one of those who had so befriended Palavandishvili clandestinely trailed him as he made his way toward the pick-up point. The Thrush in question was blonde, dark-eyed and sporting a crooked smile. She kept her peace as Illya knelt and dug into the ground, unearthing a satchel that he then hefted from its previously buried location.

"What have you there?" questioned Angelique as she came out into the open, cocked semi-automatic pistol very noticeably in hand.

Illya closed his eyes. Damn, it was too late. All too late.

“Aren’t you going to answer me, Illya?” pressed Angelique as she drew closer. “Don’t stand up and don’t even think about heaving that satchel at me,” she warned. “You know damn well I am an excellent quick-shot and you’d be dead before it so much as grazes me.”

“I’ll concede your advantage on that score,” grudgingly allowed Illya.

“And I’ll concede your disguise is very good,” allowed Angelique in turn. “It’s the sole reason it took me so long to peg you.”

“So what now, Angelique?” prompted Kuryakin. “You parade me into the compound to the admiring shouts and cheers of your assembled feathered friends? Another captured U.N.C.L.E. agent to crown the achievements of this conference?”

“I don’t give a damn about this conference,” spat out Angelique. “And I certainly have no intention of placing any kind of crown on the head of the garish Quebecois tanager who is sponsoring it.”

And there it was: his chance, imbedded in Angelique’s jealousy and hatred of Lillie Coté. “Then your plans are?” prodded Illya.

“I want you to get Napoleon out,” demanded the Thrush femme fatale without prologue.

“Why?” pressed Illya.

“Does it matter why?” Angelique groused angrily. “It’s what you want to do in any case, isn’t it?”

“I need to do much more than simply get Napoleon out of here.”

“Oh yes, of course. You have a mission of some kind, don’t you? Let me guess: you need to destroy the MUD. Thus the compound must be blown to smithereens with all of us Inconvenient Thrush inside. And that bag is full of your usual pyrotechnics to do the job good and proper.”

“Partly right,” confessed Illya.

“Partly?”

“The bag is full of explosives,” he admitted, “but the compound isn’t to be blown to smithereens, as you so colorfully put it.”

“No?” doubted Angelique with sarcasm dripping in abundance from that single word.

Illya shook his head. “No,” he reiterated. “It would be too dangerous. Blowing up the compound would release the MUD into the local environs.”

“How unfortunate,” derisively commiserated the Thrush.

“I only want to plant charges to seal the MUD into its holding tanks.”

“Only,” Angelique mocked.

“And you don’t really care about that either, do you, Angelique?” Illya played his trump card. “I mean the MUD is a crowning achievement for Lillie Coté, isn’t it?”

“Cette salope perverse! La seule couronnement je veux pour elle c'est l'éloge funèbre sa facilitateur Conseil délivre à sa tombe!²⁹” Angelique exploded with a vicious tirade in French.

“Temper tantrums will get you no closer to such an aim. But helping me might,” proposed Illya with a purposely ingenuous smile.

Act IV: “la perception de ma propre position”

Illya found negotiating with Angelique to be a definite challenge. She knew without a doubt that she had the upper-hand in this scenario and she had no intention of relinquishing that advantage. There were of course conditions for her aid. She demanded he wait one more day to attempt his plan of exploding the storage tank outlet ports. She wouldn't say exactly why, but Illya more than suspected there were certain Thrush she wanted to insure got out before the blasts and the hard-upon coordinated U.N.C.L.E. raid of the facility. She insisted – though even that was absolutely too casual a term – that he take his leave of the conference as Khveli Palavandishvili that very afternoon. She stated non-categorically that she would get him back inside the compound as needed to set and subsequently detonate the charges.

“I'll need a diversion,” Illya forwarded to the woman who had for the nonce become his collaborator.

“To plant the charges unnoticed,” agreed Angelique.

“Do you think you could manage something?” Illya further prompted since his questionable ally offered no suggestions on her own.”

“Do you think me incompetent?” spat out Angelique with acid quickness.

“Far from incompetent,” conceded Illya. “But I do wonder if you might just be stringing me along to subsequently push me into Thrush clutches and thereby paint yourself as a heroine.”

“Darling, you're just not that important to Thrush,” Angelique dismissed this idea with rather offensive nonchalance.

“But the MUD...” he furthered, leaving the rest unsaid.

“Is a method of control that is no more than theoretical at this point. Science sometimes has unforeseen downsides.”

She was right in that of course, and Illya had to mentally acknowledge the unvarnished realism of the argument.

“So?” Illya again pressed.

“So I will find the means to make a diversion, never fear,” the Thrush femme fatale spelled out bluntly.

“And Napoleon? You know where he is being held?”

²⁹ That perverted bitch! The only crowning achievement I want for her is the funeral eulogy her Council enabler delivers at her graveside!

"I know it is not a place you can just waltz into and take him out of," prevaricated Angelique. "But I will get him where he can escape once U.N.C.L.E. makes its strategic incursion into the compound."

"And I am to trust in that?"

"You are to take responsibility for properly setting your damnable pyrotechnic toys and getting word to your irritating Command playmates on the timing of the raid! Leave the rest to me."

"I'm not sure I like that arrangement." Illya made known his reservations.

"It is the only arrangement you are going to get! So deal with it, Illya, because to get this done you will have to deal with me ...on my terms."

Illya said nothing. He knew it was wiser not to do so. Yet silencing the unspoken thoughts that were roiling about in his head was not so easy. The outcome of his assigned task, as well as likely Napoleon's life, now depended on the cooperation of an enemy. And not just any enemy, but rather one who Illya personally disdained and who equally disdained him. Still, he really had no choice. His mission required he do whatever was necessary to achieve final success.

"Will you require vehicular transport to the public heliport, Dr. Palavandishvili?" Jason Omvet asked officially of the microbiologist packing to take his leave of the conference.

"No need," Khve-ish Illya assured the other man. "I haven't much kit and the day is fine. I really would enjoy the walk."

"As you wish," granted Omvet.

"Please do convey my sincere congratulations to our hostess on her amazing biochemical accomplishment and express my equally as sincere regrets at not being able to personally bid her farewell."

Jason nodded. "She had another private appointment this afternoon," he mentioned briefly.

"Of course," Illya allowed. "She is no doubt a very busy woman. In fact I wondered about her personal oversight of so much of the MUD production on a daily basis. Surely there are assisting technicians who could take over some of the quotidian accountabilities for the process?"

"Alas, Miss Coté does not permit herself any such lightening of the burden," mouthed Omvet politely, though his personal opinion on the matter might, by his vocal tone, be surmised as somewhat in opposition to such studied politeness. "The MUD is her creation in its entirety," he revealed in a surprisingly careless manner. "She shares its elemental specifics with no one."

"*Bingo!*" Illya commended himself on having succeeded with so little effort to wheedle from the comptroller the particular tidbit of information he was after. "*So no one else within Thrush has the formula it would seem but one Lillie Coté.*"

"Well, as a fellow scientist I cannot fault her in that," the supposed mild-mannered Georgian microbiologist stated with a gently indulgent smile. "Our technological innovations become rather like our children. Thus it is difficult to ever place them fully in another's care."

“I must admit I have not the mindset of a scientist,” Omvet prefaced a statement of his concerns. “However, as comptroller for this project, I would rest easier in my bed knowing the formula for the MUD could be accessed by some method, even should something untoward happen to Miss Coté.”

Illya suppressed his smirk.

“And what such unpleasantness could ever happen?” he falsely comforted the other man. “Thrush is as always resolutely efficient in its security measures.”

That sentiment received a perfunctory nod from Omvet as inwardly Illya laughed.

“Ah, Angelique,” remarked Victor Marton as he entered the open door to her room, “I have been seeking you.”

“To some purpose?” questioned the Thrush femme fatale with naught but languid interest.

“Just to bid you adieu, ma chère,” Marton clarified with a smile. “I’m afraid I must take my leave for Paris immediately. Vital Thrush business.”

“Leaving this conference a few days early will likely cost you nothing in terms of real Thrush intelligence. After all, we have already been made privy to the salient points of the Quebecois’ biochemical weapon,” noted Angelique. “The rest of this gathering I suspect will be little more than a continuation of the bacchanalian revelries our hostess seems to so enjoy.”

Marton chuckled. “Those are indeed enjoyable to me as well, Angelique, but duty calls rather inopportunistly.”

“Keep well then, Victor, à la prochaine³⁰,” she bade the man affably as she pulled herself up on tiptoe and leaned in to give him a brief kiss on the cheek.

“À la prochaine, ma mignon,” Victor echoed her sentiment before turning back toward the door and his own room to pack.

Marton had not been out of her presence more than five minutes when her Thrush communicator began to chirrup. Removing a compact from a side-pocket in her sleek red slacks, Angelique proceeded to open the small round case to answer the communique.

“I did as you asked, Angelique,” came the male voice over the instrument.

“Yes, Victor just said his good-byes to me.”

“I will expect payback for the favor,” reminded the man on the other end of the conversation.

“And you will get it, never fear,” pledged Angelique. Promptly upon the completion of that ‘assurance’, she snapped shut the compact with an audible click, cutting off any further avenue for chat.

“*One down,*” she thought with internal satisfaction. “*Now to ascertain available means to safeguard the other.*”

³⁰ until next time (we meet)

With that foremost in her mind, Angelique took herself over to the dresser. Selecting a particular scent from the variety of crystal perfume bottles lined up on the bureau's surface, she applied a quite generous dose to her throat and décolleté. Then she too went seeking... for Emile Fabhcun.

In the late afternoon Fabhcun again took on the task of bringing a food tray to Solo. It was not that he needed to perform this duty himself, but he did so love goading the U.N.C.L.E. agent. As he made his way toward the Gazerie, he happened upon a totally and unselfconsciously naked Lillie Coté making her way out of that "playroom".

"Bit early in the day for your usual entertainment, isn't it?" he queried offhandedly of his superior.

Lillie gave him a sly, lopsided grin. "Never too early. And I had a special request from a certain someone."

"Indeed," was all Fabhcun could comment on that score. He didn't understand that certain someone's voyeuristic proclivities. Himself he much preferred to do rather than watch. "I suppose the prisoner won't be up for his meal then," the Security Chief subsequently concluded.

"I've sedated him after our pleasantly exhausting interlude, as I usually do. So no, he won't have need of food for several hours. However, I gave him a lighter dose as I want him awake for more stimulating entertainment again later this evening. He likely, therefore, will require a tray before being part of more such physically taxing encounters tonight."

"And stimulating entertainment is all he is to you, isn't he?" baited Emile somewhat sarcastically. "He is the Number 1 Enforcement Agent for U.N.C.L.E. North America and all you see fit to do with him is play."

"And what would you do with him, Emile?" Lillie inquired as her voice took on a subtly confrontational tone.

"Use any means possible to wrangle pertinent Command intelligence from him," readily responded the far-from-cowed Security Chief of the MUD facility and project.

Truth be told Fabhcun's belligerence was ramped up a bit beyond safe self-preservation limits. He had been talking with Angelique, who had expressed serious concern for the welfare of a certain someone within the compound. Emile had put the famed female operative's mind at rest on that score, reassuring her there was a plan in place to evacuate that someone should the need arise. Yet she had raised some very salient questions about what use Thrush was currently making of Napoleon Solo. "He likely could tell us a great deal ...with the right persuasion," Angelique had put into words what Emile had been thinking all along.

"Emile, Emile," teased Lillie with steel yet running through her coquettish approach with him, "you are too serious!" Seductively stroking the side of his jaw, she proposed, "Perhaps you should learn the personal pleasure provided by playing with the enemy."

Emile stiffened his spine. "Enemies are for killing," he declared succinctly.

"All in good time," counseled Lillie. "Central has its own designs for Napoleon Solo to be sure. Yet in the meanwhile he is mine to do with what I like. And what I'd like, Emile, is for you to frolic in MUD with this particular enemy."

"Frolicking is for those with no Thrush business to which they need attend."

“Frolicking is for whom I say when I say,” came Lillie’s flinty statement of authority. “And I say you will engage with Solo in the MUD for the enjoyment of all our guests. We will need to make a glorious event of such a prized match of course, and that will require a bit of preparation. Shall we say tomorrow then? As part of the performance theatre during the midday meal?”

Fabhcun swallowed the sour bile that had risen in his throat. So his humiliation was to be public. That fact stung his pride more than he would ever admit. And that was just the point, he wouldn’t admit that fact ever, and thus he would not argue this matter with Lillie Coté. She was sure to win the battle in any case, since a certain someone would undoubtedly do aught but reiterate her edict.

“As you say, madam,” conceded the Security Chief, bitterness dripping from every word but not so much as a hint of more aggressive resistance.

“It should make for a fine show.” Lillie anticipated the experience as she smiled a very self-satisfied smile. “Both of you are quite pleasing examples of male pulchritude,” she finalized as she looked the Security Chief up-and-down from head-to-toe.

Emile Fabhcun didn’t bother to thank the lady for the candid compliment.

As Lillie Coté made her announcement at dinner that evening about a “special treat” she had arranged for them all during the next day’s luncheon, Angelique had to suppress a desire to absolutely crow with triumph.

Fabhcun had been a willing fount of information. A few flirtatious words and actions, and the Security Chief had been putty in her hands. Of course a very up-close-and-personal deep whiff of the concoction imbued in her perfume hadn’t hurt either. It had made him a bit careless, a bit too bold of speech, a bit like a quarrelsome drunk.

Despite her outward pooh-poohing of Lillie’s MUD creation, Angelique was in no way anti-science when it came to means of seeking power. She just preferred more intimate methods; thus she had a few technological bagatelles of her own. The perfume was one of them. It contained a subtle pheromone that was activated by human male sweat. What it did was to amplify testosterone just enough to make the male in question somewhat more than usually reckless, perhaps unwisely aggressive in situations where normally his intellect would advise him to exercise more caution.

The immediate effect was that Fabhcun had revealed to Angelique more about the security measures surrounding the Supreme Councilman in residence than was surely prudent. She now knew about the private copter on the roof via which said personage could make good an escape from the complex. She also now knew that the standard pilot for the chopper was Jason Omvet. There were others in the Security Force who could fly the machine of course, among them Emile Fabhcun himself. Yet the main responsibility for seeing to the Councilman’s airborne getaway rested with Omvet.

Likewise did Angelique now have full reconnaissance information on the placement and scheduling of guards around various points of the facility. Such intelligence she could definitely utilize to get Illya back inside the compound. And now she had her diversion ...as well as a means for getting Solo out of the Gazerie and into the public hall where he could connect with U.N.C.L.E.’s raiding party when they entered the compound.

It was all risky in the extreme of course. However nothing worth having ever came without risk and Angelique had absolutely no qualms about taking such with not only her own life, but also with the lives of two oft-times irksome U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agents.

Not that Illya minded camping out in the wilderness, but he really hadn't any available gear to make this necessary outdoor sojourn more bearable. He had at least been able to remove his disguise and he found it positively liberating to be wearing his own skin again. Having managed to bag himself a rabbit, right now he was carefully tending the small fire over which its skinned and eviscerated carcass roasted on a branch spit. He knew he had to keep that fire completely controlled, as well as downwind of the compound. Yet going without food for some twenty-four hours would not be the way to be at his best when he planted the explosives, and the locations of the charges were absolutely key. He could not, therefore, risk being distracted by something as curable as a rumbling stomach.

Illya gave the spit another quarter-turn just as his communicator sounded a signal very different from its standard two-tone warble. He had set up a matched clandestine channel on both his own U.N.C.L.E. instrument and on Angelique's corresponding Thrush one so that they could get in touch with one another regarding the details of the plan. He certainly wasn't fool enough to give Angelique even temporary access to any standard U.N.C.L.E. communication frequency.

"Enjoying your night out under the stars, Illya?" asked Angelique over the wire, the non-up-close-and-personal nature of the mode of communication doing nothing to conceal the smugness in her tone.

"Do you have something of relevance to relate, Angelique?" queried Illya sourly. "The less we use this method of contact, the safer we both will be."

"Tomorrow," then stated Angelique with purposeful terseness. "During the luncheon carousing."

"You have a diversion in mind?"

"Tomorrow; during the usual lunchtime session; wait for my signal," was all the answer Illya received before Angelique deliberately cut off the connection.

"Damn spider woman!" Kuryakin cursed out his absent and unwanted colleague. "I swear if she tries spinning any of her nastily sticky webs to snare me, she won't live long enough to regret it."

"I do not like it, madam." Jason Omvet spoke out boldly regarding Lillie's decision to have Napoleon Solo and Emile Fabhcun wrestle in the MUD. "It poses an unnecessary risk."

"Have you no faith in our Security Chief's ability to subdue the U.N.C.L.E. agent?" baited Lillie with something of an entrapment leer. "You may calm those fears, Omvet. Solo will be suitably manacled and thus at quite a disadvantage during the match."

"Madam, my concerns have nothing at all to do with such picayune details," stated Omvet with as much patience as he could muster. "I have no vested interest whatsoever in the outcome of any meaningless pissing contest. I do, however, have a very vested interest in the reality that you are placing Solo in an environment where he could perhaps make good an escape."

"Surrounded by observing Thrush?" queried Lillie in feigned astonishment. Then she added pointedly, "Solo may be good, but he's not that good."

"Madam, you are taking the possibility of mishap in such a scenario far too lightly!" Omvet declared bluntly as the last of his patience snapped.

“Do not attempt to scold me like the schoolmaster disciplining a careless student!” snapped back Lillie in turn. “I am your superior. I am the head of this project. And I have the ear of the Supreme Council.”

“*Something in hand of one particular member of the Supreme Council undoubtedly,*” thought Omvet bitterly. He was weary of dealing with Lillie Coté and her private peccadilloes and pointless penchants. He was Thrush to his core, but Lillie Coté posed an almost unpassable test of his continued mental deference to the assumed wisdom of the leaders of the supra-nation.

“I will not be held responsible if something runs amiss,” he therefore flatly uttered his final word on this subject.

“And who asked you to take on any such responsibility, Omvet?” demanded an unmistakably furious Lillie. “You overstep your authority. You are naught but comptroller here, and I will see that you are removed from that post once this conference is complete.”

“As you will, madam,” acknowledged Omvet with a deferential nod of his head, though inside he was all but cheering the likelihood of being relieved of the constant trial of dealing with this unbearable woman.

“Yes, **my** will,” emphasized Lillie Coté before flouncing out of the small butler’s pantry where she had been cornered by her disapproving project comptroller regarding the upcoming MUD match. Her anger-fueled exit all but barreled her bodily into the person of Angelique La Chien.

“What burr has found its way under her saddle?” questioned Angelique as she entered the butler’s pantry where Omvet yet remained.

“You have a purpose here, Miss La Chien?” Jason, using his best comptroller’s tone, formally queried in return.

“I only came seeking a nightcap before bed,” replied Angelique with one of her trademark crooked smiles.

“Of course,” perfunctorily responded Omvet. “The liquor tray is there on the sideboard as usual.”

“I am well aware of where the liquor is made available. Of what I am not aware is why you seem so upset.”

Jason eyed her warily. She was a prominent Thrush field operative with a reputation well-earned for the sly cleverness of her intrigues. He thus wasn’t sure trusting her in any way was wise. But then again she was, like him, Thrush to the core ...and had as well, from what he had observed, no particular liking for Lillie Coté.

“I advised her against this ridiculous grandstanding competition between the captured U.N.C.L.E. agent and our Security Chief,” Omvet found himself relieving his mind of its lonely burden.

“And she pooh-poohed your sound advice,” surmised Angelique easily.

“Things could so easily get out-of-hand,” furthered the comptroller with a frustrated sigh.

“Indeed they could,” Angelique readily agreed. “Mademoiselle Coté is, I fear, very much underestimating Napoleon Solo.”

Jason sighed again in exhausted exasperation. “She will have her way.”

“Like a recalcitrant child. The MUD’s brilliant creator, it would seem, is far less brilliant when it comes to more commonplace concepts.”

“I can do nothing,” Omvet bemoaned unhappily.

“There I disagree,” put in Angelique with ingenious yet seemingly ingenuous simplicity.

Jason cocked his head as he gave her a questioning look.

“You can do nothing about the match of course,” Angelique conceded, “but you can provide for contingences in case of disaster.”

“I am not sure I follow.”

“It is elementary, darling. Lillie Coté indulges in her private brand of circus because a certain someone is soft on her. Yet softness of heart in that certain someone does not mean he should be put into jeopardy by her careless actions.”

“There are... designs to insure that does not happen.”

“I am certain there are,” granted Angelique with a remarkably charming smile. “I have noticed and do admire your efficiency, Monsieur Omvet.”

The comptroller preened at the compliment just as Angelique had anticipated he would. She recognized that his current superior likely seldom praised him and thus that he might be hungry for any small show of appreciation.

“I do my best,” Omvet prevaricated modestly.

“Without a doubt. Thus personally insuring all is in readiness – should any immediate need arise in that regard during this ill-advised contest between Solo and Fabhcun – is definitely a task I more than expect you to handle expertly. And be assured, should any such unfortunate circumstance come to fruition, I will be there to aid you however I can.”

Late the next morning Lillie arrived at the Gazerie uncustomarily accompanied by a coterie of some half-dozen rifle-toting goons. Seeing the approaching entourage, Napoleon prepared himself for likely transport to some secret torture chamber run by Thrush Central.

“I’m standing on the precipice, tovarisch,” Solo mentally cautioned the absent Illya. *“Please don’t let me fall over the edge.”*

“Eh bien, bonjour là, Napoléon.³¹” Lillie greeted him cheerily as she reached the stand of translucent columns. ““Vous-avez bien dormi?³²”

“Pourquoi une telle foule?³³” queried Napoleon directly to the point.

³¹ Well, hello there, Napoleon.

³² Did you sleep well?

³³ Why such a crowd?

“Ils serviront de garde d'honneur,³⁴” Lillie responded unhesitantly.

“Pour mon prochain voyage à Central, je présume?”³⁵

At that inquiry, Lillie burst into delighted laughter.

“I presume wrongly then?” probed Solo with a blink as he switched the conversation between them to English.

“At the moment, very wrongly,” Lillie acknowledged as she took his lead regarding the language of their continued dialogue. “Though admittedly that time will come, it is not yet.”

“Then?”

“You wish to find out more about the MUD, do you not?”

Napoleon felt a tightening of fear clutch at the muscles of his stomach, but he gave no outward sign of the inner dread her words instilled in him.

“U.N.C.L.E. wishes to find out more about the MUD. I am but their small means to that end,” Solo nonetheless clarified with perfect calm, though his heart was racing.

“Vous n'êtes pas du tout petit,³⁶” countered Lillie avariciously, again switching the exchange to French, as she focused a lascivious gaze upon one particular portion of his nude anatomy.

“I’m not sure I should take that as a compliment ...coming from you,” came Napoleon’s brusque retort as he stubbornly refused to again converse with her in her native tongue.

Lillie gave him a languid shrug. “Ca m'est égal,³⁷” she stated frankly. “I am here, with this company,” she furthered as she casually waved a hand toward the six Thrush musclemen, “to take you to the banqueting hall where you will participate in an undeniably visually appealing competition.”

“Competition?” repeated Napoleon in a questioning tone as his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“A physical match of skill and strength,” Lillie provided a bit more detail.

“To what end?” he demanded.

“For entertainment, my dear Mr. Solo. You are to serve as but a small means,” she paraphrased his previous declaration, “to amuse all those gathered together for this conference and to indulge a particular fantasy of mine.”

Napoleon’s brain was buzzing with apprehension. What the hell was she talking about? What the hell was going to happen to him now?

³⁴ They are to serve as a guard of honor.

³⁵ For my upcoming journey to Central, I presume?

³⁶ You are anything but small.

³⁷ I care not.

“What particular fantasy?” he asked guardedly.

“All in good time, Napoleon.” Lillie evaded making an immediate answer. “Yet do realize each and every member of this honor guard has a standing directive to, without hesitation, shoot you straight through the heart should you attempt any... shenanigans while being escorted to the dining hall. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Crystal,” confirmed Napoleon succinctly. In any case, he couldn’t attempt any such ‘shenanigans’ since he yet didn’t know the status of Illya’s portion of the mission. He would just have to endure as best he could whatever it was Lillie Coté had planned for him now.

The sun was nearly at its noontime zenith as Illya anxiously awaited Angelique’s signal that it was safe for him to sneak back into the compound. All around the area, hidden from sight and under a strict edict of radio silence, a large number of U.N.C.L.E. Section II, Section III, and even Section V personnel also waited. The signal these others anticipated would come from Illya himself in the distinctive form of blasts as he detonated the explosives to seal the outlets to the MUD holding tanks ...assuming all went according to plan. Right now Illya was getting a bit antsy, truth be told. He hated relying on the likes of Angelique to complete this mission, but there had been no choice. Still, he didn’t trust her not to betray him and the whole operation in the final minutes.

At last a quick specialized trill on his communicator indicated Angelique’s okay to attempt his stealthy entrance back into the facility. This he did through transport doors at the rear of the complex the two had previously targeted as the most likely break-in point. He entered the premises surprisingly without interference or incident, but was greeted by a rifle-toting Angelique once inside.

Taken aback, Illya asked acerbically, “Is this the part where you gun me down?”

“Don’t be such a predictable dolt, Illya,” replied his one-time adversary turned temporary ally. “Omvvet is drilling some of the sentries in a special evacuation procedure. So in the meanwhile I graciously volunteered to stand guard duty for an hour in this minor security location.”

“How obliging of you. And the ever-cautious Omvvet didn’t think to assign you a guard buddy?”

“Of course he did,” Angelique assured him as she pointed with the business end of her rifle to a motionless heap in a nearby corner.

“For how long will he be thus incapacitated?” queried Illya.

“Forever I imagine, since I killed him,” she particularized point-blank. “Unlike soft-hearted U.N.C.L.E. operatives, an efficient Thrush agent doesn’t bother with silly sleep darts in such circumstances.”

“And when they find the body?”

“It won’t be found until after you’ve set off your big bangs. Then it will just be believed you murdered the guard while breaking in.”

“Yes, I can see you are indeed an efficient Thrush agent,” Illya sarcastically complimented the woman.

“Stop trying to pull the righteous card with me, darling. You know damn well you would have killed the man yourself if I hadn’t already done the deed.”

“However I’m his enemy, not his cohort.”

“He’s a nobody, a nothing. Not worth my concern.”

“I’ll keep that in mind in future.”

“See you do. Now get on with your business. You’ll have to make it into the storage tank inner control rooms on your own initiative.”

“I figured that.”

“I’m going to circle around and meet up with Omvet to be relieved of my completed stretch of guard duty.”

“And how do you intend to explain the absence of your guard buddy?”

“He wasn’t feeling too well; so I compassionately told him to take a lie-down in his quarters.”

This all sounded a bit dicey to Illya. “They won’t buy it, Angelique.”

“Omvet will buy it if I sell it.”

“Very sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Immensely. It’s one of my most useful traits.”

It struck Illya in that moment, though perhaps not for the first time, that Angelique and Napoleon did indeed share some common personality traits. Their often brash confidence and undaunted willingness to take what could be deemed highly questionable risks being the most obvious of these mutual qualities.

“Get going before I really am forced to gun you down,” Angelique starkly interrupted his brief musings. “Strictly in the interests of self-preservation, you understand, as the Hierarchy doesn’t take kindly to collaborators.”

And that speech on her part revealed the vast differences between her and Napoleon. For what Angelique surely did not share with Solo was his idealistically defined sense of conscience and his ever-empathetic heart.

“The diversion?” Illya demanded stubbornly before heeding the ‘instructions’ of the Thrush femme fatale.

“In place and about to begin.”

“And Napoleon?”

“Will get his chance to escape into the hopefully ready arms of your... What is that term you so naively used to describe my implied relationship with a lowly Thrush sentinel? Ah yes, into the hopefully ready arms of your Command cohorts.” Angelique repeated the end of her sentiment making purposeful use of the term in debate.

“And that’s all you will tell me?”

“That’s all you need to know!” insisted an intensely irritated Angelique. “Now get on with it and stop being such an annoying magpie!”

The less than gregarious Kuryakin had certainly never been called that before. But then again there was a first for everything ...like this “partnership” with Angelique.

Having been “captured” during the initial check-in procedure for the Thrush conference, Napoleon had never before set eyes on the lavish banquet hall. When he was escorted by his “guard of honor” into that public space, he was absolutely amazed by its sheer scale and airy openness. It truly was fashioned like an ancient Roman atrium, with its white marble floors and walls and silk-covered reclining couches set before low dining tables. Several standard height tables flanked by velvet cushioned chairs were also available for those that preferred a less decadent style of dining. From the at least twenty-foot ceiling hung a truly uncountable number of lanterns, electric for convenience but nonetheless designed with the clean aesthetics of old-world candle models. With the sun being a long way from setting at the moment, those lamps were currently unlit as light flooded into the enormous chamber through a lattice-like maze of windowed skylights.

The second thing that caught Solo’s gaze was several large though rather shallow pools patterned after the look of a natatio within famous Roman baths. Inset at various points in the floor with raised rims that necessitated an approach via two steps, these approximately two-foot-deep marble basins were filled not with water, but with mud. Or more precisely, Napoleon surmised, they were filled with MUD.

He unconsciously let out a small groan.

“Go ahead and bolt, Solo,” one guard muttered just loud enough for him to hear. “I’d love to put a bullet straight through you.”

“And end this farce?” guessed Napoleon astutely as the realization dawned on him that the guards were not particularly keen on Lillie’s desired ‘physical match of skill and strength’. As to why that was, he didn’t yet know ...but he imagined he would soon find out.

He didn’t dare scan the Thrush in the room to locate the disguised Illya. That would be too dangerous for the Russian. Solo instinctively recognized that his anxious and rather uncustomary desperate state of mind might communicate itself to his partner in even the most casual of glances. Thus he had no idea if Illya was even in the hall at this uncomfortable moment. “*Well, if I’m going to wind up dying in the MUD,*” Solo mentally conceded to himself, “*I’d rather Illya not be forced to serve as witness.*”

Lillie gave him a self-satisfied little smile. “I see you have already guessed the nature of this competition, Napoleon. A classic foray of naked Greco-Roman wrestling in the mud.”

“And my opponent?” pressed Napoleon with an answering though entirely false smile of his own.

“Ah, now that is truly part of the treat,” expounded Lillie enthusiastically. She waved her hand toward the second entrance on the opposite side of the room. Through that other entry point walked the equally-as-naked-as-Napoleon Emile Fabhcun.

All around him Solo felt the unrest of the guards. They obviously did not appreciate their leader being singled out for this exhibition. Napoleon conjectured their discontent with this development might aid him in some way, though exactly how he indeed had no clear-cut idea.

Angelique sauntered into the room through the same doorway Lillie and company had used before her.

“Ah, Mademoiselle La Chien,” Lillie greeted this other Thrush femme fatale. “How good of you to grace us with your company this afternoon.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” stated Angelique with one of her crooked smiles. “Thrush vs. U.N.C.L.E. in one-on-one combat: truly an archetypal showdown of the do-gooder vs. the self-aware.”

“The self-serving, more like,” put in Napoleon with a definite edge to his voice.

Angelique turned to him with another ready smile. “Oh darling, don’t be such a party-poop,” she scolded Solo. “After all, you’ve always known that in the end you would lose. At least this way you get to go out with a bang.”

Napoleon wasn’t sure at first. Her seemingly innocuous final comment could easily be taken as nothing more than a quite common expression. Still... Then he glanced briefly into her eyes and he saw it. “*Heads up, Solo,*” he gave himself unspoken notice, “*something’s afoot.*”

“Perhaps you would like to assist in preparing the competitors?” Lillie purposely baited the other woman.

“With pleasure. You know Napoleon and I do have a bit of history together,” Angelique allowed easily. “While Emile and I have indeed become quite close friends,” she added with an extraordinarily flirtatious smile at Fabhcun, who returned that smile in kind.

Lillie’s eyes narrowed. “Have you indeed? Well then what better person to aid me in oiling the bodies of these two exceptional examples of maleness? Slickly gleaming flesh does provide so much more in the way of appealing visuals, emphasizing musculature to true advantage. Don’t you agree?”

“Of course,” Angelique seconded coolly. She simply could not believe it was going to be this easy to do what she had to do. She had assumed she would have to make a more impulse-seeming approach to Fabhcun: to kiss him for luck or that sort of thing. But now she was being granted a perfect opening to make her move by none other than Lillie herself. “*Unsurprising,*” thought La Chien smugly. In her mind the Quebecois was not half as shrewd as the gallingly aggravating woman imagined herself to be.

A tray with two vials of oil was handed to Lillie by a servant. She passed one to Angelique as Fabhcun strode to where his opponent stood surrounded by his captors. “If you will be so good as to oil up the delightful form of our dear Security Chief?”

Accepting the vial with a smile, Angelique set about the task with regard to Fabhcun as Lillie herself handled a similar undertaking with regard to Solo.

The sharp tang of eucalyptus oil greeted Napoleon’s nostrils. “*Should help to keep the MUD from making full-on contact with my skin,*” he thought, “*and the eucalyptus fumes might help me to breathe a bit. Here’s hoping it proves enough...*”

In the midst of this process, Fabhcun let out a small grunt of discomfort as the sharp diamond of a cocktail ring Angelique was wearing scraped his right upper arm slightly.

“Oh, I do apologize, darling,” remarked Angelique. She lifted the scratched arm smoothly to her lips, depositing a light kiss to the skin not quite on the exact spot of the actual abrasion. “There. The boo-boo is all better, no?” she teased.

Emile laughed lightly in response. “Yes,” he agreed readily enough. “But would you mind removing your ring so we can avoid further boo-boos? Especially in areas more sensitive than my arm.”

“Not a problem, darling,” Angelique acknowledged as she slid the offending bit of jewelry off her finger and slipped it into the pocket of her slacks.

It had been a risk bringing this particular personal bagatelle into the conference to be sure, but Angelique was more than glad she had managed to do so. Omvet had been frustrated by her large cache of jewelry and perfumes without question, but subsequent inspection of them by the guards had honestly been cursory at best. The ring contained in the expertly-cut fractured facets of the gemstone a small stash of a powerful sedative that could be released into the sharp points of the jewel by touching a particular portion of the band. As a scientific trifle, it surely wasn't rocket science (or biochemical innovation). Yet it certainly could be worth, in terms of personal assets, triple the cost of its pricey diamond in certain circumstances.

Once the oiling ritual was (rather sensuously) concluded, Lillie announced, “As Central would not take kindly to this bit of playtime resulting in the death of our U.N.C.L.E. captive, Emile has been advised, under peril of immediate execution should he disobey this directive, that he is not to kill Solo.”

The gathered Thrush raucously booed in open disapproval of this restriction. Around Napoleon the guards grumbled resentfully.

Lillie raised one hand for silence. “However, in the interest of fairness, because of this limitation being placed upon the Thrush competitor,” she elaborated, “the U.N.C.L.E. competitor will be handicapped with regard to range of motion.”

The gathered Thrush in the room now just as raucously shouted their unanimous approval of this plan. The guards, however, still seemed less than mollified in Napoleon's observation.

Lillie nodded to the sentries accompanying Napoleon and he was suitably handcuffed with his hands in front of him. Then a chained ankle manacle, very similar to that he had worn while in the Gazerie though much shorter in length, was attached to one of his legs with the other end of the chain being secured to a metal ring on the upper rim of the largest of the MUD pits.

“For luck, darling,” Angelique noted evenly as she raised herself on tiptoe to give Fabhcun a brief if passionate kiss on the mouth. “And, in the interest of fairness, Napoleon, since we have such a storied acquaintance,” she furthered as she turned toward Solo. She then gave Napoleon a quick peck on the cheek, coming just close enough to his ear to whisper “Keep alert. Friends at the ready.”

As Fabhcun stoically stepped down into the MUD, the guards unceremoniously pushed Napoleon into the pit, putting him at an immediate disadvantage as he landed awkwardly on his hands and knees in the citrusy scented muck. All he could do was his best and pray that he could indeed keep alert as he felt the first tingles of his skin's adverse reaction to the substance in which he had nonchalantly assured Illya he would never attempt to “swim” again. Yet now there was no choice but to somehow find the strength to swim ...or sink forever into oblivion.

Though Illya remained clueless as to the nature of the diversion Angelique had “arranged”, he nonetheless sensed a strange uneasiness and preoccupation in the sentinels supposedly securing the lower reaches of the compound. They didn’t seem “on point” with regard to duty as it were, and that made Illya’s job of getting into the control rooms for the MUD storage tanks that much easier. In fact he was wary of how easy this was seemingly turning out to be as he diligently set charges in those locations he had previously calculated offered the best option for achieving the desired effect of cutting off the MUD outlet channels.

He then found a hiding place a reasonably safe distance from those sites. He listened for a few minutes to the guards conversing in quiet tones as they supposedly patrolled the area, catching snatches of dialogue that included muttered condemnations of Lillie Coté. As to what was the current basis of those complaints, he really didn’t have the luxury of time to conjecture. Trusting that the reinforcements from U.N.C.L.E. were suitably in place and ready to act with all speed, he used his watch to detonate the explosives, pushing down the stem with a determinedly steady finger.

In the banqueting hall above Napoleon was having a difficult go of it with Fabhcun. The Thrush Security Chief was well-versed in techniques of hand-to-hand combat and he had the advantage of full mobility. He was thus able to move completely out of the extent of Napoleon’s grasp when necessary, often leaving Solo to fall clumsily into the MUD after his opponent successfully avoided an attacking lunge.

Yet Fabhcun was encountering some problems of his own. His vision doubled more than once, causing him to shake his head like a wet dog in an attempt to clear it. His body seemed unnaturally uncooperative and his reflexes failed him now and again, allowing Solo to get a full grip on him on more than one occasion.

All of Napoleon’s holds had to be double-handed since the handcuffs prohibited him from obtaining more open clasps. However he successfully brought Emile to his knees: once, twice, thrice. Each time the Security Chief managed to regain his feet and his balance, but his reaction in doing so was definitely slower each time.

Solo’s breathing was becoming more and more labored and his skin itched unbearably. He was covered in MUD from neck to toes now and felt his heart pumping so hard it seemed about to jump out of his chest. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep from fully and finally collapsing.

Three distinct rumbles rattled through the building. Several of those in the hall yelled out in panic “Earthquake!” The ensuing chaos provided just enough confusion for Napoleon to get close enough to the more-and-more disoriented Emile to slip the circle of his handcuffed hands around the other man’s neck. Solo then turned one elbow to position his forearm across Fabhcun’s throat and – with the last of his remaining strength – squeezed...

Folks had abandoned paying any attention to the match as Fabhcun fell unconscious in a heap at Napoleon’s feet. Solo soon followed with his own insensate drop into the MUD, his stressed body refusing to remain alert any longer.

Meanwhile all hell was breaking loose in the banqueting hall. The initial fear of a natural disaster was quickly replaced with assumptions of sabotage. Thrush of all feathers went reaching for weapons. Wild accusations rang out in angry voices amongst those gathered, internal rivalries coming inevitably to the fore.

Lillie was screaming something at the guards who rushed toward the main entrance so to protect the facility from incursion, but all too late. A faction of the massive U.N.C.L.E. raiding party burst into the room as others from their group continued gunfire exchanges in the outer corridors. The Thrush, already battling amongst themselves, were caught at a distinct disadvantage. They turned their attention toward gunning down the invaders, but the previous moment of internal division had cost them dearly.

In the mass disorder Jason Omvet slipped from the hall through a private door. Angelique, who had been keenly observing him, followed close behind, casually picking off with expert clandestine shots several Thrush guards who also were making toward that special exit.

“The Command force will undoubtedly be in here in a minute,” she cautioned Omvet as she hastily entered the hall beyond that doorway, drawn weapon in hand. “Best be quick,” she added as she decisively shut the portal.

“There should be a stand of guards!” protested the comptroller. “I drilled them on this earlier today!”

“No time to wait on them,” responded Angelique pointedly as the sounds of the pitched gun battle in the dining room beyond moved ever closer. “I’ll act as cover,” she stated bluntly as she propelled the comptroller down the hall. She knew from her previous trek here with Omvet this particular passage led to a concealed elevator.

Omvet offered no further objections to this plan. Arriving at where the elevator was hidden behind a fake wall, Jason manipulated a series of pressure points on the partition as necessary to slide the obstacle away. The two then entered the lift, Omvet punching in the necessary code to access the upper floor suite where a certain someone was currently in residence.

They reached the proper floor and Omvet, subsequently turning to thank Angelique for her diligent loyalty, came face-to-face with the barrel of her semi-automatic. In an instant a bullet from that silencer-equipped lethal projection tube entered square in the middle of the comptroller’s forehead.

Illya left the temporary security of his hiding spot as it became apparent the U.N.C.L.E. incursion force was in the midst of its raid upon the compound. He joined the fray, subduing several Thrush guards on his way to the main of the facility. Noting the fierce fighting going on near the dining hall, he entered that area. He moved forward into the room, proficiently ducking and firing his Special (providently included in the bag carrying the explosives) in answer to Thrush bullets.

Once inside, he progressed from cover point to cover point, firing as necessary on the various Thrush assailants confronting the Command force. He had been doing this for several minutes when he spotted the MUD pool wherein lay, fortuitously face-up, two unmoving naked male bodies. It took him only a moment longer to recognize one of the men as Napoleon.

“Damn Angelique to hell!” he muttered furiously. He bolted toward the pit. While on the run he noticed Lillie Coté, gun in hand and firing almost continuously and certainly indiscriminately, attempting to cut a path through the press of Thrush and U.N.C.L.E. operatives in the room. He had direct orders from Alexander Waverly not to let this woman slip through their fingers; so he realized he had to stop her from making any type of strategic getaway.

Quite near the largest MUD pool, Illya got close enough to leap toward Lillie, braving her gunshots without hesitation. The result of his action was to take the creator of the MUD with him down into the shallow basin containing her creation ... wherein as well lay Napoleon and Fabhcun. That tackle also knocked away her gun and Kuryakin’s Walther. The two struggled wildly hand-to-hand in the

MUD, until Illya managed to push the woman to one edge of the pit. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he forcefully knocked her head against the raised edge of the pool, and it was lights out for the brilliant Thrush biochemist.

Illya turned in time to see other U.N.C.L.E. personnel retrieving Napoleon from the pit as the gun-battle had finally ended with the invasion force in the ascendant. Pulling himself back to his feet using the rim of the shallow pool for leverage, he immediately headed to where his partner lay motionless on the marble floor being attended by a Command medical team.

“Epinephrine!” Kuryakin shouted in a no-nonsense tone. “He needs epinephrine! And oxygen!”

“We know, Mr. Kuryakin,” responded one of the med techs as he placed a calming hand on Illya’s arm. “We were briefed regarding Mr. Solo’s condition.”

Though he remained visibly agitated, Illya kept from giving the medical professionals any more frantic instructions as they conscientiously worked on Napoleon. An alcohol towelette was used to cleanse a small area on one of Napoleon’s thighs and then a syringe employed to inject epinephrine into the muscles there as an oxygen mask was fitted over his mouth and nose. Not seeing enough of a response to the drug, the lead tech subsequently swabbed clean an area on Solo’s other thigh and employed yet another syringe to inject a second dose of epinephrine into that musculature. With a distracted air, Kuryakin took one of the folded sheets off the stretcher laid out at the ready nearby and began methodically wiping some of the MUD from Napoleon’s body. All the while he cursed out Angelique in Russian under his breath, causing the med techs to glance anxiously from one to another, wondering if they were about to see the legendarily ice-blooded Section II agent crack.

From behind the oxygen mask came a somewhat throaty murmur that immediately caught Kuryakin’s attention.

“You shouldn’t try to talk, Napoleon,” advised Illya as relief flooded through him that his friend was at the very least now conscious.

With an unsteady hand, Solo lifted the oxygen mask slightly from his face as he opened his eyes.

“You’re not being fair,” Napoleon managed to get out in a hoarse and near breathless voice. “How was Angelique to know?” That was as much of an effort as Solo found himself capable of making at the moment. His hand slipped and the oxygen mask dropped back to his face, though somewhat askew. Its position was speedily corrected by one of the attending medical personnel.

“We’re taking him out by helicopter, Mr. Kuryakin,” the lead med tech informed the enforcement agent. “I assume you’ll want to accompany him?”

Illya only nodded as he disciplined himself to regain firm hold of the roiling emotions churned up in his mind and heart at so nearly and needlessly losing not only his field partner but his best friend.

As Solo was loaded onto the stretcher, Kuryakin chivvied him, “So you finally broke a promise. You did promise you wouldn’t swim again in that MUD, you know.”

It delighted Illya no end to hear the distinct if muffled sound of Napoleon’s chuckle behind the oxygen mask.

Even as the U.N.C.L.E. medical team prepared Solo for air evacuation, another copter was whirling its way to a secret destination. At the controls of that aircraft was none other than Angelique La Chien.

...After killing Omvet, Angelique burst into the Supreme Councilman's apartments frenetically declaring that U.N.C.L.E. agents had murdered the comptroller just as the door to the special elevator was closing. She told the certain someone in residence that, though she had subsequently managed to short out the controls to the lift (with another private bagatelle hidden in the construction of a bracelet she wore), she had no doubt Command operatives would soon be at the Councilman's very door. There was no question of U.N.C.L.E. being permitted to gain such a unique and valuable Thrush prize. The certain someone had to get out immediately.

The Councilman stated there was a planned escape route via a small two-seater helicopter stowed out of ready sight on the roof, but that they would need a pilot. Angelique solved that dilemma, apprising him she could adequately perform the task. But the certain someone predictably wanted to retrieve his lady-love before departing. Lying with conviction, Mademoiselle La Chien enlightened him sadly that she had personally seen Lillie already handcuffed and in the custody of several U.N.C.L.E. agents. It was too late to rescue her. Resignedly, the Councilman had finally given in and agreed to be flown from the premises by Angelique...

And so now these two were well on their way to a private landing pad in a concealed location.

"We will be at the pick-up point soon," the ever-efficient Thrush agent Mademoiselle La Chien informed that certain someone. "From there a relocation team will get you to a proper safe house."

The Councilman nodded. Then he turned to face her in the seat beside him in the small chopper. "You have my undying gratitude, Angelique," he assured her in a very warm tone.

Taking especial note of the telltale heat in his voice, Angelique gave him her best crooked smile. "It has been an honor to be of service," she stated sweetly.

With a smile of his own, the Councilman leaned over her right hand as she operated the cyclic control and kissed her fingers lingeringly.

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

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, along with several Section VIII scientists, sat about the round-table style desk in Alexander Waverly's office. It was two weeks after the relatively successful conclusion of The Sticking in MUD Affair. The current subject of discussion was regarding the development of a means to fully deactivate the stored MUD Kuryakin's precisely triggered explosions had sealed within the man-made tunnels that served as holding tanks in the former Thrush science facility in rural New Jersey. The Section II agents were being included in the dialogue as the two people within U.N.C.L.E. who had the most direct experience of the MUD.

"We will have to come up with a more innovative way of focusing ultraviolet light in a confined area. Consider that we will be working with ionizing frequencies that can cause severe damage to much beyond the MUD," noted Dr. Shillet with some irritation for he felt as if his colleagues were sidestepping this very real issue.

"Agreed," spoke up a laser specialist. "Still, it is the only sure method of forever neutralizing this life-altering concoction," he made sure to press the point home.

“Yet, if we do not come up with a proper method of delivery, we will be risking altering life ourselves, including forfeiting the lives of our deploying technicians,” Shillet reminded the other man, his annoyance becoming more pronounced with every word.

“We could perhaps delay neutralization for a time,” suggested an intrigued (and perhaps unthinking) biochemist. His suggestion was of course meaningfully ignored by all the other men of science gathered at this confab.

“Enhanced deuterium arcing may be the best procedure,” advanced a Section VIII radiation technologist with secure self-confidence in his own solution. “It does have the stability we need.”

“Perhaps,” granted the specialist. “But would it be enough? Would it produce the amount of UV light that is needed for this particular application?” he charged his associate somewhat antagonistically.

“Frankly we cannot be sure that anything short of an actual nuclear fission event will be enough,” bluntly asserted the previously ignored biochemist with ire-born sarcasm.

“And that, gentleman,” interspersed Waverly, “is completely out of the question.” The Continental Chief then turned to his scientifically-inclined, nuclear-physics-educated Number 2 in Section II. “You have no current input, Mr. Kuryakin?”

Illya crossed his arms in front of his chest and answered tersely, “Not at this time.”

That remark garnered the quirk of one bushy eyebrow by Mr. Waverly as he silently took in the defensive body posture of his operative, as well as the tense set of his jaw.

“Look, gentlemen,” Solo, recently recovered from his nearly lethal bout of anaphylaxis, interjected his two-cents into the less-than-calm conversation, “I’m no scientist and I have no clue about the technical niceties involved in getting this right. Yet I do know this: We are U.N.C.L.E. Our mission is to keep these types of hazards, created by megalomaniacal individuals or egocentric groups of individuals, from harming humanity as a whole. Illya and I willingly put our lives on the line to provide this organization the opportunity to destroy the danger to the world at large inherent in this MUD. That opportunity mustn’t be squandered, but it also mustn’t contribute in any way to the possible detriment of humanity. That is not who we are. That is not what this organization stands for. Thus we must be more circumspect than reckless in cases such as this. And ultimately united in consistent but above-all compassionate methodology for containment of the threat.

“As Plato said:” Napoleon continued in a strong voice, “Any man may easily do harm, but not every man can do good.”

The disputing scientists fell silent and Waverly, behind the cover of lighting his pipe, let a pleased smile curve his mouth for the briefest of instants.

“Section VIII will need to pool together all available talents in the endeavor to find a workable solution to this problem,” finalized Mr. Waverly with all the authority encompassed within his position as Number 1 in Section I. “There is a way through any conundrum, if all possible avenues of intelligent possibility are utilized. For now you are all dismissed to consider how best to jointly coordinate this effort.”

The men around the table rose almost as one; then made their separate ways through the pneumatic portal to the gunmetal hallway beyond. Napoleon and Illya were the last ones to reach the portal.

“You are to stay, Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly commanded uncompromisingly.

Solo gave his partner a brief and less-than-happy, over-the shoulder glance as a stone-faced Illya turned without a word back into the main of Waverly’s domain and regained his previous seat.

After everyone had made their exits and the electronic door had once more slid its way fully shut, the Continental Chief made a blunt statement, a statement that could in no way be interpreted as any form of question. “You had no comment regarding the submissions of Section VIII with regard to the means of providing waves of ultraviolet light of sufficient intensity to sterilize the MUD.”

“I **made** no comment,” Illya stated just as bluntly. “That does not mean I **had** none.”

“Yet you said nothing.”

“I did not think any comment I made would be appreciated.”

“By whom?” Waverly now indeed questioned his Russian operative.

Illya huffed once in frustration. “By all and sundry,” he noted succinctly.

Alexander Waverly took a long draw on his pipe and then puffed out a leisurely curl of smoke. His probing eyes never left the countenance of his Number 2 in Section II as he performed this personal contemplative ritual.

“What did you think of Mr. Solo’s remarks?” he then asked easily.

“They were finely made,” Illya’s answered just as easily. “And,” he then added as a small smirk curled his lips, “they certainly stopped dead the Section VIII internal wrangling for idea precedence.”

Waverly smiled knowingly. “So they did.

“Mr. Kuryakin,” the Continental Chief subsequently advised the enforcement agent as he placed his pipe in a nearby ashtray, “let me explain something to you.” Leaning forward on his desk and clasping his hands in front of him as they rested on the wooden surface, he continued. “I consider you an extremely valuable part of the essential fabric of this organization: someone who will become even more valuable over time. Do you understand why that is?”

Illya cocked his head in some confusion. “I’m not sure, sir,” he admitted.

“Mr. Solo is my chosen successor for this chair. He has the skills, both strategic and diplomatic; and he has the high regard of everyone in this organization, thus inspiring loyalty “

This was not news. Illya already knew this; everyone in U.N.C.L.E. knew this. Hell, everyone in Thrush knew it as well, sometimes predictably to Napoleon’s disadvantage and at other times unpredictably to his advantage.

But Waverly had more to add regarding his eventual replacement. “Mr. Solo also possesses one particular attribute in much greater degree than do I.”

Illya raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Sir?”

“Warmth of heart, Mr. Kuryakin. He will defend his friends to the death, even to the point where it could result in a question regarding the soundness of his judgment. And one day that might cost him the loyalty of some.”

“Sir, I don’t think—”

Waverly put up a hand to halt Illya’s expected verbal objection. “He will need your cooler logic to temper his warmer heart, Mr. Kuryakin. However, what he will not need is a second-in-command who constantly puts him in a position of having to defend that second to others within this organization simply because of his sometimes too sharp manner in making his opinions known.

“You see, Mr. Kuryakin,” the Old Man finalized straightforwardly, “what I want from you is not silence. But rather – as Mr. Solo noted with regard to other matters – for you to become more circumspect than reckless in your mode of expression.”

Illya blinked: once, twice, thrice. He understood. He indeed now understood. In no uncertain terms he had just been informed he was being prepared for a future elevated station within U.N.C.L.E. as surely as was Napoleon.

“I—” he began. Then hesitated. “I don’t know what to say, sir,” he finally managed to stumble out.

“There is nothing more that needs to be said,” Waverly concluded with absolute surety. “Now,” he readied release of his second-best operative from his inner sanctum as he grasped his pipe from its rest within the nearby ashtray, “get yourself over to the Section VIII labs. Provide, with all due civility, your input as to what can be done to manufacture a UV device capable of safely neutralizing the damnable Thrush-designed Microorganism Ubiquity Depredator. Such appalling monikers these foul birds do give their even fouler creations,” the Number 1 in Section I added with an annoyed shake of his head.

“At once, sir,” acquiesced Illya with the ghost of a smile haunting his lips.

Illya encountered Napoleon in the hallway just outside of Waverly’s office. He had no doubt his partner had been impatiently and anxiously awaiting him.

“What happened?” Solo wanted to be told. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is fine,” Illya responded smoothly. Then seeing the unabated concern on Napoleon’s face, he laughed out loud, totally astounding the American. “Everything is more than fine, Napoleon. I have to run over to the labs now to confer with the Section VIII personnel regarding a transmission device for the ultraviolet light needed to render the MUD permanently inert.”

Napoleon looked a bit bewildered. He had hoped Illya would reveal more about exactly what had gone on in Waverly’s office, but apparently that was a secret the always less-than-gregarious Russian intended to keep close.

“Okay.” Solo, a bit hesitantly, accepted the situation as it stood. “I’m on my way over to Medical myself. Seems the good doctors have decided on a course of gradual exposure to reduce, and hopefully completely alleviate, my allergy to chlorine. They say the process has worked with champion swimmers and divers.”

“So you will be spending a good deal of time in the swim tank.” Illya – with a bit of a smirk – couldn’t resist teasing his water-submersion-reluctant friend.

“More than I care to think about,” conceded Napoleon, his face a bit paler than usual.

“You’ll be fine, my friend,” Illya elected to soothe the other man’s fears. “Everything will turn out as it should.”

Solo gave his partner a quizzical look. “You feeling okay, tovarisch?”

Illya nodded decisively and quite ebulliently.

With an impish grin, Solo ventured to push the envelope of Illya’s unexpectedly buoyant mood. “Will you retain your oh-so-chipper temperament if I tell you I have a planned rendezvous with Angelique tonight?”

Kuryakin rolled his eyes. If only this was a case in which his “cooler logic” could prevail over Napoleon’s “warmer heart”. ...Or rather his friend’s warmer something... But now was not the moment.

“That’s my Illya,” cheerily acknowledged Napoleon in ready recognition of the reassuringly familiar eye-roll. He then slapped his partner companionably on the back before the two of them parted for their separate destinations within U.N.C.L.E.’s New York headquarters.

—THE END—



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