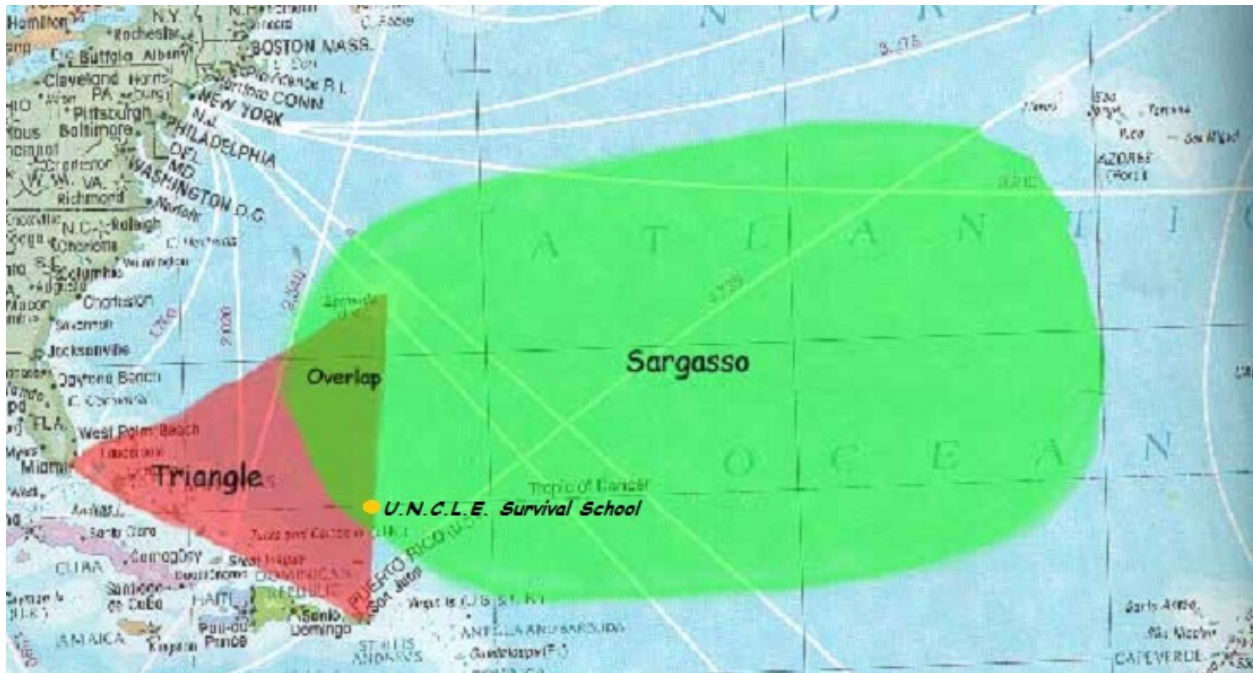


Author's Note: The concept of a distinguishing “trigger pattern” for each agent with regard to instinctive firing of a weapon in a surprise ambush situation was initially forwarded by **NappiFan** in her story [THE DISPOSABLE MAN AFFAIR](#). I am elaborating on that idea in this story with her kind permission.



I'll have grounds
More relative than this—the play's the
thing

THE PLAY'S THE THING

BY [LAH](#)

July 1954

An uncharted island within the southeastern overlap of the Devil's Triangle and the Sargasso Sea

Jules Cutter had gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning. He had turned out the last group of trainees from U.N.C.L.E.'s elite Survival School less than a month before, and today the next bunch were being brought in by rowboat and by helicopter after having made the first leg of the trip by submarine or by plane. Going through two classes of trainees a year – one from mid-January to mid-June and the other from mid-July to mid-December – did tend to wear on the nerves, and Cutter was not a particularly patient man to begin with. The groups were at least kept small, never consisting of more than two-dozen young men. Of those roughly 60%-65% would wind up making it through the entirety of the course and being designated as fit

for status within the enforcement ranks. And in the final analysis only a mere quarter of that percentage would be deemed immediate Section II (Operations and Enforcement) material, the remainder winding up at least temporarily in Section III (Enforcement and Intelligence) or Section V (Communications and Security).

At the moment Cutter stood near the helicopter pad waiting on the last of the new arrivals, and how he did hate to be kept waiting. Certainly that wait was doing nothing to improve his already foul mood. He checked his clipboard, quickly scanning the recruit's background once more, though in truth all that information was already firmly sealed within his brain, as were the backgrounds of all members of the new class.

Recruit:	Napoleon Solo b. Dec. 21, 1932
Citizenship:	United States of America
Father:	Darius Solo b. 1908 – d. 1932 (son born posthumously)
Mother:	Ciaran Amelie Milbourne b. 1913 – d. 1948 (relinquished custody of son to her parents at his birth)
Paternal grandfather:	Admiral Horatio Solo b. 1888 U.S. Navy, retired
Paternal grandmother:	Sarah Jane Stedmann b. 1889 – d. 1919
Maternal grandfather:	Franklin Milbourne b. 1885 U.S. Minister to Canada 1933 – 1938 and 1942 – 1943 U.S. Ambassador to Italy 1938 – 1941 U.S. Ambassador to Canada 1943 – 1946 U.S. Ambassador to Greece 1946 – 1949
Maternal grandmother:	Annette LaCoursiere b. 1892 – d. 1951
Upbringing:	By maternal grandparents
Higher Education:	Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy; 1954 Columbia University, New York, NY
Military Experience:	U.S. Army, 1950 – 1952 Enlisted, served in Korean theatre Decorated with various medals of valor Achieved rank of Sergeant Major Attached to Army Intelligence, 1951, under Colonel Phineas Alan Morgan Honorably discharged, December 1952
First Language:	English (American dialect)

Other Languages:	Fluency (read/write/speak) – French (Québécois dialect); Italian Competency (read/write/speak) – Russian; Spanish Basic Understanding (spoken only) – Greek
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“Silver spoon type,” muttered Cutter quietly to himself, his open distaste evident in the words. Still, the kid had enlisted in the Army by choice, not relying on the possible crutch of his grandfather’s status by selecting the Navy. Apparently too he had served well. So there was some hope to be gleaned as to his overall demeanor from these factoids. However, arriving on the island base of U.N.C.L.E.’s Survival School by “private” helicopter didn’t bode quite as well.

The chopper descended onto the landing pad and Cutter poised himself to catch his initial glimpse of the new recruit. He was a firm believer in first impressions and thus he expected to have this kid sized up in about thirty seconds flat. What he hadn’t expected was for the dark-haired young pilot of the helicopter to himself exit the craft after turning off the motor. “So *where’s Solo?*” he thought irritably as the pilot opened the back door and extended his hand to aid the passenger within in disembarking. “*Oh surely he can at least get out of an aircraft under his own power?*” mentally mused Cutter as his eyes rolled in exasperation. The passenger who disembarked though was not any new recruit, but rather Alexander Waverly, head of U.N.C.L.E. North America.

“Thank you for agreeing to take over for my pilot when he so inconveniently came down ill,” Waverly spoke to the young man who apparently was not the original pilot. “I do appreciate the ride.”

“My pleasure, sir,” responded the dark-haired young man with a truly brilliant smile.

“*One of those classic charmers,*” Cutter noted voicelessly to himself.

“And the conversation during the flight proved most entertaining, Mr. Solo,” Waverly acknowledged with a surprisingly devilish grin.

“*That’s Solo?*” Cutter registered this reality with a hearty measure of shock as the man he now realized was his last trainee for the semester laughed easily.

“I enjoyed the conversation as well, sir. You have a wicked sense of humor.”

“My wickedness is, I’m afraid, now no more than a fond memory,” responded Waverly with obvious lightheartedness.

“With age comes wisdom,” suggested Solo with a quick wink.

“And frequent hardening of the arteries rather than other body parts,” was Waverly’s casual rejoinder.

Solo guffawed in genuine appreciation of the older man’s slyly off-color joke.

“Ah, Mr. Cutter,” Waverly finally turned his attention to the headmaster of the Survival School who had come across the small tarmac to greet his high-ranking guest. “Let me introduce you to one of your new students who very graciously filled in for my private pilot today. Mr. Solo, this is Mr. Cutter, who will be teaching you what you need to know to become an enforcement agent in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.”

“A privilege,” Solo said as he extended his right hand toward Cutter.

“I wasn’t told to expect you,” Jules ignored the young man’s proffered hand and spoke instead directly to Alexander Waverly.

“You’re not expecting me was exactly the point,” noted Waverly gruffly. He disliked the way Cutter blew right past the formal introduction he had himself provided of the younger man. “Inspection tours seldom give true results if the inspector is ‘expected’.”

Alexander Waverly and Jules Cutter were not in the least friends. Each knew the other more than capable of performing in his position within the organization, but beyond that neither saw much to like in the other.

“There is a reason for this tour of inspection?” probed Cutter in a very non-circumspect manner.

“I don’t need a reason,” Waverly made a blunt point of reminding the other man.

Napoleon stood watching the two older men as they eyed each other rather hostilely. “*No love lost there,*” he catalogued the antagonistic attitude between the pair for later reference.

“Perhaps, Mr. Cutter, you and I should retire to your office and discuss these matters in rather a more appropriately private atmosphere.”

“*Ouch!*” thought Napoleon. “*Waverly definitely knows how to deliver a scathing reprimand without so much as raising his voice.*”

“Of course,” Cutter agreed without so much as flinching at the chilly reproof made to him by a man who was technically his superior. Turning his attention momentarily to Napoleon, he ordered, “Wait here, Solo, and I will send another cadet to show you to your quarters. I will speak with you further later in the day.”

“Yes sir,” Napoleon had sufficient military experience to respond with respectful obedience to the man who would be his commandant during his stint in U.N.C.L.E.’s Survival School program.

Then the two older men moved off, side-by-side but definitely not in tandem, toward the main administrative complex on the island. Napoleon speculatively watched their retreating figures until they were out of his ready line of sight.

“Napoleon Solo has great potential,” the Continental Chief informed the Survival School Headmaster.

“All U.N.C.L.E. recruits come in under the umbrella of ‘great potential’,” responded Cutter dryly. “Unfortunately few truly fulfill the expectations of that potential.”

“Mr. Solo will,” knowingly predicted Waverly.

Jules Cutter squinted hard at Alexander Waverly. “Are you subtly suggesting I allow that to be a foregone conclusion of his training here?”

“On the contrary,” spoke out Waverly emphatically. “I want him tested to his very limits. I want to be sure the latent capacity I see in him comes fully to fruition.”

Jules grunted his understanding. “You expect him to ultimately become more than just an enforcement agent.”

“Perhaps,” Alexander hedged.

“Well, even to get to enforcement agent status, he has to come through the training here with flying colors. And believe me; I’ll ensure he gets his own share of personal bodily colors in the process.”

Now it was Waverly who squinted hard at the other man. “I expect you to make things difficult but fair, Mr. Cutter.”

“Have you ever known me to be less than fair with regard to any recruit, Mr. Waverly?”

“No,” Waverly had to admit, “but I don’t want the antagonism you have toward me to make this a case where I have reason to alter that answer.”

Jules stuck out chin defiantly. “I adhere to my own set of principles,” he reminded the other man, “and those don’t include unprofessionally bulldogging any cadet, even if he might be accounted a personal project of one of the five Continental Chiefs of the Command.”

Alexander’s only reaction to that borderline insubordinate statement was a rather noisy harrumph.

“Smart of you to cozy up to the main man like that,” commented the cadet, who introduced himself as Joe Valdovwiz, Cutter had assigned to show Solo to his quarters.

“Main man?” questioned Napoleon bemusedly.

“Why Waverly of course. You do know he is the one of the five Continental Chiefs of U.N.C.L.E.?”

“Yes, of course I know that,” granted Napoleon.

“First among equals, so the saying goes.”

Napoleon shrugged. “I just know I received an invitation to travel with him here. He specified in the note he sent that he had business to attend to at the school and thus was making the trip at the same time I needed to do so.”

“He wrote you himself?” Joe gawked.

“It was just a couple of lines scribbled on the back of his calling card and delivered to me by the hand of a very pretty young lady.” Napoleon smiled at the memory of that redheaded honey.

“Holy be Jesus!” exclaimed Joe in some awe. “How the heck did you pull off a coup like that, Solo?” He then tilted his head and eyed the man in front of him in frank assessment. “Or is there more to you I don’t know?”

“Like what?” asked Napoleon in obvious confusion. “Hey, I’m completely in the dark about why Waverly asked me to accompany him. I thought it might just be standard practice for any new recruit who was traveling to the island from New York at the same time as him. Figured it saved the organization on the cost of travel expenses.”

“It’s definitely not a practice of which I’ve even heard the hint of a rumor,” Joe observed with an emphatic shake of his head.

Napoleon shrugged once more. “Maybe he heard I had flown copters in Korea and just wanted to have a trained backup pilot onboard in case of emergency.”

“As if U.N.C.L.E. wouldn’t provide its head honcho with backup upon backup?”

“Well, I wound up having to fly his copter when his private pilot was hit with a sudden flare-up of malaria after he had captained the U.N.C.L.E. jet into Anegada. So there certainly was not so much ready backup to hand in this instance.”

“I wonder...”

Napoleon’s brow furrowed. “You wonder what?”

“Whether it was really a malaria flare-up that waylaid the pilot, or a simple spate of orders from Waverly himself.”

“Gee, is everyone here as fond of engaging in speculation about the top brass as you are?” Napoleon teased with a ready smile.

“Don’t discount the possibility, Solo.”

“Napoleon. Call me Napoleon, will you?”

“That’s quite a name.”

“Yeah, but it’s the only one I’ve got,” Napoleon dismissed with a casual smile the usual reaction to his somewhat portentous given name. “My paternal grandfather insisted on adherence to the family tradition of naming males after great military leaders. My maternal grandfather liked grandiosity and was inclined toward distinctive first names. My only living grandmother at the time was from Quebec and thus partial to all things French. And to top it all off my mother was an incurable romantic. All-in-all, those conditions did not make for the most fortuitous consensus when it came time to christen me,” he finalized with a conspiratorial wink.

“Didn’t your father have a say?”

“Nah, he was already dead when I was born.”

“Do you have a nickname?”

Napoleon chuckled. “In my family? Perish the thought. Names must always be borne with pride and never lessened with the artifice of a ‘childish handle’, as my paternal grandfather refers to such things.”

“And what’s his name?” inquired Joe with an open smile. He was finding he rather liked this Solo fellow. There was a certain easygoing charisma to his personality that was definitely appealing.

“Horatio,” answered Solo. “And my father’s name was Darius,” he added with a decidedly impish grin.

“Holy be Jesus!” responded Valdovwiz with a chuckle of his own. “Makes me glad I have only my surname to count as unusual.”

Solo’s smile seemed to go tight for a moment, but it was a moment so brief that Joe Valdovwiz quickly released the notion from his mind and memory.

“So are you aiming for Section II?” Joe continued the laid-back conversation.

“Isn’t every recruit here?”

Joe laughed again. “Likely, but few will make it, even fewer on first assignment into service. Cutter is a tough taskmaster. My brother went through this course two years ago. He’s assigned to Section III in Caracas now. He told me to watch my Ps and Qs and never imagine Cutter will miss so much as a quick grimace in reaction to a direct order or a training routine.”

“Sounds like a truly charming man.”

Joe shrugged. “He’s good at his job.”

“And likely as inflexible as a rusted spring,” forwarded Napoleon. “But I did my stint in the Army and I’m accustomed to that attitude in those in charge. Now Waverly: there’s a commander wearing different stripes.”

“How so?” questioned Joe with a tilt of his head.

“I got the sense that Waverly doesn’t mind mental flexibility and personal ingenuity in his agents. In fact I rather think he would encourage it.”

“He’s a strategic genius,” Joe admiringly complimented the Continental Chief who was acknowledged by his Section I peers as the first among equals.

Napoleon nodded. “And I imagine that is why he is willing to give his agents some working leeway. In the moment is always different than from a distance in any life-and-death situation.”

Joe considered what Solo had said and then asked bluntly, “You’re rather into creating strategies yourself, aren’t you, Napoleon?”

“I’ve made a few minor moves in the intelligence chess-game before,” acknowledged Solo as generally as possible.

Joe smiled a wry smile. “So there **is** more to you.”

“Huh?” Napoleon inquired with less than his usual verbal polish.

“Never mind,” Joe dismissed the probability that Waverly had made an especial point to travel with Solo to the island that housed U.N.C.L.E.’s Survival School because the Old Man had wanted to make his own initial evaluation of the young man who likely had received particular mention from U.N.C.L.E.’s recruiters. “Better get your gear stowed before Cutter comes around looking to give you the official once-over.”

“Not much to stow,” Napoleon admitted with a sigh. He did so like to dress well, and here... Several pairs of black slacks, a few black pullovers, some sets of equally black socks and sturdy also black work-boots made up the sum total of his official wardrobe. “*At least there is no requirement for only black underwear,*” he thought with a lighthearted silliness.

“Why oh why they insist on an all black uniform in this location is beyond me,” Solo nitpicked as he began to unpack his one carryall. “Here we are sitting smack-dab on the Tropic of Cancer and they want us to wear dark turtlenecks... with long sleeves no less!”

With an expression of obvious distaste, Solo shook out one of these – in his opinion – less-than-optimal, jet-hued, long-sleeved, Survival School wardrobe essentials in order to fold it more neatly.

“I don’t know where you garnered the information about the Tropic of Cancer or if it’s really accurate, and frankly I don’t want to know details about either of those points. Too dangerous. Remember: the location of this place is a closely guarded secret and we’re not officially part of U.N.C.L.E. until we graduate. So Cutter might just hack off one of your ears if you bandy that kind of stuff about too readily, Napoleon.”

Napoleon snickered. “Well, it’s absolutely no secret we are in the damn tropics where black is definitely out-of-season all year round. Guess the brass want to sweat us into shape,” he added with a sly wink.

“If only it was that easy to make the grade,” Joe stated with a vague longing in his voice.

Instinctively Napoleon sensed that formless yearning in the other man and the underlying insecurity of self that engendered it. Slapping Joe on the back in a companionable manner, he assured him with an open grin, “We’ll make it.”

Then Solo placed his gear in a supremely orderly fashion within the storage cubbies provided for this purpose in the small barracks room that would provide his only private space for the next five months.

U.N.C.L.E. recruits were not “raw” in the sense of having no familiarity with firearms and the basics of personal defense. None made it into the organization’s elite Survival School without some sort of prior military or police training. Some recruits, like Solo, had done a tour in the armed forces. Some came straight from military educational facilities like Annapolis, West Point, Saint-Cyr or Sandhurst. Some had been cops for several years or at the very least graduated from a police academy. A few came from the ranks of specific government agencies throughout the world, like the FBI, MI5 or Interpol.

All cadets were young (no candidate over the age of 30 was accepted into the program), physically able, dedicated and male, U.N.C.L.E. having yet created no openings for females within the ranks of its enforcement and security operatives. Female agents in U.N.C.L.E., destined for support positions in Intelligence or Communications or Personnel, received a much

less rigorous and considerably shorter-termed separate form of training in various facilities located near the cities of the five major headquarters. That instruction did include a course on the fundamental handling of a firearm, something the male recruits in Survival School were expected to already know well enough at entry into the program to be able to immediately engage in the learning of more advanced techniques in the use of many types of weaponry.

Scientific and medical personnel within U.N.C.L.E. were an entity unto themselves as they required the particular skills of professions having little to do with the law enforcement and peacekeeping doctrines of the Command. Thus most such personnel operated under no requisite to carry a gun and subsequently received no training in that regard. There were a few exceptions: Scientific personnel who were involved in the running of mobile lab facilities sometimes vital at mission sites did go through a special course to learn to accurately fire the small sidearm each was issued and expected to carry in those particular circumstances.

With retirement from the field for Section II operatives predetermined by the Command charter as obligatory at the age of 40 (though that supposedly “hard and fast” endpoint had been moved forward in more than one case), in all honesty it was rare for a recruit over the age of 28 to be accepted into Survival School. At not yet 22, Solo was at the low end of the spectrum with regard to the general age of recruits. Most were men between 22 and 26 and all were required to have at least an undergraduate degree as well as competency in a minimum of two languages beyond obvious fluency in their own native tongue and in English, since courses were taught in that language. U.N.C.L.E. emphasized the skills of strategic planning and alert manipulation when dealing with an enemy as much as it did any of the more physical methods of persuasion. Thus these men seeking to become enforcement agents within the framework of the multinational organization needed to showcase brains as much as brawn.

The Survival School program was hardcore. Recruits were engaged in educational sessions, whether physical or mental, during virtually all their waking hours. Off time was extremely rare and thus highly prized. The five-month course was grueling in every sense of the word. It toned the body and honed the mind. It was demanding, it was intense, and it set the bar for success extraordinarily high. And the indomitable men who entered the program were all intent on graduating with maximum honors, of achieving the “holy grail” of immediate assignment to Section II.

In this regard Napoleon Solo was no different than the other cadets. Cutter more than suspected that young man had an extreme aversion to failure of any kind, though he certainly kept an outwardly nonchalant demeanor. Solo’s natural magnetism and overriding good humor ingratiated him with everyone, and Cutter quickly discovered he was no exception himself. He was finding he liked this young man, but that didn’t stop him from pushing him hard. Jules Cutter was determined to find out without a doubt if Alexander Waverly’s confidence in Napoleon Solo’s underlying ability was justified. Cutter’s pointed resolve in this direction, however, was not something that went totally unnoticed.

“Why does Cutter ride you so hard, Napoleon?” questioned Joe Valdovwiz a little more than three weeks into the Survival School program.

Napoleon shrugged. “Maybe he’s afraid I’ll steal all the girls away from him.”

Joe snickered. “If only there were any girls to steal!”

That elicited an effusive sigh from Napoleon. “Ah, what I wouldn’t give for a bit of feminine company at the moment.”

Napoleon Solo liked women and for more than just the obvious and usual reasons. He liked talking to them on any and all subjects, finding their perspectives uniquely different from his own and that of his male brethren. He liked their general ease of emotional response, something men either couldn’t or wouldn’t allow themselves in open society. He liked the faint sweet scent they left on his clothes as subtle reminders of themselves whenever he was around them. He liked the warm feel of their soft flesh against his, a treat he could freely enjoy because of their overall willingness to snuggle close. He found their common insecurity about their physical selves fascinating, though he didn’t understand it. He had never met any woman who didn’t think some facet of her face or body was “not up to par”, even those who could justly be categorized as nothing less than gorgeous. And perhaps it was because of this that he had taken early on in life to complimenting them with urbane effortlessness, for he had as well never met any woman who didn’t have at least one natural asset that warranted frank appreciation.

Solo opened the locker to store his sidearm and other personal weaponry gear in preparation for “rigging down” for a “within enemy hands” escape drill that was to start within the next half-hour. A snapshot he kept taped to the inside of the locker door caught Joe’s attention.

“Been meaning to ask you,” Valdovwitz began, “who’s the pretty gal in the pic? Your girlfriend?”

“Not yet,” conceded Napoleon as he smiled at the familiar image of Clara Richards captured in the photograph.

“Not yet?” inquiringly repeated Joe with a little chuckle underlying his tone.

“I’ve known her for years, since we were kids, and right now she’s just a friend. I do intend to change that state of affairs between us, however.”

“Sweet on her, are you?”

“I guess,” Napoleon acknowledged a bit sheepishly. “I don’t know. There’s just something about her. She’s stubborn and smart and sassy...”

“And stunning,” supplemented Joe appreciatively.

Napoleon’s responding smile was naturally easy and just as naturally enthusiastic. “She is that indeed,” he agreed as he lightly brushed a fingertip over the glossy image of the auburn-haired beauty in the picture.

Another cadet stuck his head into the open door of Napoleon’s tiny barracks room. “Hey Napoleon, Cutter sent me to find you. He wants to see you in his office pronto.”

“Probably wants me to run the drill blindfolded or something,” quipped Napoleon readily.

“Well, since we’ll all already be shackled and handcuffed,” quipped back Joe with another grin, “he does have to get creative in order to offer another impediment to your successfully completing the drill.”

“Hey, don’t give him any ideas, Solo!” protested the other cadet.

“Cutter wouldn’t like any of my ideas,” Napoleon answered only half in jest as he headed toward the door on his way out of the barracks.

“I don’t know any other way to deliver this news except directly, Solo,” spoke Cutter in a very somber voice.

Napoleon quirked an eyebrow in the commandant’s direction as the man handed him a telegram.

Regret to inform Franklin Milbourne expired from massive heart attack early this morning.

Presence of his grandson, Napoleon Solo, requested to finalize funeral arrangements and for formal reading of last will and testament.

Bertrand Nostalis, Attorney at Law

Napoleon swallowed hard. His maternal grandfather, the inimitably honorable righteous man who – in tandem with his surreptitiously sentimental socialite wife – had raised him, was gone. Just like that: with no time allowed for him to say goodbye.

“Do I have permission to comply with this request, sir?” Napoleon asked.

Cutter nodded shortly. “We don’t like to interrupt the training regimen as a rule, but of course there are always reasonable exceptions. However, I can only give you three days, Solo. Any more than that and you’ll be required to drop out of this class and reapply for the next course here at the school.”

“I understand, sir,” spoke Napoleon as he struggled inwardly to keep perfect control over his voice. Though he was determined not to let Cutter see this in his reaction, this inflexible attitude did make him somewhat angry. After all, it wasn’t like he was going off on some little pleasure jaunt; he was going to bury the grandfather who had been his legal guardian since birth. And that reality was mental pressure enough without having to ensure he kept within Cutter’s tight deadline for return to the school.

Without purposeful summoning, the last time he had spoken with his grandfather thrust itself into Napoleon’s mind. It was just before he had left for U.N.C.L.E.’s Survival School. His grandfather had given him a ring, the gold and star-sapphire one he even now wore on his left pinky finger, a twin to a centuries-old Milbourne family heirloom the old man himself wore...

“It’s to remind you, Napoleon, that a man must always find his own place in the world,” stated Franklin Milbourne straight to the point as he always had been with his grandson. “Bloodlines don’t offer assurances of anything, and the lack of them certainly doesn’t restrict the scope of personal responsibilities. I’ve always been proud of the way you’ve understood that. Despite the fact that your very existence can be accounted as a series of sixes and sevens, you’ve never let that inhibit your personal sense of integrity.

“The ring is a copy, but it is also inherently yours. It’s never belonged to another and thus can mean whatever you want it to mean. Just like your life can be whatever you choose to make of

it for yourself and others. In the end, one doesn't need heirlooms to understand that all of humanity is of one blood..."

Napoleon's thoughts snapped back into the present as he focused in on the tail-end of the discourse in which Cutter had evidently been indulging during his own mental meandering.

"As we aren't very far along in the program at present, I think you'll be able to make up whatever you might miss in your absence. But be aware you will need to make up every bit of course and field work, Solo. No special allowances will be made."

"I expect none, sir," responded Napoleon in a perfectly respectful tone.

For truly he had never expected special allowances of any kind in his life. He preferred to take fate in his own hands. He preferred to accept responsibilities and aim a steady eye on what others accounted impossible. Himself, he didn't believe anything impossible; it just wasn't in him to do that. He had dealt too long with hard realities and learned at a young age to see beyond them, even while accepting them. He wasn't an unrealistic dreamer, but at his core he did have the soul of an idealist, the mind of an optimist, and the heart of a warrior.

If Napoleon had found the wake and subsequent funeral mass and graveyard interment service difficult to endure, the reading of the will seemed all but unbearable. He did his duty, sat straight and attentive in his chair as his grandfather's affairs were set to rights according to the old man's last wishes, all the while praying for this final trial to end. It made him too psychologically uncomfortable, left him viscerally aware of a reality few others shared. A Milbourne; a Solo: he was biologically both and legally neither. Though both his politically potent grandfathers had rectified that last with the clandestine feat accomplished of filing days after his own birth and months after his father's death a predated marriage certificate for his parents. It was a thing spoken of in only private family circles, this truth that he was technically a bastard.

The question popped unbidden into Napoleon's mind: Was this oh-so-businesslike lawyer aware of that truth? "Yes, of course he is," Napoleon mentally chastised himself. "This firm has handled my grandfather's 'family legal matters' for decades." And what was that retroactive filing of a marriage certificate for his daughter but another family legal matter in the eyes of Franklin Milbourne?

At last the drawn-out recitation of the last will and testament came to a close, far from soon enough in Napoleon's opinion. Everyone rose from their respective seats and the attorney executor shook hands with all involved parties. Then those involved parties filed out of the conference room, where the reading had been held, and into the main hallway of the fashionable suite of Manhattan midtown offices for Nostalis, Nostalis and Klein, LLP.

"Well, I likely don't have to tell you how annoyed I am with how Franklin treated you in his will, Napoleon."

The comment came from Napoleon's Great Aunt Amy, the sister of his maternal grandmother.

Currently just shy of 60 years old, Amy Oppen-Schilden née LaCoursiere was still a notable beauty. Her pale golden-brown hair was now adorned with a wide swath of silver that she advantageously displayed in the elaborate style of the low-slung, nape-gathered chignon she preferred. Her dark eyes still snapped with an inner fire. She was incredibly petite, a tiny

dynamo of a woman who adored skiing on both water and snow, had an unexpected passion for bow-hunting, and was more than fond of the equestrian sport of steeplechase.

She had married an extraordinarily good-looking scion of Danish nobility when she was just 17, that feat the subject of a battle of wills with her parents that the strong-minded girl had in the end won. However, her husband had passed away when she was only 32, and thus for all of his life Napoleon had only known her as a widow. Not that fair Amy had ever worn “black weeds” and bemoaned her sad fate in that regard. Though Napoleon truly believed she had loved her one-time spouse, his death had certainly never lessened her unquenchable zest for life. Unconventional, outspoken and self-confident in the extreme, Amy was affectionately accounted as the “black sheep” in the family, though Napoleon believed a more apt description would be the “wild ewe”. She had more than her share of “male escorts” over the years of her widowhood, but it couldn’t be denied that – if they were indeed her lovers in a sexual context – she kept such relationships sufficiently discreet as to competently manage to retain the appearance of perfect propriety within the eyes of society at large.

“Aunt, he left me a more than comfortable competence,” responded Napoleon simply.

A sound halfway between a guffaw and a grumble issued from the elegantly attired, diminutive woman who stood before Napoleon.

“Oh, I admit he was very generous with money. The trust fund he set up will more than provide you with ample means for all the necessities of life. But, Napoleon, he left you nothing personal, nothing at all: the New York house going to me, his personal effects going to a none-too-close cousin, and the family heirlooms scattered amidst several barely-related relations.”

Napoleon’s lips curved into a small, wry smile. “We both know the why of that, Aunt.”

“And I’ve no hesitation in saying it’s a very poor excuse for a why,” stated Amy emphatically. “Good Lord, Napoleon, he and the Admiral went through that entire troublesome legal skullduggery when you were born to make sure you were acknowledged as a legitimate vessel of the Milbourne/Solo bloodlines by the world at large. Yet he just wouldn’t acknowledge that himself.”

“I’ve never held that against him, Aunt, so you shouldn’t in my behalf.”

Amy harrumphed noisily. “I know how much you respected him, Napoleon, but it cannot be denied that he was in many ways a very narrow-minded man.”

“He had his principles and he lived by them,” forwarded Napoleon. “Society can ask no more of any man than that.”

“But family can,” decided Amy. “Ciaran was, I grant you, a foolish, overly sentimental, water-willed chit of a lass. I credit it to too much girlhood reading of improbable fairytales and dewy-eyed romance novels. Certainly the LaCoursiere blood ran thin in her,” she declared matter-of-factly with a prideful shift of her shoulders.

Napoleon could not help but suppress a smile at this declaration and its accompanying gesture. The two LaCoursiere sisters, Amy and her older sibling Annette, who was Napoleon’s maternal grandmother, had never been known as shrinking violets or delicate rosebuds even in an era when such feminine types were looked upon with tolerant affection in the upper crust circles in

which they traveled. Attractive, smart, self-confident and self-forwarding, each sister had approached life in society from a different standpoint yet with very similar results. Where Amy had been delightfully daring, Annette had been fastidiously faultless. Yet each had a will of iron and a spirit of steel. They knew what they wanted and they went after it in every facet of being, including the sexual. Amy had pursued and properly caught her striking Danish noble; Annette had inveigled and fittingly ensnared her distinguished American diplomat. Neither ever considered it necessary to hem and haw regarding her particular determination in securing the husband of her desires. After all, one engaged in such pursuits within a framework of what was publicly acceptable, but that didn't mean you didn't engage.

"Still, Ciaran was Franklin and Annette's only child, and you are Ciaran's only child," Aunt Amy continued her discourse. "Why such a head-in-the-clouds fantasist fell so hard for that pessimistic cynic, Darius Solo, I still haven't a clue. I suppose she saw something – though I can't begin to imagine what – of JANE EYRE's soul-tortured Rochester in him. And there is no doubt he was indeed a handsome devil, just as you are, Napoleon," she added as she tapped a fingertip against the cleft in Napoleon's chin.

Napoleon gave his aunt a big grin. "I thank you for the compliment."

"As if you weren't already more than aware of your good looks and didn't cleverly calculate how to use them to purposeful advantage on many an occasion," Amy non-censoriously censured this aspect of her great-nephew's personality.

Napoleon took hold of his aunt's hand, thus removing her softly prodding finger from against his chin, and lightly kissed her fingers. Amy preened at the action. How she did delight in Napoleon's cosmopolitan manners. It seemed living under the influence of all that ambassadorial protocol hadn't been such a bad state of affairs with regard to his upbringing, even if she had considered it at the time much too confining an atmosphere for an adventurous child and adolescent.

"Now don't try and throw me off my current topic of conversation, young man," she chivvied him despite her appreciation of her great-nephew's debonair deportment. "I'm not that easily manipulated. And I'm just old enough to be allowed the occasional ramble, and you're yet young enough to be obliged to listen to it."

Napoleon chuckled. "Yes, Auntie," he teased, knowing how much she disliked to be addressed in such a juvenile manner.

Amy thumped him lightly on the upper arm. "Auntie indeed!"

"Honestly, Aunt Amy," ventured Napoleon in a more serious tone, "I know you think Grandfather was wrong to socially cut off my mother from the family the way he did. And I really don't disagree with you. However, he still saw she was always well taken care of. So it can't be said that he ever really abandoned her."

"I know what he did, Napoleon, far better than you. I know full well that he provided that living pension for her. And I know he saw to it she never physically wanted for anything. But what about emotionally? He never spoke to her again, nor did my sister. And he legally foisted himself in the position of your guardian only days after your birth, presenting her with no viable choice but to give you up to him and my sister for rearing."

“She had her memories of my father and that was truthfully all my mother wanted. And you know that at least as well as I do, Aunt.” Napoleon’s tone was quiet and calm, but this was emotional thin ice and how he did hate to be forced to skate out in the middle of it.

Amy’s brown eyes, darker in color but definitely less covertly camouflaging of private emotion than his, searched those of the young man before her. Placing comforting fingers around one of his wrists, she declared straight-to-the-point, “To this day I am not sure I didn’t do more harm than good when I took you to meet your mother that first time, and subsequently arranged those various visits between you both over the ensuing years.”

Napoleon shrugged. “I don’t regret getting to know her,” he said in a very hushed voice.

“But I imagine you do indeed regret coming to understand that you were no more than an incidental corollary to the self-indulgent romance she saw as the central focus of her life.”

“My father was her life.”

“Your father was a misty-edged dream from which she never had to rouse herself. His dying the way he did guaranteed that, even to the point of letting her discount the blunt fact he had already forsaken her.”

Darius Solo hadn’t exactly been a hero of a man. Sharply cynical, unrelievedly pessimistic, he viewed the public world as a pit of hypocrisy from which none could effectively escape. He wallowed in this supposed indisputable knowledge, waxing poetic over the inevitability of every human being’s ultimate dissatisfaction with life. Ciaran Milbourne had been a stunningly beautiful though somewhat mentally insecure debutante subconsciously seeking a surreal depth of emotional connection with existence in human society. Darius had seemed to her as someone who had intimately plumbed those depths and been torn by them, shredded and reshaped into a being sunk in despondent (and artfully intriguing) melancholia. She had been mesmerized by this aspect of him, and ultimately had permitted herself to become wildly enamored of every facet of him, from the mental to the spiritual to the emotional to the physical.

For his part, Darius basked in this unabashed adoration. It seemed to validate his certainty that he – and he alone – had uncovered the true essence of life. Thus he unthinkingly encouraged Ciaran’s self-effacing love, a love that exalted him as a being unique in understanding of the one true philosophy of existence. And it was only natural in such a scenario that Ciaran became but a supplemental piece of Darius’ ego. He used her to boost his own unbalanced vision of himself. It was not that he was uncaring; he was rather oblivious. He was centered in his own cataclysm of inner depression and just didn’t comprehend the damage that could be wrought upon those just outside the eye of the cyclone.

The rest was a common enough tale: they bedded; she got pregnant; he fled. Of course Darius maintained he just needed a bit of private contemplation to overcome “natural uncertainties”, but in truth neither of the pair was in a mental or emotional place that could successfully encompass the ups-and-downs of lifelong commitment. Ciaran needed to lose some of her romantic illusions and Darius needed to reconnect to the joy of simply living. However, it all became something of a grandiose tragedy when Darius, who was waylaying in the Cayman Islands during this period of divesting himself of those natural uncertainties, wound up in the middle of the storm surge that resulted from the Cuba hurricane of 1932. Unpredictable as only the ending to a true life-story could be, Darius Solo did indeed die a hero while rescuing survivors of that devastatingly deadly storm surge.

From that point onward, Darius would never be anything to Ciaran but a man of unique insight and extraordinary courage. A man conflicted by a humanity he saw as essentially hopeless and yet a humanity he still in the end ventured to selflessly aid. A man who had given everything for a cause in which he honestly did not believe, but which he knew most of the world yet did.

“Maybe he would have come back to her,” Napoleon suggested, though he had never once himself believed that.

“And maybe you were plied too often in your formative years with Ciaran’s pie-eyed fantasies.”

“Maybe,” allowed Napoleon with a surprisingly self-deprecating smile.

Napoleon Solo had first met his mother when he was eight years old. Aunt Amy had arranged the meeting very much “behind the back” of Franklin Milbourne and his wife. They had raised the boy since infancy and Franklin had always thought it best Napoleon know exactly why. So, as soon as he was of an age to understand such things, his grandfather had told him of his out-of-wedlock conception. He never told the boy more than he could readily comprehend, revealing additional details as Napoleon grew into adolescence. However, at eight Napoleon did know that his father had never married his mother and that his two grandfathers had made special arrangements so he did not have to suffer the labeling to which that situation might open him up from those outside his own family. He also knew his mother had been “disowned”, a status that confused him somewhat except that he recognized it meant she was no longer accounted part of the family unit. He also knew that all this was considered “a private matter” and not something he should ever discuss with non-relations.

At their first meeting, Napoleon had found his mother kind and sweet, a truly gentle soul. It bewildered him how someone so mild of temperament and fragile of spirit could be at the core of what was considered an inexcusable family scandal. From the beginning she had told him stories of his father: stories glazed glitteringly glowing by her own untempered idolization of the man. Thus was Napoleon’s initial impression of Darius Solo one painted in gloriously jewel-bright colors. Those colors were, however, too exaggerated not to fade with time, and so eventually – as he learned more of the realities of life – fade and streak and tinge they did. Yet somehow out of that first flush of intensely full-blown shading came into being Napoleon’s own innate sense of idealism and his persistent grip on a fundamentally optimistic outlook.

How the negative scorn for humanity of Darius Solo metamorphosized in his unwanted son into a positive reverence for that same humanity was surely one of the many mysteries of the human psyche. Yet so transform it had. And that transmutation was something of which Aunt Amy was keenly aware.

Amy sighed softly. “I do at least have to give the Admiral credit. He’s never looked askance at your... well... less-than-auspicious origin.”

The Admiral was Napoleon’s paternal grandfather, Horatio Solo. For as long as Napoleon could remember he had been referred to by all and sundry as “the Admiral”. Napoleon himself called him that. And a man more different in personal outlook and overall disposition from Franklin Milbourne there could not have been. The Admiral was a widower, had lost his wife fairly early on in his marriage, leaving him with a ten-year-old son to rear on his own. That son had definitely been the apple of his eye and more than likely over-indulged, but the circumstances of his single fatherhood certainly did not keep the Admiral from finding intimate companionship with many a female lovely. Nor from engaging on a somewhat regular basis in a raucous

carouse or two with his male buddies. Nor from throwing his head back and howling in pure pleasure as he felt a brisk salty breeze whip at his hair and his clothes while he manned the deck of an ocean-faring vessel. In short, he enjoyed life to the full and was not in the least ashamed of doing so.

He was often away: at sea, at various naval installations, at conferences amongst the military elite of the United States advising presidential actions. When his son unexpectedly died, leaving only the possibility of progeny in the womb of a young socialite his unaccountably depressed lad had not bothered to wed, the Admiral hadn't hesitated to recognize the unborn child as a Solo. He didn't care about licenses or official records. This was the fruit of Darius' seed, the only fruit that seed would ever bear, and the Admiral had no intention of letting that fruit wither ignored and untended on the vine.

The "conspiracy" between himself and Franklin Milbourne to provide for Napoleon's birth being recorded as all upright and legal had been a natural outcome. He didn't himself care that Napoleon was a bastard according to society's standards, but he was going to make damn sure no one ever viciously used such a trivial bit of "fact" as a weapon to wound his grandson. It wasn't exactly to his liking that Franklin and Annette Milbourne would be raising the boy, who was a Solo first and foremost, but he had to concede he didn't have much endorsable standing in all of this. And too his particular lifestyle didn't make it a sensible thing for him to attempt to bring up another child alone. Maybe if his wife Sarah had still been alive he would have objected more strongly to the boy being reared in the restricted embassy environment surrounding the Milbournes. But Sarah was long gone and he had absolutely no intention of ever marrying again. A bachelor's life suited him more than fine.

Still, Horatio Solo had spent as much time with his grandson growing up as he could manage with his constantly hectic schedule. He had taught Napoleon to sail. And he had brought into the boy's life an appreciation for finding an easiness of mind within yourself. Where Franklin Milbourne had educated Napoleon in the strict importance of fulfilling responsibilities to others and society at large, Horatio Solo had shown him the equal significance of seeking a personal joy within the framework of one's day-to-day existence.

"How is the Admiral doing, by the by?" asked Amy. "I didn't get much chance to speak with him at the funeral repast. Is retirement suiting him?"

Napoleon laughed as he shook his head in the negative. "No. He is already bored out of his mind and he's only been a 'man of leisure' for less than a year."

"Well, the structure of the Navy really was more his home than any physical structure ever was."

"He told me he's thinking of moving to a tropical isle where he can forget about the conventions of society and fully indulge in the pleasures of 'wine, women, song and the sea'."

"Good heavens, he hasn't been 'fully' indulging in those things for his entire life? He certainly could have fooled me."

Napoleon laughed once more. "He is a man of great appetites."

Amy nodded absently. "And great heart. I've always liked him, and I'm glad he kept himself involved in your childhood as much as he did. He and Franklin weren't exactly friends, but at least they accepted one another's rights and never started proprietarily feuding over you."

"I wasn't a possession, Aunt," Napoleon reminded Amy perhaps a bit more harshly than he intended.

"Of course not, dear boy," Amy assured him. "However, two powerful men standing on opposite sides of any emotionally charged situation so often lose all sense of judgment. And you can't deny the situation involving your birth and upbringing was quite emotionally charged."

Napoleon shrugged. "I guess," he allowed, although with obvious truculence as he slipped his hands into his trouser pockets to conceal his steady clenching of them into tight fists.

"Don't go all sullen and broody on me, Napoleon," reproved his aunt. "It doesn't in the least become you. Your laid-back charm is much more engaging."

"As you say, Aunt."

Napoleon's tone was deliberately controlled, soft with the words enunciated precisely and evenly. Amy recognized this as a sign of anger in her great-nephew. He almost never shouted. Whenever fury rose in him, he kept his voice low and the pronunciation of his words tersely exact.

Amy sighed in a bit of exasperation. "Napoleon, I wasn't trying to upset you. You know I always speak my mind. It's one of my many failings."

Napoleon knew it was silly to remain angry with his aunt for saying something that had the overall ring of truth. His guardianship and upbringing could very well have wound up as a "bone of contention" between the Milbournes and the Solos. Though Franklin Milbourne had been deeply disappointed with his daughter's sentimental disregard of her responsibilities to the accepted tenets of human society, he could at the very least value her stubborn loyalty to her selfish lover. Yet for Darius Solo, and his wallowing failure to discharge his own responsibilities within the framework of societal mores, Franklin had no respect whatsoever. He considered him as a man unworthy of either forgiveness or forbearance and had never once hesitated in saying so.

Naturally this was an attitude that irritated the Admiral. His son had been in his adult life a completely demoralized man. Though he had never understood why or even how this had come about, the Admiral knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that some leeway had to be given Darius because of his severe spate of depression. He keenly regretted he had not been able in those last years to find a means of reversing the downward slide of his son's emotional state. Thus did the Admiral blame himself in some part for the way events had ultimately culminated. However, he also could not forget nor discount that in the end his son had died aiding in the saving of the lives of others. Perhaps, had he lived, this would have served as the start of an upturn in Darius' self-tortured personality.

Franklin Milbourne didn't hold truck with such "untoward tolerance" and the stage had definitely been set for a no-holds-barred faceoff between the two men with regard to their mutual grandson. However it had been the Admiral who had reluctantly backed off and unhappily bit his tongue; the Admiral who kept relations between the two families on a more-or-less even keel; the Admiral who had seen to it that Napoleon was never forced to take sides in the matter. And for that Napoleon would always be more than grateful to the man.

While it was true that there was no man Napoleon more respected than Franklin Milbourne, it was equally as true that there was no man Napoleon more appreciated than Horatio Solo.

"It's also one of your many assets, Aunt," Napoleon healed the small breach before it had a chance to stretch into a yawning gap. His tone was normalized now and the casual charm was back to the fore.

"Ah, Napoleon, Napoleon," gently lamented his aunt as she reached up and tenderly stroked his cheek, "how I wish we had been able to give you a more comfortable life."

"I never wanted for anything, Aunt Amy," Napoleon responded with a grin, portraying a purposeful obtuseness with regard to her meaning.

"And may you truly never want for anything in future, dear boy," hoped Amy. "Make yourself a good life, Napoleon, a life that gives you the reward of knowing you did well by everyone, but first and foremost by yourself. You deserve that."

Napoleon once more clasped his aunt's hand within his own and pressed his lips to her fingers. Yet this time it was not a gesture of debonair style, but rather of warm affection.

"Now," finalized Amy as she drew her hand from that of her great-nephew and casually smoothed the lapel of his impeccably tailored suit jacket, "get yourself out of this boring den of stodgy lawyers and back out into the excitement of a young man's fancy. Go and get yourself laid," she commanded impishly as she pushed once against his shoulder.

"Aunt!" exclaimed Napoleon in sham shock.

"Don't think I don't know about all your amorous adventures with the ladies, young man. The LaCoursiere blood runs strong in you."

"Some would insist that particular trait comes courtesy of the Solo blood."

"Nonsense. It's the LaCoursiere blood that is intrinsically French."

"The LaCoursiere blood is Canadian," Napoleon smirkingly reminded her.

"French Canadian and don't you ever forget it."

"Yes, Aunt," he agreed with a poorly suppressed chuckle.

In the hallway where they stood the doors to one of the elevators opened. Clara Richards came out of the car and walked toward the pair.

"You could do worse than that one," whispered Amy to Napoleon before she focused her attention on the young woman. "Ah Clara, you have good timing. I am more than ready to get myself into my penthouse and relax with a snifter of good brandy. Last will and testament readings are always so... innerving, and not in a good way."

"I truly wish to be of some service during this sad time for your family, ma'am," Clara assured her. "Thus I'm glad you thought to call me for a ride. Do you need a lift too, Napoleon?" she then questioned the other of the pair with perhaps a bit too noticeable eagerness in her voice.

Napoleon considered that prospect for a moment or two. True, he had his car parked in the law firm's underground garage, but he could always take a cab back to pick it up later. He really liked Clara and was very much physically attracted to her as well. Bedding her – and he was sure she would be willing to share that intimacy with him at this moment though she never had before – was intensely appealing. He was tempted. Hell, he was more than tempted. But somehow he just didn't want anything that could be misconstrued as a "sympathy fuck" from her. When they finally came together sexually – and he had absolutely no doubt they soon would – he wanted it to be out of nothing but mutual desire and affection. Not possible compassion on her part for his loss of his grandfather.

"No, Clara," he made his mental decision though his body balked, exhibiting its own wishes in a manner that would have proven most embarrassing if his suit jacket hadn't been discreetly buttoned, thus hiding the attentive interest of a certain portion of his anatomy from ready view. "But thank you for the offer just the same."

"Anytime, Napoleon," promised Clara, her amber-hued eyes aglow with twin banked fires.

"Give your aunt a hug and a smooch, dear boy," Amy bid her great-nephew.

As the two embraced, Napoleon whispered quietly in her ear, "You employ a chauffeur, Aunt Amy."

"Who deserves a day off now and again," whispered back Amy in Napoleon's ear. "Not that you appreciated my liberality in giving him today as that off-time."

Napoleon kissed his aunt on the cheek, all the while trying to hide the amusement that made the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"Write me, Napoleon," pressed Amy. "I'll be in residence at my Copenhagen estate for the next few months, and I will expect at least two letters from you in that timeframe."

"I'll try, Aunt."

"You'll do, Napoleon," Amy brooked no hesitation as the ding of the elevator call-button turned her focus toward the arriving car.

Before she followed the older woman into the open elevator, Clara brushed a tentative finger over Napoleon's lips. "If you need to talk, don't hesitate to stop by, Napoleon, no matter the hour."

Napoleon nodded, knowing he had no intention of taking Clara up on that particular invitation... at least for now.

This is not to say that in the end Napoleon Solo did not avail himself of intimate female companionship before his return to the male-exclusive environment of U.N.C.L.E.'s Survival School. After the reading of his grandfather's will, he made the obligatory trip to New York HQ to find out about travel arrangements for his journey back to that uncharted island in the Caribbean. The pretty female U.N.C.L.E. operative who advised him of those arrangements was most obliging... with regard to all his needs. And such an opportunity was not one to be missed. After all, the young man was only too aware that this would be likely his last chance for such female companionship for the remaining duration of his term in the training academy.

Thus a fine dinner in a five-star restaurant, a bit of public cheek-to-cheek dancing in an upscale nightspot, and then a bit of more private crotch-to-crotch dancing in the gal's small Brooklyn apartment had indeed put Napoleon in a good mood as a precursor to his return to the arduous trials of Cutter's agent training course.

Joe Valdovwiz poked his head into the room of Napoleon Solo upon hearing a bit of rather tuneless humming emanating from those precincts as he walked through the barracks corridor.

"You're back," he greeted his friend.

"Back and ready for action," enthusiastically responded Napoleon.

"By your chipper mood I take it the real action has already occurred far from these shores. With the pretty gal in the locker pic?"

"What? Uh, no."

"No?" questioned Joe in some surprise.

"No. But there was this raven-haired temptress in New York HQ who wasn't opposed to participating in some interpersonal exploits."

"Lucky you," congratulated Joe with an amused yet envious laugh.

Napoleon shrugged. "Luck comes to those who take ready advantage of offered opportunities."

"Well, you better hope you get lots of offered opportunities in the next few hours."

"Why?"

"You know that initial in-enemy-hands escape drill you wound up missing?"

Napoleon grunted in positive acknowledgement as he sat down on the narrow bed to pull on the black work-boots that served as part of his normal Survival School gear.

"You're going to have to run through it first thing after you meet with Cutter."

"And how do you know that?" asked Napoleon somewhat curiously as he glanced up at Joe.

"Because you have to run through it with the five bottom finishers from the original drill and I'm one of those."

"Oh," was the only comment Napoleon made, uncomfortable with the idea of making Joe feel bad for his previous poor showing in the exercise.

"Cutter is purposely handicapping you, Napoleon."

Napoleon only shrugged in response.

"Look, why don't you file a complaint with Waverly about—"

"No," tersely interrupted Napoleon.

“But—”

“I can pass every exercise with any handicap Cutter wants to slap on me. I don’t need any coddling by the brass.”

“Geeze, you’re stubborn, Napoleon.”

“And I’ll see to it that Cutter never forgets that facet of my personality,” finalized Napoleon as he heavily stomped one boot on the floor, ostensibly to correctly seat his foot within the shoe but in fact to accent his own steely determination on this score.

The six men stood side-by-side in the at-ease posture of military attention, hands clasped behind their backs with their stances square and steady. Jules Cutter surveyed their faces one by one. All six men had passed through the in-enemy-hands drill without falling victim to any of the simulated death traps. As a team, the six had gone above and beyond and managed to free all the mock innocent prisoners without losing a single one to any of the traps either. And to top it all off they had subjected to imitation fatality or physical detainment every single one of their faux Thrush captors. Five of these cadets had been the poorest scorers in the past drill in which they had participated, but today they all had scored in the highest percentage. And one man, Napoleon Solo, had achieved the highest score ever awarded for the drill.

Cutter, however, wasn’t exactly pleased with this outcome. The way the six had worked through the drill hadn’t been conventional in the least. Led by Solo, they had taken seemingly impossible risks that had paid off in the end. They hadn’t even stayed cuffed and shackled as was the general idea. Solo, taking advantage of an unintended opportunity created by some less-than-perfect maintenance of the drill facility, had gotten them free via use of an exposed nail in one of the concrete walls. A small thing, that exposed nail: barely noticeable, but Solo had noticed. And, though he hadn’t been able to free the entirety of the nail from the concrete to make of it a viable lockpick, he had exploited the raised nailhead to painstakingly twist open a chain link on the cuffs and then on the shackles to free first himself and then the others from their bonds.

That action had been nothing short of truly inventive of course, thus worthy of high credit with regard to the scoring of the exercise. Yet it was an action that stuck in Cutter’s craw. Why did Solo have to be such an ingenious bastard, always ready to toss aside established parameters and yet succeed when doing so? Cutter preferred more than casual adherence to time-tested methods, and thus Napoleon Solo’s penchant for daring resourcefulness rubbed against the grain with him. Still, he had to admire this determined and talented young man who had such an obvious flair for original strategizing. But such admiration wouldn’t stop him from employing techniques to tame a bit of the wild adventurousness in Napoleon Solo. This young man did need to learn the value of thoughtful restraint in certain scenarios if he was to thrive in the long-term as an enforcement agent.

“You men have all passed the drill,” Cutter informed the six. “Your scores will be posted to the general bulletin board by this afternoon. You are dismissed, gentlemen. Except for you, Solo,” he added as his eyes found and held those of Napoleon.

When the others had left the room, Cutter spoke bluntly, “You are to report to the dockside officer for underwater demolitions check duty, Solo.”

Some emotion Cutter could not quite identify fleetingly evidenced itself on the face of the cadet, but it was gone in a flash too brief for the older man to properly study.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” Napoleon asked in a perfectly controlled voice.

“Granted,” allowed Cutter with a curt nod.

Napoleon recognized the duty being assigned him as a form of punishment and thus noted bluntly, “You said we all had passed the drill.”

“You all did... with flying colors. Especially you, Solo. A score as high as that you pulled off today has never been attained by anyone in all my years as headmaster of this school.”

Napoleon did smirk just a little before he caught himself in that telltale reaction. “Then why am I being penalized?” he straightforwardly demanded to be told.

“Because in my opinion you need to learn a bit more self-discipline. Sometimes you’re like a battering ram pushing your way through every obstacle with dead-on force.”

“Are you saying I don’t think? Because—”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” interrupted Cutter. “I **know** you think. I can all but see the pros and cons of various strategies being calculated in your head. You work through them all with lightning speed. But you are quite often simply seduced by the bravura of the diciest course, trusting in your instincts alone to see it successfully through.”

“And an enforcement agent shouldn’t trust his instincts?”

“Don’t try that kind of verbal entrapment with me, Solo. I can’t be tripped up like that. We all know an agent’s instincts are one of his best weapons. But there is a balance that must be maintained between the audacious and the tried-and-true. I don’t believe you understand that balance as of yet.”

“And pulling underwater demolitions check duty will aid me in reaching that understanding?” questioned Napoleon with bitterness evident in his voice.

Cutter assessed the young man before him. This bitterness wasn’t strictly the result of Solo believing he was being reprimanded unfairly. There was definitely more to it than that. Cutter wasn’t sure what it was about the particular retribution that was bothering Solo, but it surely had the effect of undermining his usual easygoing charm.

“Checking underwater demolitions is a process that must be done slowly and in a precisely routine manner. There are no derring-do alternatives, or at least none minus the upshot of a rather nasty death. You’ll have to stick with the tried-and-true in this case, Solo, and that’s something you need to learn to do... at least on occasion.”

“Yes sir,” Napoleon submitted to the commandant’s logic, albeit through tightened lips. “Will that be all, sir?”

“Yes, that will be all, Solo,” Cutter dismissed the cadet while internally pondering why Napoleon had so uncharacteristically been unable to hide under his usual nonchalant public face his reaction to the order to report for underwater demolitions check duty.

Napoleon checked his scuba gear for a final time and then took a deep, calming breath.

He could do this. He was a capable scuba diver and a more than capable swimmer. He would be fine.

Silently he repeated these thoughts over and over in his head. He forced down his panic, swallowing it like bad-tasting medicine, and set his mask into place. At the nod from the officer on duty, he plunged feet-first off the edge of the pier where the dockside control/monitoring equipment for the underground explosives surrounding U.N.C.L.E.’s private Caribbean island stood flickering and flashing a multitude of informational data. As the water surrounded him on all sides, he fought for control of the irrational fear that gripped him. Submersion like this terrified him on an inner level he could never and would never explain to anyone. Instead he privately beat that fear into unwilling submission whenever it reared its persistent head. Yet about that mentally and emotionally exhausting internal combat, he never uttered a single word.

He didn’t recall what had initially triggered this reaction in him, though others in his family had often told him the story of how he had almost drowned at three years old. A tale of slipping off the deck of the family boat during an unexpected storm at sea and nearly being lost forever in the churning waves. The incident itself had not stayed in his memory, but the overly anxious feeling it had engendered had haunted him ever since. He had learned to swim at a young age in an attempt to battle that anxiety, doing well enough to successfully compete on swimming teams in both elementary and secondary school. Still the feeling remained as potent as ever and he had to compel it into abeyance with every stroke he took through the water. He had learned scuba diving while in the army and had worked further at perfecting that skill while in college. Still the feeling remained: strong, stubborn and steady, something against which he had to constantly struggle.

Though Cutter had no way of knowing any of this, it was nonetheless true that, if a reprimand had indeed been his aim with this assignment, he couldn’t have picked a more powerful method of punishment to use on Napoleon Solo. Napoleon trusted enough in his training so that the live explosives did not overly concern him; still the water which now engulfed him did.

“All right, Solo,” Napoleon heard the voice of the duty officer through the special earpiece attached to his mask, “perimeter one is down from live. Proceed to check the mines in that section for security of position and integrity of containment.”

Moving quickly to the section of the grid that had been set to a deactivated state, Solo followed the checklist that he had memorized on what to look for at each individual mine site. The startling clarity of the water of the Sargasso Sea, in which U.N.C.L.E.’s private island was located, made the inspection relatively easy. The strange undercurrents and magnetic anomalies of this particular location on the edge of the Devil’s Triangle sometimes made use of electronic equipment unreliable however. The Command itself made effective use of these circumstances to keep vessels away from their secret bit of territory, but these particular conditions were also the reason the organization continuously monitored its own equipment for accuracy. As well several redundant systems were utilized in any instance where the vagaries of the Sargasso and the Devil’s Triangle might wreak havoc.

Unclipping a small photoelectric device from his weighted diving belt, Solo signaled that the check on perimeter one of the mine grid was complete.

“Proceed perimeter two, Solo. Provide indicator when sufficiently clear of perimeter one.”

Napoleon made his way to the next section of the underwater grid. He signaled via his handheld device that he was clear of perimeter one, thus giving the okay for that section to be reactivated. The small mechanism he clasped in one palm began to send out a series of warning lights and pulses in evidence that apparently perimeter two had been reactivated instead of perimeter one. He tried to contact the duty officer via the instrument once more, but that just sent it into a wild cascading series of blinking and beeping. Without the device responding properly, Solo couldn't risk going further with the demolitions check. Thus he immediately glided upward toward the surface of the water without even taking the precaution of re-clipping the handheld to his belt.

His head attempted to break the waterline through a particularly dense patch of sargassum, the ubiquitous seaweed from which the Sargasso had received its name. The fronds and stipes clung to his mask, obscuring his vision. As he pushed determinedly upward, the tangled holdfast of the plant caught at the air hose where it attached into his mouthpiece, his own jerky movement then pulling loose the tube. Panicking, Napoleon slipped back under the water, gulping for breathable oxygen that turned out to be liquid and not what his lungs craved. The instrument he yet held dropped from his grasp as he flailed both arms helplessly above his head. Fortunately that instinctive reaction provided enough of a visual aid with regard to his position for the motorboat, that the duty officer had launched from the dock at the first failure of receipt of a proper signal from Napoleon's handheld, to come readily to his rescue. He was pulled quickly onboard, gasping wildly for breath.

“Steady, Solo,” spoke the duty officer. “Take slow, deep breaths.”

Over the heavy hammering of his own heart, Napoleon stammered out, “Portable went into overdrive. Wasn't properly registering.”

“It happens occasionally here.”

Napoleon made a purposeful effort to even out his breathing. “Aggressive seaweed,” he joked with a somewhat shaky smile.

“You should have ducked back under and went for breakwater at another spot, Solo. That's best practice if you hit a thick area of sargassum on the surface like that. Don't try and push through it.”

Napoleon wasn't going to let this man in on the fact that the idea of going back under and jockeying for position beneath the water in order to break through clear of the sargassum hadn't even been a vague thought in his head. He had simply wanted out from the undersea environment as quickly as possible. When the device connecting him to the world above the surface had malfunctioned, all the control he had been putting into staying composed underwater had been pushed in another direction and there just hadn't been enough left to keep his own personal worse nightmare of drowning at bay.

“I'll remember that,” Solo nevertheless catalogued the advice for future use.

The duty officer ran the launch back toward the dockside pier and then tethered it in place. Solo sat down on the pier, head resting upon his drawn-up knees, gathering the tattered remnants of his willpower.

“You have another mask and handheld?” Napoleon asked after about ten minutes had passed as he rose to his feet with just the tiniest bit of wobbliness.

The other man nodded. “But you don’t have to complete the check, Solo. I’ll report to Cutter as to why you didn’t.”

Napoleon’s gaze was unwavering even if his body wasn’t in synch with the evenness of that gaze quite yet. “I’ll complete it.”

The duty officer eyed the cadet in frank assessment for a moment and then nodded once more. “All right. Let me get you another mask and handheld from the supply shed. I’ll need to calibrate the instrument. That will take a few minutes.” A few minutes the man reckoned Solo could use to fully regain his equilibrium.

As the officer moved off the pier and into the small storage shed nearby, Napoleon took another calming deep breath and prepared to once more do battle with a personal demon.

Six weeks into the Survival School curriculum the cadets were scheduled to be apprised of their personal “trigger patterns” to be utilized in an unexpected life/death situation. Once each man had been acquainted with the particular nature of that pattern, he would train in it religiously until it became second nature in moments when there was no time for thought. Consistent with the principles of the Command, such moments were not defined by personal danger, but rather by danger to others, usually innocents but occasionally other agents if the death of any such agent would fully compromise a mission. Thus the purpose of an instinctive trigger pattern was not to ensure the life of the agent himself, but rather to ensure against the needless loss of innocent life or the pointless failure of a world-saving scenario.

All the cadets were good shots. Some were better than others of course, but all were classified as highly qualified marksmen. Unsurprisingly Napoleon Solo was the best shot in his class. In fact he was the best shot there had ever been in any class at U.N.C.L.E.’s Survival School. This despite the fact he had the unconscious habit of squinting his eyes almost completely shut at the actual discharge of a bullet from his gun. The quirk annoyed the marksmanship instructor and Cutter too, but neither could dispute Solo’s consistent results. He seemed to have a natural instinct with regard to aim that didn’t fail him even in the most tense or urgent of situations.

Unlike most results/scores/tasks garnered during the Survival School program, the assignment of trigger patterns were not posted to the public bulletin board. They were considered something private between each trainee, the marksmanship officer and the school’s headmaster. It was not that the patterns were top secret exactly, and certainly – if a trainee graduated – that pattern would freely be made known to his partner or partners on any mission. Yet it was something considered confidential in many respects; something worked on in private with the marksmanship coach to perfect. Thus was there an air of mystery regarding how the trigger patterns were decided upon.

Unsurprisingly therefore, the impending trigger pattern designations were the subject of conversation as several of the cadets, enjoying some very rare time off from the grueling

Survival School training schedule, sat around a foldable card table in one of the public recreation rooms enjoying a friendly game of poker.

“The patterns have to be death-shots, so I wonder at the assertion of there being no exact repeats among enforcement agents.”

“There are lots of ways for a gunshot to kill a man,” noted Napoleon bluntly. He was winning most of the hands and had on the table in front of him a considerable pile of the bulletwood shavings, garnered from dead Balatá trees, which served the men as poker chips.

“A cheering thought this rainy day,” rejoined Joe Valdovwiz a bit morosely. He was losing badly at the game and was in an uncharacteristically down mood.

“A three-shot pattern by which U.N.C.L.E. can always identify which agent made what was deemed a crisis kill: Kind of gives you the shivers, doesn’t it?” commented another cadet. “It’s sort of like having the eyes of Big Brother always upon you.”

“You are always responsible for what you do,” supplemented Solo unflappably. “So the eyes, ears and noses of Big Brother or Eavesdropping Mama or Prying Cousin don’t much matter. If you don’t have conviction what you do is right in the moment, then you’ll always fail anyhow.”

“Spoken like a man of true principles, Solo,” the voice of Cutter, who had himself entered the rec room unheeded by the relaxing cadets, caught the young men up short.

Briefly the area was filled with the noises of chairs scraping the floor, one falling back and hitting the lower surface loudly, as the cadets all rose to their feet in respectful acknowledgement of their commandant’s presence.

“Still,” Cutter continued speaking, “U.N.C.L.E. does prefer the ability to verify an agent’s reaction to certain responsibilities in tricky situations. Hence the individualized trigger patterns.”

“Like a personal insignia branded on a corpse,” spoke out Napoleon straightforwardly. “Only insignias can be forged.”

Under his breath Joe muttered quietly, “Holy be Jesus!”

“Highly unlikely in this case,” Cutter stated just as straightforwardly.

“Why highly unlikely?” Napoleon wanted to know.

Cutter smirked. “Perhaps you’d like to see how the ‘insignia’, as you call it, is determined?”

“I would,” Napoleon agreed with a nod.

Cutter surveyed this cadet for a moment or two. Solo was proving himself to be, as Waverly had initially insisted he was, someone with great potential... perhaps beyond being merely a good enforcement agent. Though Jules hated with a passion the idea of Waverly proving unequivocally right in anything, he didn’t deny that the Continental Chief did have an innate genius for judging personalities. Solo, as many others Waverly had deemed capable of something more than the obvious, seemed more and more likely to one-day fulfill the older man’s prescience.

“Come with me then, Solo,” the commandant ordered the cadet, and the cadet did as ordered while the others standing about the table gawked in amazed silence.

“The firing range?” questioned Napoleon in some surprise.

“Where did you expect, Solo? This is where it all starts,” retorted Cutter.

“I just supposed it would be some computer setup with dozens of punch cards filled with data.”

“There is that when necessary, but everything still begins here. Now, if you will unholster your sidearm and take three shots at the target for a guaranteed kill.”

The targets on the Survival School firing range were not the general flat paper or cardboard variety used in most such venues. Rather they were three-dimensional forms fitted with a thin muslin “skin” over a wire-mesh internal structure. They were appropriately life-sized and, though featureless, each displayed the correct topography of a human face along with a bodily landscape complete with the correct shaping of torso and limbs right down to fingers and toes. The muslin outer coverings were replaced after every session, while the mesh frames were repaired as needed. An overhead cable, attached to an electric conveyor system, allowed for the targets to be brought forward toward the shooter for inspection after a firing sequence, while a manual pulley setup attached at the torso of the dummy permitted the shooter to position the target in a full 360 degree spectrum. When not in active use, the dummies were positioned in a right-side profile position rather than front-forward.

Thinking Cutter’s dog-and-pony show rather superfluous, Napoleon nevertheless did as bid. Quickly jerking the pulley level with one hand so to set the target directly in front of him to a face-forward position, Solo drew his gun with the other hand and fired three shots in rapid succession at the dummy, all three aimed “right between the eyes”.

“Nice shooting, despite that damnable habit of yours.”

“Thank you,” Napoleon refused to rise to the bait of the derogatory reference to his oft-criticized ‘flash squint’ as he casually returned his weapon to his hip-holster.

Cutter pushed the button to bring the target on its overhead guide-wire “up the line” until it stood directly in front of them both. The Survival School headmaster studied it critically for a long moment.

“So tell me, Solo, why did you aim all three bullets at the forehead?”

“Excuse me?”

“You had three bullets to use; yet you chose to expend all three in close proximity in one area rather than aiming at several different vital organs. Why?”

“You didn’t give me a specific mark,” Napoleon explained a bit irritably.

“I told you to take three shots for a guaranteed kill.”

“Are you trying to tell me that three shots through the forehead isn’t a guaranteed kill?”

“No, I’m not trying to tell you that. But apparently you are trying to tell me by your action that three shots to the forehead, closely clustered in the middle of forehead I might add, are what you automatically discern as a guaranteed kill.”

“I get your point,” conceded Napoleon, “but I wouldn’t be the only trainee in this class, or indeed in any class ever at this school, who would react that way.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” conceded Cutter in turn. “However, look closer at your used target and tell me what you see.”

Napoleon proceeded to look as he silently kept a tight rein on his temper. “Three bullet holes in the approximate horizontal middle of the forehead with the lowest vertical point about an inch above the upper bridge of the nose. All shots in close proximity.” Suddenly Napoleon’s eyes opened a bit wider as his annoyance abated. “Very close proximity, yet without any chance overlap: something that could only be achieved by a very precise marksman.”

Cutter nodded. “Go on. What about the nature of the pattern itself?”

Napoleon squinted in concentration at the target. “No curves. Angled lines.” He carefully traced the telltale holes in the dummy’s ‘face’ with the fingers of one hand. “Tight asymmetrical triangle.”

“Correct,” acknowledged Cutter. “Anything more?”

Definitely intrigued now, Napoleon tilted his head as he gazed at the target. Then his cheeks flamed slightly red in embarrassment. “I pull my aim just a tad to the right. So tight right triangle in the middle of the forehead.”

“Now you get it, boy,” Cutter praised his observation. “We don’t truthfully assign you a pattern; rather we use what you naturally give us. The marksman instructor has been watching and working with you men at least two hours a day every day for six weeks. During the course of that time he has given you drills like this, true? Providing a bullet count, whether to kill or maim, if to maim to what specific purpose...”

“Yes,” interrupted Napoleon, “of course he has.”

“And he’s evaluated every reaction you’ve made in those drills, as well as kept tabs on your overall accuracy percentages in every scenario. He’s come to understand every damn detail about your overall abilities and personal idiosyncrasies when firing a semi-automatic pistol, and he’s called upon that understanding in recommending an instinctive trigger pattern for you.”

“Still, I couldn’t be the only agent or would-be agent to...”

“Differences in trigger patterns are often minute, but sufficient for those computers you mentioned to accurately distinguish in 98% of cases.”

“And the other 2%?” asked Napoleon with an ironic smile.

“Hell, Solo,” declared Cutter pointedly, “even U.N.C.L.E. is only made up of humans.”

Perhaps it was the wrong reaction, but Napoleon found himself grinning ear-to-ear at that assertion. He just couldn't help it.

"I'm glad to hear it," the cadet emphasized to the commandant.

And amazingly, at the candid verbal expression of that corny sentiment, the commandant smiled in return to the cadet.

Halfway through the 22-week training course Jules Cutter was finding to his own surprise that he was actually enjoying watching Napoleon Solo turn every previous record at the school into past tense as the young trainee time and again claimed those honors solely for himself. There was, the headmaster acknowledged, a certain cocky confidence to this cadet that sometimes bordered on arrogance. The commandant did not, however, find this off-putting. Nor did Solo's instructors, by whom he was highly regarded, or even his classmates, by whom he was well liked. Perhaps it was his laid-back bonhomie or his wittily upbeat charm or even his unpretentious empathy that granted Solo this unusual status as a rising star that yet didn't intimidate or aggravate his peers. Cutter wasn't sure about that, but he did know by this point that Napoleon Solo was very likely going to make one helluva enforcement agent for U.N.C.L.E.

Still, the Survival School headmaster kept up the pressure on Solo, wanting to leave no stone unturned in ensuring Waverly would be getting everything the Continental Chief was apparently expecting. Napoleon rose unflinchingly to every added challenge and complained not at all. And, on those rare occasions when the cadet's natural cockiness tended too strongly toward wannabe arrogance, there was always an assignment to underwater demolitions check duty to force a bit of humility back into him. Cutter had learned early-on that this was the one task during which Solo had to internally battle himself and not just external circumstances. The commandant made prudent use of this knowledge, neither over-exploiting it nor under-utilizing it. Rather that knowledge became a mental bludgeon that he stored at-the-ready in his psychological arsenal, but that he employed most judiciously; thus making its occasional application all the more effective.

At this point in the program the current class had been winnowed from 24 to 20 cadets, four men having mustered out: three voluntarily deciding a life within the framework of the Command would not suit their personalities, and one being compulsorily removed on account of major injury incurred during a drill. The nature of the injury was not life-threatening: a cracked rib and a broken arm, but U.N.C.L.E. policy was that such a program-impeding health condition required exclusion from the current training class. With the jam-packed curriculum, there was no viable means to permit time-off sufficient to fully knit fractured bones, or indeed to properly mend any other long-healing ailment. Any so affected recruit, however, did receive priority consideration when applying for another Survival School class after recovery.

The intense training was wearing on all the cadets. Napoleon, though he outwardly showed the strain less than others, was certainly no exception in this regard. There were many nights when he tossed and turned restlessly on his cot, literally aching for the easy relief from pent-up tension he was always able to garner in the body of a willing female. While his own hand could of course provide him simple physical release, it just couldn't simulate the mental lassitude holding a womanly form within his arms after achieving climax – breathing her sweet musky scent and feeling the human warmth radiating from her soft skin – engendered in Napoleon. And that pleasant torpor was really what he craved at the moment to temporarily liberate himself from the taxing rigors of stress-related anxiety.

Though constantly surrounded by others, Survival School – with its perforce stretching personal limits of physical and mental endurance to unfamiliar levels – was in many ways a solitary emotional experience for any cadet. Napoleon was by nature a social person, and thus that sense of aloneness played a bit of havoc with his notions of self, sometimes leaving him questioning everything in that regard. Would he really fit into the U.N.C.L.E. environment? Was this truly the right path for him? Could he in actuality handle the responsibilities he was taking upon himself with such determined bravado? Each time such mental queries arose, however, he responded by trusting in his natural instincts, grabbing tight hold of his intrinsic optimism, thrusting fully forward his spirited self-confidence, and soldiering steadily onward toward the goal of successfully completing the Survival School course and becoming an U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agent.

“Have you ever thought about what it says about us?” Joe Valdovwitz questioned Napoleon one night as they lay on their bellies, automatic rifles at the ready, camouflaged in the vegetation of the jungle waiting for a visual signal to commence their phase of an exercise in a multi-flank undercover attack on an enemy stronghold.

“You mean our desires to become enforcement agents in the Command?” Napoleon sought confirmation.

“Yes. An U.N.C.L.E. field operative isn’t your everyday policeman or run-of-the-mill federal agent or even your garden-variety spy. I mean the things they do... they aren’t just somebody’s life or death. Or dominance of this nation over that nation. They’re more human civilization as we know it or no human civilization at all. And those kind of... grand gestures... well, they’re exhilarating. So are we all just little boys still stubbornly intent on playing superheroes?”

“Joe, I think of it more this way,” mused Napoleon as his eyes steadily scanned the darkness for the small burst of light that would constitute the signal. “Every human being has his or her share of personally heroic moments. We’ve just chosen for ours to be more broad-based in societal terms and thus more complex to achieve than the norm. Sure, there’s some little boy in all of us that wants to proudly flex his muscles knowing we’ve made the less common and thus ostensibly nobler choice. Yet there is also a whole lot of man in all of us that is willing to take on global responsibilities from which most others would shy away. So if the reward for shouldering those responsibilities is a bit of individual exhilaration now and again, where’s the harm?”

Even in the darkness, Napoleon could see the bright specter of Joe’s toothy smile. “And no harm, no foul,” he agreed enthusiastically.

“And no rest for the wicked,” finalized Napoleon as he and his companion espied the quick glint of a flashlight beam and thus began the complicated ‘fallback-push’ maneuvers assigned to them for the drill.

The class in Mental Deflection during Enemy Interrogation was referred to colloquially by the cadets as HHCB (orally pronounced HĪH-sĭb) for Hell to Heaven to Cut-to-Black. Just referencing it in casual conversation could make some guys break out in a cold sweat.

The slang had several derivations. The most direct of these came from the fact that during the course of the class the trainees went through the process of becoming well-versed in using mental deflection techniques during extreme questioning sessions conducted within several scenarios. First was Hell, an enforced period of “imprisonment” anywhere from 24 to 72 hours with no food and/or water and/or sleep while having to endure cramped and darkened quarters

where it would be impossible to perhaps stand up straight or perhaps sit upright or perhaps lie fully out flat. Next was Heaven, when the cadets were “grilled” while under the effects of alcoholic beverages and mild hallucinogenic drugs. And finally Cut-to-Black, during which the trainees were submitted to controlled doses of actual truth serums during the cross-examinations, the reference garnered from the fact few if any wished to recall the details of these interrogations afterwards.

The second derivation had to do with cadets swinging from fretting whether they could make it through the class (Hell), discovering self-belief they had the stamina to grit it through somehow (Heaven), and finally hitting the possibility of being mustered out of Survival School solely on the basis of not doing well in this one class (Cut-to-Black).

The final derivation was very dark humor, something in which the Survival School cadets would often indulge in an attempt to ease tension. In this meaning Hell was coming to terms with the frantic world-interconnected and yet somehow societal-outsider existence of an active enforcement agent (personal torment), Heaven was experiencing several productive and therefore personally satisfying years in active field service (personal high), and Cut-to-Black was dying in the line of duty (personal finality).

The fifteenth week into the Survival School program was when the cadets were scheduled to begin their first mock interrogations under the effects of an actual truth serum. The prospect put most of the trainees noticeably on-edge. Intense questioning under conditions of physical deprivation and discomfort had been difficult, but maintaining hold of proper deflection techniques had been even more complex under the influence of alcoholic and hallucinogenic “uninhibitors”. Under the spontaneous tongue-loosening effects of a veridical, the task loomed as nearly herculean in scope.

“It is one of the great paradoxes of this profession to which you all aspire that, if an enemy is intent on gleaning some piece of information from you, that enemy must keep your mind fundamentally intact at least until the retrieval of what is sought,” the instructor summarized as the first truth serum session commenced. “As counterintuitive as it might seem when faced with the magnitude of those agonies you could be forced to endure during an interrogation by the enemy, this fact does provide you an advantage. Therefore remember: no matter what method is used to coerce you into talking, your mind is still your own. Use that advantage however you can.

“Physical suffering can make controlling the mind seem in the moment somehow less important than granting it the cessation of pain. Alcohol and hallucinogens can make maintaining that control seem ephemeral, something that comes and goes in waves. With pharmacological veridicals a skilled interrogator, whether he decides on a friend or foe tack, will employ a brisk shotgun style of verbal thrust-and-parry. This can make it seem as if you are consistently maintaining mental control until the stark realization you are not comes just one moment too late. Be aware of this psychological trap and you’ll find a way to step over it uncaught. Truth is relative; thus avoiding that trap isn’t impossible, though I won’t pretend doing so can’t be just as traumatic as the alternative.

“Still, to prevent becoming merely a burden the enemy decides has no further value and thus must be permanently shucked aside, never surrender your one advantage,” he emphasized strongly. “If your hope is that, in saving something of greater consequence than yourself, you will yet retain even the slightest opportunity to save yourself as well, never let go of your mental focus no matter how pervasive the idea of letting go becomes.”

The cadets were silent, absorbing the information, waiting on this ultimate test with bated breath. All but five, who were chosen by random draw to undergo interrogation during this first session, were then dismissed. The others' turns would come in succeeding days. Napoleon Solo was in the first group. (Sometimes the value of "luck" was ambiguous at best.) Each man in the group was given a specific code he was charged to keep absolutely secret. The codes could be real or sham: the cadets were not told which were which and each code was described as having a specific connection to a vital worldwide operation.

At the gestured indication of the instructor, Napoleon made his way into one of the interrogation cells with its one-way observation glass and internal intercom system that would provide the HHCB guru full visual and audio access to the goings-on. Solo took a seat in a small wooden armchair that was anchored to the floor in the approximate center of the room. A white-suited technician, face hidden behind a surgical mask, strapped Napoleon's wrists to the arms of the chair and his ankles to the front legs. Then he tied a rubber cord about Solo's right biceps, tapped at the area on the underside of the cadet's right arm just below the elbow to locate an appropriate vein, and finally brought forth a filled syringe and slowly injected the serum. The technician, his job done, exited and the room went completely dark.

Napoleon felt a mildly uncomfortable heat begin at the site of the injection and experienced an unpleasant taste much like that of rotting onions at the back of his mouth. The intensity of the bad taste gradually receded as the heat sensation mellowed out until it felt almost like the touch of sunlight on bare skin during a fine spring day. That gentled warmth spread gradually throughout his body, lulling him into a placid wish to doze.

"How are you feeling?" the voice of the interrogator came from somewhere out of the darkness after an appropriate interval had passed to allow the drug to take full effect.

Napoleon did not know who was questioning him. It could be any of the instructors of the School as the voice was being purposely disguised by an electronic device and the blackness of the room hid the man from ready view. This was standard procedure, so that the trainee did not feel too secure with the person doing the questioning.

"Bit sleepy," Napoleon answered honestly. There was yet no need for the deflection of truth.

"That's to be expected, Napoleon. May I call you Napoleon?"

A sort of moonish grin evidenced itself on Solo's face. "*Friendly approach,*" he mentally registered before vocally answering, "Seems to me you already are."

"So I am. Does that bother you?"

"What's in a name?" Napoleon quoted Shakespeare with another grin.

"Sometimes a name has particular meaning. Like the name of U.N.C.L.E."

"You have only one uncle? Small family."

"It promotes intimacy."

“And perhaps less than comfortable familiarity,” Napoleon goaded. So far he was finding this easy, but he remembered the instructor’s words. “*Don’t get over-confident,*” he reminded himself sternly.

“I like that closeness. Eliminates the need for secrets,” continued the interrogator and Napoleon, even though he couldn’t see it, could well imagine a shrug accompanying that statement.

“Need doesn’t always equal desire and desire doesn’t always equal need,” forwarded Napoleon.

“No more than clever always equals smart.”

“Do you think me clever?”

“I prefer to think you smart.”

At that statement Napoleon started giggling. He couldn’t help it. It embarrassed him that he couldn’t control this fit of silliness, but he found he just couldn’t.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“Seems so and I don’t even know why.”

“Perhaps I can help you with that. Perhaps you are in a good mood because you think I don’t know what you are trying to hide from me.”

“It’s very dark in here, so I don’t have to try very hard to hide anything.”

“And what if I was suddenly to shine a light...” At these words a brilliant spot-lamp was turned on directly in front of Solo, completely blinding him to his surroundings. “What then might I see, Napoleon?” the interrogator asked as the interrogatee blinked then squinted in discomfort, his eyes tearing of their own accord.

“Me tearing up,” Napoleon managed to keep his truthful answer quite innocuous.

A hand reached toward him; Napoleon instinctively leaned his head as far back away from that hand as his confined position allowed.

The interrogator laughed. “No wiping tears from the eyes of intrepid U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agents, heh? Or is it perhaps that you had no inkling I was so close?”

Napoleon answered nothing, but he began to sweat.

“So tell me, Napoleon, are your secrets a matter of need? Or a matter of desire?”

“A matter of security,” Napoleon found the response, stripped naked of all pretext, falling from his lips. “*Damn!*” he thought.

“Whose security?”

Napoleon fought the urge to answer straightforwardly, his head beginning to pound as he did so. God, how he wished he could massage this throbbing temples!

“I want an answer to my question, Napoleon. Whose security?”

“Who can tell? Security is mostly a superstition.¹”

Unseen by Solo, the interrogator smiled. “Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing¹,” he finished the quote. “And you are quite the daring adventurer, aren’t you, Napoleon?”

“I have my moments.”

“Are you having one of those moments now?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Napoleon rather glumly.

The interrogator laughed once more. “So then tell me about one of those moments.”

“What?” Napoleon balked, completely caught off-guard. He didn’t understand this interrogation. He didn’t know where anything was heading. He was confused, he was drowsy, his head hurt, his heart was thumping in an unnatural staccato rhythm, and he just didn’t want to answer any more questions.

“Tell me about one of those moments,” repeated the interrogator.

“My head aches too much to remember one.”

The interrogator switched off the intense light. “Better?”

“Why do you want to make it better?” Napoleon demanded, the plunge into total blackness having virtually blinded him yet again. He was truly nervous now.

“Are you sick to your stomach?”

Napoleon realized he was, though he didn’t think he had been before. Or maybe he just hadn’t noticed.

“Yes.”

“Is your head spinning?”

“Yes.”

“Is your heart pounding?”

“Yes.”

“Are you breaking out in a cold sweat?”

“Yes.”

“Have you memorized the details of this matter of security?”

¹ Helen Keller

“Yes.” Napoleon bit his tongue hard directly after this last affirmation exited his mouth. Christ, he wasn’t doing well...

“So, we have established that, whatever this matter of security could be, you can – with sufficient persuasion – tell me.”

“Such misconceptions in your hypothetical assumption,” tut-tutted Napoleon. “But perhaps it’s just grammatical misconstructions. Do you know that most people use the various forms of can and may incorrectly?” he successfully deflected. “They aren’t really interchangeable, you see.”

“May I remind you that life and death can be made interchangeable?”

Napoleon chuckled. “Well, you used them correctly in that sentence.”

“I too have my moments.”

“So why don’t you tell me about one of yours?”

“One of my moments of daring?”

Napoleon nodded, though he had no clue if the interrogator could even see the gesture.

“I could tell you about the last method I used to kill an uncooperative U.N.C.L.E. agent. It is quite audaciously graphic.”

Napoleon shook his head. “No, no, that’s not daring at all. Tell me about the last method you used to kill a **cooperative** U.N.C.L.E. agent. That’s likely to be even more audaciously graphic.”

“Quite the wit, aren’t you, Napoleon?”

“Wit is cultured insolence,” Napoleon glibly quoted Aristotle.

“Quotation is a serviceable substitute for wit,” the interrogator utilized a quote from Oscar Wilde in rejoinder.

Napoleon smiled crookedly. His head was still pounding, his heart-rate was alternating from too fast to too slow, his stomach was queasy, he was more tired than seemed reasonable under the tense circumstances, but he was managing to retain his focus. He was effectively coping...

“So, witty U.N.C.L.E. man, do you know any quotes to explain your untoward display of arrogance?”

“It’s only arrogance if you’re wrong²,” shot back Napoleon readily.

“Certainty?”

² Anonymous

“If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts: but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.”³

“Resistance?”

“The history of liberty is a history of resistance.”⁴ Euphoria was climbing through Napoleon’s veins. His brain wasn’t failing him. All his familiarity with literature was aiding him to deflect. He was coping... It was getting easier...

“Foolishness?”

“Good nature without prudence is foolishness.”⁵

“Pride?”

“Pride in their port, defiance in their eye
I see the Lords of human kind pass by.”⁶

“Only in this case it’s the **would-be** Lords of human kind, isn’t it?” Napoleon confidently baited.

“Responsibility?” the interrogator, not rising to that verbal taunt, pressed steadily onward.

“Bloodlines don’t offer assurances of anything, and the lack of them certainly doesn’t restrict the scope of personal responsibilities.” Napoleon’s attention stopped short, costing him his secure place in the quick-fire patter. Why had he said **that**? Why had he publicly spoken those words his grandfather had privately spoken to him? This was a personal secret, one he had been advised all his life never to tell. So just how deep was this all getting into his psyche? His brain seemed to be skipping in an irregular synaptic pulse to match the unbalanced palpitations of his heart. This wasn’t good...

“Security?” the interrogator never ceased the lightning pace of the ostensibly pointless repartee.

Still reeling from his unintended revelation, Napoleon’s mouth formed the beginning of the telltale phrase that had been recited to him and that he had then himself been required to mirror in recitation many times in return. “Geometric—” He choked back further words as he fought to regain his mental equilibrium. Blood was vibrating painfully through his temples and he felt sure he was about to throw up all over himself. He swallowed the vomit and let the sour taste of the hot acidic bile control his tongue. “Rectangular box transposition cipher: Code A12-7OU-X9,” he forcibly continued in an altered direction.

“And the key?” prompted the interrogator

“Whatever transposes it all properly,” Napoleon hedged by using the bluntest of truths.

“And transposing it all properly would reveal the code to?” the interrogator pursued the issue from another angle.

³ Francis Bacon

⁴ Woodrow Wilson

⁵ Proverb

⁶ Oliver Goldsmith

“The men’s public washroom at the U.S. embassy in Ottawa, Canada.” In the heat of the moment setting that factual if ordinary bit of remembered ‘code’ in a proper if somewhat basic cipher box was the best deflection Napoleon could think clearly enough to make. “It could come in real handy if you’re ever a visitor there,” he commented with a tongue-in-cheek honesty.

Then the nausea gripped hold of Napoleon’s insides in earnest. An intense headache blurred his vision as he began to retch spasmodically, turning his head to the side so at least any expelled vomit would hit the floor rather than himself.

An electronic horn sounded through the room, signaling the expiration of the session timer. Napoleon had never in his entire life been so relieved to hear such an obnoxiously ear-splitting noise. As he fought to regain some control over his rebelling stomach, the main lights came up.

“The code revealed was not that given to Solo as part of the exercise, nor did he provide any clue to the actual nature of the cipher or underlying transcription key, nor to what operation his assigned code was privileged information,” the HHCB instructor informed the pair in the interrogation cell over the internal intercom system. “Cadet has safely passed through all criteria phases of the narcoanalysis.”

The erstwhile interrogator came forward with a tumbler of water. The man Napoleon now recognized as the school’s Covert Strategies instructor held the glass to Solo’s mouth between his fitful bouts of gagging, letting the liquid just moisten the young man’s lips. “Easy now, Solo,” he advised the cadet. “Soon as you’re done with the heaves, you’ll be taken to the infirmary. Some intravenous fluids and then bedrest for a day or so and you’ll be fine. It’s not uncommon for there to be an adverse physical reaction when a man has to fight through the psychoactive effects of pentathol, especially the first time.”

Napoleon let a tentative sip of water pass into his mouth after the last of the dry heaves had finally stopped shuddering through his body. He swallowed with care both the clear liquid and his clear humiliation regarding his own condition before quipping, “Well, as long as it’s only the first time.”

The master strategist smiled and lightly clasped the cadet’s shoulder in a show of sympathy before signaling forward a pair of med techs to handle getting the physically spent and mentally exhausted Solo unbound and onto a gurney.

The HHCB truth serum interrogations resulted in the mandatory mustering out of three more trainees: two for failing in four of the six appropriately separated sessions to “safely pass” through at least three of the four criteria phases (code revelation, cipher type revelation, transcription key revelation, related operation revelation) of the narcoanalysis, and one for the intensification of a slight heart murmur to an unacceptable level as a result of the administering of the drug. Thus in Week 20 of the Survival School program 17 cadets remained to take part in the “full mission operations” challenge.

The 17 were split into three groups: two of six and one of five. A “lead agent” was assigned in command of each group. These lead agent assignments were not determined via random draw as had been the case with most other drill placements, but rather through careful determination by Cutter and all of his staff as to those best qualified for positions of authority. While all the cadets would be scored upon their individual and team performance of tasks within the exercise with regard to standards of effectiveness, efficiency and creativity, the three leads would as well be scored upon their management style. Thus these three were trainees who were viewed as

the most likely to achieve a higher-ranked senior agent status during the course of their possible future careers.

“Red Team lead agent:” announced Cutter, “Berto Herrera. Yellow Team lead agent: William Pierret. Blue Team lead agent: Napoleon Solo.”

The three were all quietly congratulated by their peers. Then Cutter signaled for complete quiet once more as he utilized a box lottery to place the remaining men into teams. Four men into the draw, Joe Valdovwitz could not suppress a grin as he extracted a blue token from the container, slotting him into Napoleon’s squad. At the end though it was that Blue Team that came up a man short. That was not an unplanned happenstance. Cutter and his staff had unanimously decided that the most demanding test had to fall to Solo as the cadet with the best overall scores and highest instructor recommendations in the class.

“Holy be Jesus, Napoleon,” Joe whispered to his friend once all the lots had been pulled, “Cutter is handicapping you again.”

“Well, at least you can say this for Cutter,” whispered back Napoleon, “he’s consistent.”

“As you men have already been made aware,” Cutter spoke straight to the point, “the object of this exercise is to infiltrate opponent territories, incapacitate their operations by whatever means necessary, retrieve their technology in the form of plans, and finally take into custody as many of their personnel for questioning as possible. Enemy ‘deaths’ may aid in making it easier to achieve the other goals of this mission, but it is not ideal in this case. Bringing in ‘alive’ as many of the enemy as you can is as much a primary goal as any of the other objectives.

“The three cadet teams will be pitted against one another rather than a separate instructor force. You are working under a critical timeframe of 72 hours. Lead agents: all directives are to come from you unless you delegate another agent as task lead for a specific facet of the mission. Use your limited personnel resources wisely. Remember that simply because a man has the willingness to do something doesn’t mean he has the wherewithal. But if a man with the wherewithal doesn’t have the willingness, as lead agents you better figure out the right aim for the kick in the pants to get him on-point.

“Solo,” Cutter now particularly addressed Napoleon, “being a man down from the outset, properly strategizing the utilization of personnel will be particularly important for you. All lead agents: Make your orders firm; if you have any doubts about your ultimate tactics, keep them to yourself. If you doubt, your men will doubt, and you can’t afford that. Especially you, Solo.

“The operations for this exercise will be basic seawater desalination units located in three of the practice bunkers. Each utilized bunker has a color coding painted on its door matched to one of the squad designations. There are options on how you incapacitate another team’s operation of a unit, whether to re-route the operation for use in tandem with that of your own squad, mechanically disable the unit while keeping it basically intact, or destroy the unit using the limited explosive charges that will be provided as part of your gear. The final choice on employed option rests on the shoulders of the lead agent. It is also the lead agent’s decision as to how to retrieve the enemy technology: you may simply steal or salvage the paper plans that each bunker houses, or you may choose to have one or more of your men commit those plans to memory. Each plan is different, so memorizing the plans of your own unit will not aid in mentally securing the technology of another squad.

“It goes without saying that another scoring mechanism within the context of the drill is retention of the operation and technology of your own unit.

“Finally, bringing in an opposing lead agent for questioning will garner an additional score beyond the points awarded for mere enemy capture. Am I putting targets on the backs of you men?” Cutter posed the rhetorical question to the three team leads. “Indeed I am and I don’t apologize for it. Those who the enemy comes to know as most valuable to their own organization also become the most valuable to that enemy’s own.

“You have three hours to gear up according to the equipment specifications posted on the armory bulletin board, as well as scope out the operation in your own bunker and the lay of the land surrounding it. Make the best use you can of that time. Good luck, men,” Cutter concluded.

At the commandant’s final well wishes, the cadets dispersed, knotted in groups akin to their squad assignments, and headed toward the armory.

As Cutter passed several of his instructors, he asked with a sly smile, “So are you making your usual prestige gambles on the outcome?”

For a facility that handled a sharply restricted number of trainees at any one go, Cutter’s teaching staff was quite large: 16 full-duration specialized course instructors and varying numbers of limited-duration instructors throughout the term of any one class. Though it of course hadn’t been the case when Alexander Waverly had first forwarded the concept of a school for Command enforcement agents at the inception of the organization less than ten years before, presently all instructors in the school could claim either previous or current experience in Section II, Section III or Section V of U.N.C.L.E. operations.

In general the instructors were assigned to the school on a rotational basis, staying for a period of one or two cadet classes, the setup of 22-week classes roughly corresponding to either a six-month or one-year assignment. Some were “retired from the field”. Some were active enforcement/security agents on “recovery assignment” during health-related rehabilitation, the prerequisite for such assignment being that the agent was far enough along in the rehabilitation process to withstand the physical and mental challenges of conducting lessons at the school. Some were agents from various sections on limited (less than a full class term) “instructional duty” slotted to lend particular expertise to the mix of the curriculum. In this last category on rare occasions were as well cadets who had technically fulfilled the Survival School course of study but who purposely had not yet been assigned to a section or field office.

Yet there were a few who served as an instructor for a longer term. These were the men with whom Cutter felt himself most attuned as his devotion to the school was mirrored in them, although still to a lesser degree. The three men Cutter spoke with now fell into this last group.

The first was the Martial Arts instructor. A Kenyan of Kikuyu origins and a military background, he possessed an innate knack for all forms of physical attack and defense skills. Becoming part of U.N.C.L.E. at its inception, he had not himself gone through the Survival School program. However, he had spent a year in Section III, served very briefly in Section II, and wound up in Section V in London when he married. Five very happy and productive years in Security had all ended for him when, shortly after a much anticipated transfer to U.N.C.L.E.’s Nairobi headquarters in his home country, he lost his wife and young twin sons in a rebel set house fire in the early stages of the Mau-Mau Uprising. He had thus no sympathy for the rebels but,

witnessing the appalling conditions of those of his people detained in British-run labor camps, he could find little sympathy for the colonial government either.

The Kenyan had considered a straight-up transfer to another U.N.C.L.E. office, but had concluded that he needed to come to terms with his mounting distaste for all things British if he was to continue to embrace the ideals of U.N.C.L.E. Teaching at the school, he reasoned, would give him the opportunity to experience through the buoyant spirits of the trainees the world-hopeful outlook he had himself lost. He had initially applied for a two class stint at the School, but had reapplied for another stretch. At 44 he was now midway into his second year as an instructor.

The second man was the HHCB instructor. Starting his intelligence career with S akerhetspolisen, this Swede with a razor-edged demeanor had been an early recruit into U.N.C.L.E. Thus he had gone through what was the initial experimental class in the Survival School at the "ripe old age" of 34. After completing the program, the already quite experienced operative had climbed the promotional ladder within U.N.C.L.E. from Section III to Section II in just a few months. An excellent enforcement agent who had been posted out of various Command offices in North America, he had the "bad luck" during the course of not quite six years within Section II to lose seven field partners specifically to the heinous questioning methods of Thrush. That had hardened him and he made no bones about it. Yet he considered that hardness part of what got him successfully through the dangers inherent in Operations-and-Enforcement missions to reach the charter-prescribed field retirement age of 40.

Once retired from the field though, the Swede was uncertain what to do with his life. He had always foregone romantic relationships and found he had no inclination toward one even though now clear of the general stipulation of not marrying while active in Section II. A career outside of U.N.C.L.E. he found an unappealing option, while his somewhat thorny personality didn't readily promote the idea of him as an administrator in Section I of the organization. Section IV seemed his likely destination, but he was sure what he had learned about enemy interrogation methods during his career could benefit those coming in basically unprepared for those particular trials. (He always thought, and frankly said so, that his partners might have at least survived their ordeals, had they been better prepared.) So he had applied for an unusual "double stint" of four classes at the School. He was currently at the start of his second year as an instructor.

The last of the group was the Covert Strategies instructor. A Frenchman who had come to Survival School via the hallowed academic halls of Saint-Cyr, there was a certain worldly sophistication about him that could put folks off as easily as it could draw them. He had been one of the "dubbed knights" of Survival School, e.g., he had achieved immediate assignment to Section II upon completing the program. Two years into service within that elite section, however, he had applied for reassignment to Section III. His reasons he noted as "personal" and Gabhail Samoy, the Section I Number 1 directly in charge of him as he posted out of the Singapore regional office, had hemmed-and-hawed about granting that reassignment. The Chief hadn't wanted to lose the man's outstanding mission skills in the field of course, but more the top-man hesitated because there had been "rumors", rumors a change of status that freed up the possibility of permanent "amorous entanglements" might escalate.

The matter came to a head when a young Malayan man, who was a "close friend" of the agent, was purposely targeted and killed by Thrush. The Frenchman had at that point stated he had no desire whatsoever to continue in Section II and would simply leave U.N.C.L.E. altogether if not offered another alternative. A position within Section I was considered out of the question

because of the aforementioned rumors. So he had been offered a two-class stint as a strategy instructor in Survival School as an interim measure to keep him with the Command while the five Continental Chiefs pondered the possibilities. Refusal had been his first thought, but strategy was something he loved discussing and something for which he recognized he had a natural aptitude; so he had thought better of the proposition and accepted.

Cutter never inquired about the actual nature of the relationship between the agent and his assassinated “close friend”. In the first place the headmaster didn’t consider it any of his business, and in the second place why should he ask for information that might just bring out unwanted prejudices in himself? The Frenchman made no untoward displays or unprofessional advances to any of the cadets. He was a first-rate instructor, albeit one the trainees sometimes seemed to find a little “alien” in nature. So Cutter concluded it was better not to know and therefore better not to ask. The original two-class stint had already been renewed twice by the top administrators within the Command and likely would soon be renewed again. Thus the Covert Strategies instructor, at just having reached the age of 30, was now well into his third year of teaching at the school.

“Red will break on top,” declared the Martial Arts instructor in response to Cutter’s query.

“You only think that because Herrera is a physical bull much like yourself,” the HHCB instructor countered with no apology for the sharpness of his tongue. “Normally my best guess would be Solo and the Blue. However, with that squad being a man short, I’m less inclined to lean in that direction. Yellow with Pierret at the helm has my marker.”

“Pierret has a tendency to sometimes get trapped in the intricacies of more detail than is necessary for the task at hand,” the Covert Strategies instructor voiced his considered opinion on the matter. “My bet is, therefore, indeed on Solo.”

“Being a man down is a big obstacle to overcome with but limited personnel to deploy,” reminded the Martial Arts instructor.

“Bigger than it looks on paper,” agreed the HHCB instructor.

“My bet is still on Solo,” stated the Covert Strategies instructor without hesitation. “What about you, Jules? Where does your experience and expertise tell you to stack the chips, as it were?”

“Gentlemen, despite the fact that this is only a friendly wager where the winner can expect no more than a congratulatory slap on the back, I do think it best I express no partiality,” Cutter rebuked them lightly.

“Of course,” the Martial Arts instructor conceded with a knowing nod and a not-quite-suppressed grin.

The other two also nodded their understanding, even if they did at that same moment see fit to somewhat noisily clear their throats.

Cutter turned to make his way back to the main control center where he would have video feeds of the bunkers and their surroundings, allowing him an overall view of the exercise as a whole. However, he spun back on his heel to face the other three once more just long enough to state candidly, “My chips are all stacked on Solo and would be even if he was two men down to start.”

Then executing another militarily precise about-face, Cutter continued on his way, leaving the Covert Strategies instructor laughing delightedly as the other two chewed their lower lips in apparent reassessment of their initial judgments.

Right from the onset of the exercise Cutter got a chance to scrutinize the different management styles of the lead agents with the means each decided upon to keep the plans of his operation secure.

Herrera, the most straightforward in approach of the three, opted for the use of a “benji box⁷”, e.g., a small lockbox rigged with an electric probe in the locking mechanism to ignite the contents upon anything other than entry of the correct key-code. It was overall a safe strategy, but it meant the box could itself be stolen, leaving the home squad minus its own operational plans.

Pierret, with his love of puzzles, divided the paper plans into six asymmetrical pieces one bit of which each member of the squad secreted about his person. The problem here of course was that, though the enemy had to retrieve each piece from a different squad member, capture or off-site “death” of one or more of the members left the home squad minus bits of its own puzzle.

Solo decided upon the audacious and unexpected technique of designating two of his squad to commit the plans to memory and then himself burning the original paper set. This was a risky tactic that depended upon at least one of the two designated men not being captured or “killed” during the drill, and that – if one was captured – that man not crack under questioning. As well it did place high importance on the accuracy of the memories of those men. But Cutter had to admit it was a strategy that just might totally confound an enemy intent on finding and stealing paper plans. Additional points for creativity for Solo and his Blue Team, but whether the ploy would in the end prove either efficient or effective had of course yet to be determined.

Herrera and Pierret both split their squads into two operational forces, one for offense/infiltration and the other for defense/retention. Each force was comprised of three men from the squad. Solo, with a man less to deploy, avoided this standard methodology and instead initially kept four of his squad as defense/retention and employed the two others strictly as scouts: one to reconnoiter Red territory and the other Yellow. Additional points for efficiency to Solo and the Blue, but of course the Blue still had to somehow manage actual infiltration/attack on the other squads’ operations.

For the first 12 hours all three squads kept to their own territories, shoring up defenses and discussing various possibilities for offensive campaigns. Unsurprisingly, Herrera was the first to order an infiltration attempt of another squad’s territory. He set his team’s sights upon Pierret’s Yellow zone since that was the one closest to his own area, a fact which scored Herrera and his Red additional points for efficiency. Moreover Cutter, knowing the advantage the impetus of first attack could provide, also scored Herrera’s Red additional points for effectiveness.

Herrera himself led his infiltration force into Yellow territory. That force spotted the Yellow infiltration force on the move toward Blue territory and made a quick strike. But the strike proved over-quick, Herrera’s aggressiveness becoming a weak point in this regard. He hadn’t waited long enough to ensure the Yellow Team’s infiltration force was at “break point”, e.g., the point where they were more likely to continue in their advance on Blue territory than to come

⁷ So nicknamed as a reference to Benjamin Franklin because of the use of electrical current as the means to destroy the contents of the box if opened incorrectly.

back and defend their own. The Yellow infiltration force, receiving communication from their defense force of the attack by the Red, moved back to base and aided their compatriots in a total rout of the Red offensive force. Additional points for effectiveness added to the tally of Pierret and his Yellow, and as well that team had “hatched the golden egg” of capturing the lead agent of another squad.

One of the Red infiltration squad was hit square in the chest by an impact-dispersible dye-pellet bullet from the special guns with which the trainees were armed for the exercise. The “voice on high”, e.g., Jules Cutter, pronounced via loud speaker the hit lethal and the man was marked as a casualty. His “dead body” was routinely searched by the one of the men of the Yellow, yielding nothing beyond his normal gear. The “deceased” cadet then left the playing field as per the rules of the drill.

Two of the Yellow squad had received hits to non-vital areas; both those were declared “maneuver encumbering” injuries. Thus one of these “injured” men had to continue the drill with an arm strapped to his side and the other with one knee bound to prevent easy movement of the joint.

Because of the necessity of “tending to the wounds” of their fellows, as well as securing and questioning their two prisoners, the Yellow Team postponed their infiltration of Blue territory. If points were awarded for luck, Solo and his Blue certainly would have been scored them in this instance.

18 hours into the drill Cutter was replaced as “voice on high” by another instructor. Basically though during this replacement’s “reign of omnipresence” the playing field stayed pretty quiet as the cadets caught a few hours of needed sleep.

Cutter came back on watch at the 26-hour mark. Earlier Solo’s scout in Yellow territory had reported that the infiltration force from that squad was once more on the move into the Blue controlled zone. Wisely Solo called back both his scouts and kept his force intact for the impending assault. Additional points scored in effectiveness for Solo and the Blue.

Knowing he needed to stay free to supervise both Yellow operations, Pierret remained with his own defensive force. As the other two men on his defensive squad were both “wounded”, Pierret’s decision scored him and his Yellow additional points for efficiency.

During the Yellow assault on the Blue operation, Solo’s larger force carried the day with surprising ease. The Blue Team garnered but two minor injuries that the “voice on high” determined as “non-maneuver encumbering”. All three Yellow infiltrators were taken prisoner and the pieces of divided plans found on them during routine searches by the Blue. Additional points in both effectiveness (for the successful defense of their operation) and efficiency (for the searches discovering the plans on the prisoners) scored for Solo and the Blue.

At that point it was recognized by Solo that the entirety of the Yellow squad would require capture/“killing” in order for him and his team to retrieve the remaining pieces of Yellow technology. Score additional points in efficiency for Solo and the Blue for grasping the means necessary to garner the plans of the Yellow, but score additional points in effectiveness for Pierret and the Yellow for the execution of their method in securing their technology.

Solo, however, took the unusual step of having the three retrieved pieces of the Yellow’s plans re-transcribed on replicas of the divided papers only with the Blue Team’s insignia. He then

stored these in a benji box, making it appear as if those contents were the technology of his own Blue Team. The forged papers would at the very least confuse the Red Team into thinking they had secured part of the Blue technology, if at some point they managed to steal and successfully open the box. Additional points for creativity scored for Solo and the Blue.

In Red territory that team's defensive force considered their options. Their leader was being held prisoner and to say that chapped their hides was putting it mildly. They had nothing yet to show in the offensive objectives of the drill: no takeover of another unit, no captured prisoners and no stolen technology. They sent out scouts to both enemy regions to determine the current situation, scoring additional points for efficiency in doing so, though admittedly it left their defenses weak with but a single defender.

The Red scouts reported that all the Blue were still at base questioning their prisoners, but that the Yellow territory was now defended by a force of three that included two "maneuver encumbered" wounded men. Without their leader to forward a course of action, the group decided by consensus to attack the vulnerable Yellow zone and in the process also hopefully recover their two men who were being held prisoner. The plan was daring because it would leave their operation for a time completely undefended. But they reasoned that the Blue was not yet in strike mode, so they would go for the kill on the Yellow. Risky as it was, the tactic yet scored the Red additional points for creativity.

42 hours into the drill the Blue scout in Red territory communicated to Solo that the remnants of the Red force seemed to be preparing for an offensive operation. With no way to be sure into what territory the Red was planning to advance, Solo trusted his instincts that the Red were about to move on the Yellow. He thus needed a single man to go into the Red zone upon that opposing team's commitment to entering the Yellow region. That man would be responsible for hopefully retrieving the Red technology and then blowing up its undefended unit. Retrieving the plans would be icing, since Solo had no inkling if the plans would even be there to steal, but blowing up the unit was the cake and that was a non-optional phase of the dangerous task.

Though Napoleon dearly wanted to delegate this phase of operations to himself, he knew that was not the wisest course. He was capable with explosives, but not masterful. There would be little time to set the charges and thus no room for miscalculations. Joe Valdovwitz volunteered for the duty, but Solo knew this wasn't the wisest course either. Joe was undoubtedly masterful with explosives, but having to move undetected through Red territory at least until the Red squad ventured far enough beyond their own region to not double-back and surprise him was something at which he was unlikely to succeed.

Cutter knew Valdovwitz was Solo's buddy and that the former was itching to prove himself more than a constant "middle-of-the-roader" when it came to getting through the drills and studies at the school. Therefore the commandant was very interested how Solo would handle this situation. Would he send Joe because Joe was willing though he might not have the wherewithal? Or would he remember Cutter's own words in that regard and find a resourceful way to let down his friend's expectations of personal redemption?

"Joe," Napoleon told Valdovwitz, "we have three Yellow prisoners that have to be kept secured. While one man takes on that stealth operation in the Red zone, I will be leading a force of three into the Yellow zone, trailing behind the Red infiltrators. My strategy is to let the Red go for their attack and then swoop in quickly after the fight has been decided to take on the victors. We need to get the plans off the remaining Yellow team members, so this is the only course of action that makes any sense at present. But count it up: that leaves us one man here to keep

our prisoners in check. So yet another dodgy one-man operation that needs the right one man for the job.

“You have experience in police work, Joe,” Napoleon further forwarded. “You know how to keep prisoners in incarceration even though the numbers favor the prisoners over the keepers. I need you to do that here at base so our team can make an attempt to claim ultimate success in this mission.”

Disappointment did show momentarily in Joe’s eyes, but then he rallied and stated stoically, “I won’t let you down, Napoleon. They’ll all still be safe and sound in custody when you and the others return to celebrate a Blue victory.”

“Well played, Solo,” Cutter commented quietly, making sure that the microphone that announced his decisions as the “voice on high” was muted as he did so. Though the commandant wavered on where points should be awarded for this successful human interaction with one of his men, in the end he totted them in the efficiency column for Solo and the Blue.

It was now 46 hours into the drill and another replacement took over for Cutter as the “voice on high”. Yet the headmaster remained in the control center watching the exercise play out. He knew this was the turning point, felt it in his very bones, and he didn’t want to miss any of it.

Simonelli, the man Solo sent on the covert operation into Red territory, did his job well. He found the benji box containing the Red technology and slipped it into his pack, making no foolish attempt at opening it. Time was critical. The Red territory was now vacant, but he had no clue how long that state of affairs might persist. He set the explosive charges, in reality small “blister bombs” that would mark areas of the desalination unit with scorch marks. The “voice on high” would then determine if the areas targeted would indeed have completely taken out the unit had true explosives been employed. Once a safe distance away, Simonelli activated the charges and kept right on moving back to home base. Assessing the possible damage would be too risky.

Meanwhile the Red made their assault on the Yellow base. The fight was fast and furious, and all of the Yellow defenders, including Pierret, and one Red attacker were “killed in action” according to the “voice on high”. Score effectiveness points for Herrera’s Red, but they had barely released their captured teammates when Solo’s infiltration force swept in.

It was four Red against three Blue: the battle a wild back-and-forth venture. But this was the second battle for the Red within a very short timeframe and thus they were not as physically or mentally fresh as the Blue. As well Herrera seemed to become too intently focused on capturing Solo and made some questionable moves that wound up instead getting the Red lead agent captured once more, this time by the Blue. The remaining three Red battled on, but in the end the Blue triumphed, each team losing one man in the fray.

Solo and the Blue garnered additional efficiency points for Simonelli’s clean operation, effectiveness points as the explosives the man had set were declared by the “voice on high” to have destroyed their target, effectiveness points for taking out the last of the Red forces and gaining control of the Yellow operation, and finally they had “hatched the golden egg” by capturing the Red Team lead agent alive. Cutter headed off to bed knowing Solo had won the exercise. The only question was how many additional points he and his team would yet accumulate during the remaining hours of the drill.

On Solo's orders, the Blue searched the "dead bodies" of the fallen Yellow that the Red had not had sufficient time to examine, retrieving the other three pieces of the Yellow technology: additional points scored for efficiency. The Blue infiltration team returned to home base with their new captives to find Joe Valdovwitz had used his knowledge of explosives to set up a "containment area" on the water for the prisoners.

This was most ingenious if most unexpected. Basically Valdovwitz tied a small boat to the dock with sufficient length of rope to bring it just within the zone of depth charges that protected the perimeter of the island housing the Survival School. The cuffed and shackled prisoners didn't dare even think of moving off that boat into the water for fear of setting off a charge by missing the perimeter of the safe zone. The "voice on high" honestly didn't know what to make of this tactic as it was a "live risk" taken in what was only a drill, but in the end he awarded points for creativity and made a note to declare as illegal such use of the island's depth charge zone in future.

Back at home base, after a much needed period of sleep, the Blue properly put together the pieces of the Yellow plans. Two Blue team members returned to the "annexed" Yellow operation and used those plans to set the Yellow unit to "run in tandem" with their own. Additional points scored for efficiency.

The Blue was not able to successfully open the retrieved Red benji box, Herrera never cracking and revealing the key-code under questioning. Thus the Blue did not gain access to Red technology. Score additional points to Herrera's Red for effectiveness. Yet this was but a small failure on Solo's part and an even smaller consolation for Herrera. After all, Red not only didn't actually have their own technology in hand, but their unit was entirely destroyed as well.

The man Blue had lost in the pitched battle with the Red in Yellow territory had been one of the two men Solo had delegated to commit to memory the Blue technology. Luckily Solo's other designee in this area survived with only a hand wound. Though he wasn't able to himself re-transcribe the Blue plans because of that injury, he successfully recited them to Solo who himself transcribed them in full. The subsequent check of that handwritten version by a ground representative of the "voice on high" revealed the schematics to be accurate in all details. Additional points scored for effectiveness.

At the end of the 72-hour exercise, the men of the Blue, upon hearing the "voice on high" confirm their victory, spontaneously cheered their lead agent. All the "casualties" returned to the playing field to congratulate the winners or share in the celebration.

Napoleon Solo found himself grinning so wide and so long the muscles around his mouth actually began to ache. It wasn't the compliments from others that was bringing to the fore this unconcealed joy in him. Rather it was an inner sense of accomplishment, an internal recognition he had met all expectations, a private awareness of being the best and wanting to maintain that position. He had never experienced a high quite like this before, but he knew from somewhere deep inside himself it was an exhilaration he wanted to experience again and again.

The last few weeks of Survival School were no less jam-packed with activity than those prior, yet there was a noticeable difference in the busy atmosphere. The cadets could see the finish line and were chomping at the bit to reach it, powered by the "adrenalin kick" of self-knowledge that they had now made it over the largest hurdles.

The program did boast a commencement ceremony of sorts during which the graduating cadets were each publicly presented with their official U.N.C.L.E. ID card by a mid-level Section I administrator or more rarely by a Section II Chief of Enforcement or more rarely still by one of the five Continental Chiefs. Yet, as with most schools, that public ceremony was preceded by a private evaluation as to just who would graduate. In other schools that evaluation was revealed in the achievement of necessary class credits; in Survival School that evaluation was revealed in a final interview with the headmaster. Cutter mentally started the day of those final interviews with the yet non-public knowledge that of the remaining 17 cadets in this second class of 1954 only 15 would be graduating. Two of those were receiving assignments within Section V, another two were receiving immediate assignments within Section II, and the other 11 were receiving initial assignments within Section III.

The trainees already knew their scores in what could be termed “quantifiable abilities”. Those were posted with regularity on the main bulletin board. From those it might be surmised they could easily estimate their likelihood of graduating from the program and into what section they might be assigned assuming accomplishment of same. But what figured just as heavily in the final determination regarding graduation and subsequent assignment was a series of “intangible qualities”. The overall attitude of a cadet was carefully weighed in balance with his overall set of skills by Cutter after receiving and reviewing the opinions of each of his instructors.

Napoleon didn’t think he had any “hidden prejudices” that might not work in context with being an U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agent. He also didn’t believe he went into situations with unalterable preconceived notions. His outward self-confidence might be deemed either a benefit or a hindrance by his judges, depending on their own level of comfort with that attribute. And his general leaning toward bolder alternatives again could be regarded either way. His quick wit, overall composure and general social ease would surely be assessed as positives. Yet then again the high level of his optimism and, stemming from that, his unwillingness to ever believe anything inevitable might counterintuitively be gauged as negatives.

Going over and over this personality checklist in his head, Napoleon just couldn’t envision how things might turn out for him. He knew he was viewing his character from “the inside out” as it were, whereas his judges’ perspective would be from the outside in. And he just couldn’t be sure what they would perceive in him from such a standpoint. Moreover he had to wait to find out as the schedule for the interviews was again drawn by random lottery and this time Solo’s inherent luck failed him and his turn was but two from the end.

Joe Valdovwitz was more fortunate; his interview was scheduled just three into the process. When he returned to the barracks, Napoleon greeted him with an anxious “Well?”

“Section V in the Paris office,” Joe revealed.

Napoleon wasn’t sure what to say. Joe hadn’t received the “holy grail” of immediate assignment to Section II, but then honestly he hadn’t expected that and had mentioned the same in conversation with Napoleon the night before. But Napoleon knew the other man had more or less anticipated a Section III assignment, which would present the possibility of attaining a Section II posting in future. There was no such possibility inherent in a Section V posting.

“I’m not disappointed, Napoleon,” Joe forestalled any words of commiseration from his friend. “I thought I would be but, the more I think about it, the more the situation appeals to me. I have the pride of knowing I successfully completed the same program Section II operatives have to complete. I’m no slacker: my scores were in the middle of the class, not the bottom. Cutter and

his staff appraised my personality as not really compatible with the rigors of life as an enforcement agent, and I have to admit even to myself they are probably right. Deflection and stealth aren't my forte, but I can damn straight-up protect the organization's higher-ups and the U.N.C.L.E. facilities likely better than anyone out there. I'm going to be one helluva security agent."

Somewhat awed by Joe's willingness to put a positive spin on a result that could have been viewed by him in a truly negative light, Napoleon smiled and extended his hand to the other man, "I believe congratulations are in order, Agent Valdovwitz."

Joe smiled in return and accepted Napoleon's hand in a steady shake. "And this agent does get the side-benefit of all the delights of living in Paris," he noted with a conspiratorial wink.

Napoleon chuckled in amusement all the while wondering if he could be as upbeat as Joe should he receive disappointment in his own hopes with regard to assignment or, even more appalling to consider, with regard to graduation itself.

"Sit down, Solo," invited Cutter, though his tone was no-nonsense and he did not look up from the folder full of documents he was perusing.

Napoleon did as bid, forcing himself not to betray his inner nerves by perching on the edge of the chair seat. Instead he sat fully back into the seat, even crossing one leg over the other in seeming nonchalance.

Watchful despite his supposed inattention, Jules Cutter suppressed a little grin. Damn, but this kid kept his public persona always flawlessly intact, not a small feat in the headmaster's opinion.

Balancing an elbow on one armrest of the chair, Napoleon casually bent his left arm upward and placed a loose fist under his chin as he waited.

Cutter looked up at last, but instead of getting directly to what Napoleon was on pins-and-needles to hear, he commented as he pointed to Napoleon's gold-and-star sapphire pinky ring, "I've always wondered if there's a story behind that. You never removed it that I noticed, even during the most grunge-producing of exercises."

"I wasn't aware it was a problem," Napoleon said perhaps a bit defensively as he purposely moved his left hand to rest on his thigh.

"I didn't say it was a problem. We certainly have men that suspend their rosaries or chained crucifixes always about their necks, those that clip their stars of David always to their collars, those that wear their masabih or malas always about their wrists. But strictly ornamental trinkets most men prefer to locker, at least on occasion."

Napoleon lightly tapped the ring once as he stated matter-of-factly, "This 'ornamental trinket' is as important to my beliefs as any of those symbols you mentioned for others."

Cutter surveyed the cadet steadily for a few long moments, but Solo refused to fidget or indeed display any form of discomfort under the intent stare of his commandant.

"Care to tell me why?"

Napoleon recalled his grandfather, upon his gift of the ring, telling him... *"Bloodlines don't offer assurances of anything, and the lack of them certainly doesn't restrict the scope of personal responsibilities. I've always been proud of the way you've understood that..."* Would his grandfather have cause to be proud of him today? His future hung in the balance and he didn't know how the scales might shift. But he knew, no matter what the outcome, he had done his level best and thus he could not help but hope for the best as well. His optimism had always sustained him and, in ways he would never be able to explain, had as well in many instances kept him whole in heart, mind and soul.

Solo shook his head slowly. "No," was his only verbal response to Cutter's question.

"Well, just idle curiosity on my part," Cutter continued.

"Is any curiosity of a man in your position ever truly idle?"

Napoleon's cunning question caught Cutter a bit off-guard. An impulsive curt retort came to his lips but, seeing the recruit's knowing gaze, he suppressed it and instead found his mouth twisting into an ironic smile.

"Definitely more to you than the slick cosmopolitan you appear at first glance, isn't there, Solo? You've learned well how to burrow deep within the shadow of your personal awning while seeming to stand openly in the public sunshine. And that's not something we had to teach you here; you came to us already fully trained in the technique. So I can't help but think there is something about you everyone is missing. As if that silver spoon, with which folks credit you as being born chomping down on, might not have some secret tarnish you make a point to disguise from prying eyes."

Napoleon smiled his most charming smile. "Sir, do I honestly look to you like someone who would put anything with foreign stains on it into his mouth?"

Cutter laughed, the sound gruff and honestly amused.

When his mirth was fully spent, the headmaster informed the cadet, "You have successfully completed your training here and are appointed as an enforcement agent in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement within Section II in New York."

Napoleon blinked once, but otherwise kept his personal elation in proper agent-style check. He had achieved not only the "holy grail" of immediate designation as Section II, but had received it served upon the golden platter of assignment to New York headquarters under the command of Mr. Waverly himself.

The voice of his grandfather sounded again within his head... *"The ring is... inherently yours... and thus can mean whatever you want it to mean... your life can be whatever you choose to make of it..."*

Cutter stood and Solo quickly followed suit, bringing his mind sharply back from his private musings.

"Congratulations, Mr. Solo," the commandant noted as he extended his hand to the cadet-no-longer.

“Mr. Solo...” The form of address echoed pleasantly through Napoleon’s brain, like the gentle buzz of nature in a flowering meadow. He was no longer someone without personal status. *“...one doesn’t need heirlooms to understand that all of humanity is of one blood...”* His grandfather’s wisdom echoed meaningfully through his brain in tandem with the new verbal expression of respect from his former commandant, adding a newfound tranquility to his spirit.

“Thank you, sir,” Napoleon was relieved to find he at least had the presence of mind to acknowledge Cutter’s well wishes and accept the other man’s clasp in a hearty handshake.

Section II New York! The world was suddenly his oyster and he could foresee no doubt of purpose in this future of proving to others in the most decisive way possible that indeed all of humanity was of one blood.

...But first... Before he got into all the responsibilities of saving the world, he had a more strictly personal mission to complete when he got home to New York. That of taking Clara Richards up on her offer about stopping by to “talk”, no matter the hour.

—THE END—

