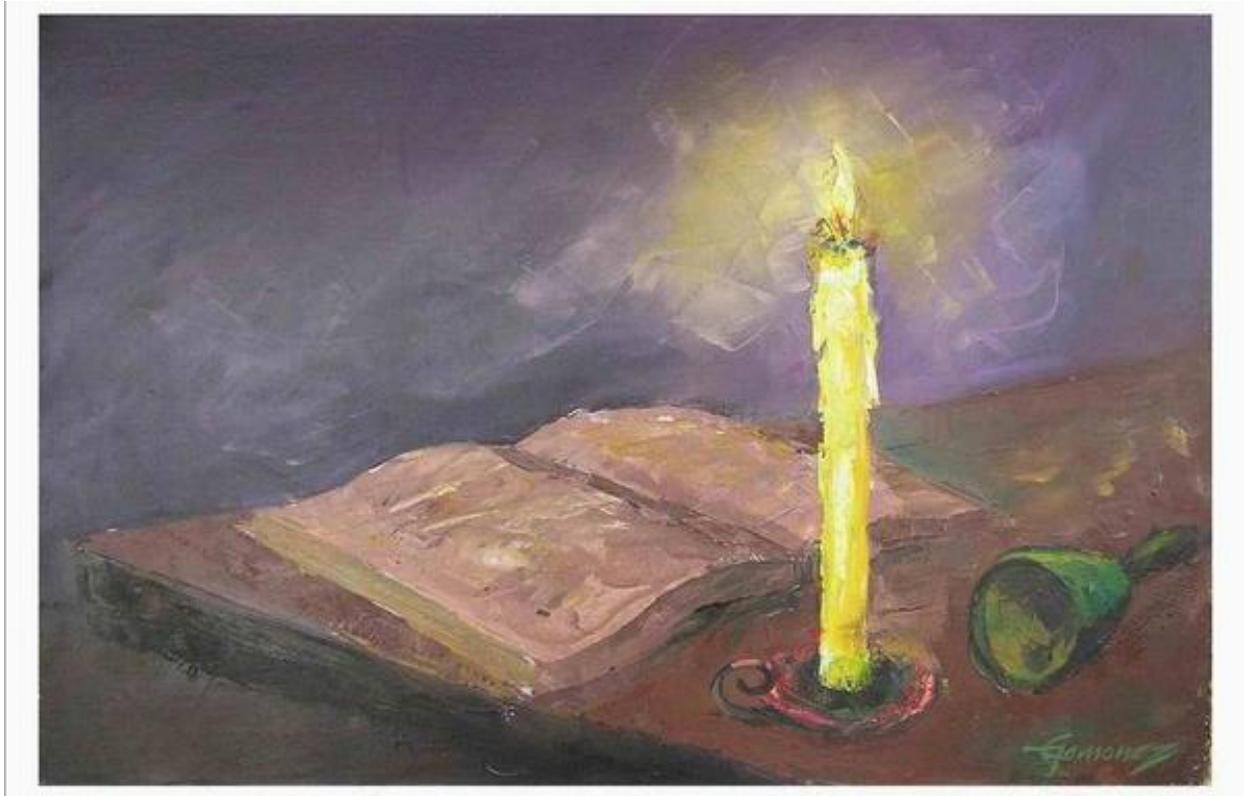


**Author's Note:** Written for **QuoteME: Challenge 5** on LiveJournal's Section VII.

Please note that this story takes place a few weeks after Napoleon has been promoted to Chief of Enforcement for U.N.C.L.E. North America. At this point in time Illya is not yet his partner, but the two men do share a friendship, albeit it one still in the early stages of development.



The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

*Joseph Conrad*

## QUENCHING THE CANDLE?

BY [LAH](#)

**Autumn 1963**

“That movie had a rather unbelievable premise,” commented Illya Kuryakin as he and his coworker and superior, Napoleon Solo, the newly-appointed CEA of U.N.C.L.E. North America, exited the movie theatre.

The theatre was one of those in lower Manhattan that operated on the “art house” concept of showing older releases. The current series of motion pictures being run at the playhouse was a retrospective on the career-to-date of actress Kim Novak. The film the two men had just viewed was thus a “revival” of the 1958 cinematic production of BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE starring said lovely lady with leading man Jimmy Stewart.

“So I take it you didn’t like the movie?” questioned Solo. He was still trying to figure out much about this Russian colleague who he had befriended. Thus any hint, however offhandedly mentioned, that might facilitate such understanding was not an opportunity to be squandered.

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” clarified Illya. “The acting was very good. And Miss Novak is certainly a compelling beauty well worth watching on the silver screen.”

“Indeed,” Napoleon wholeheartedly agreed.

“However,” Illya stated his caveat, “I found the concept of an underground klatch of witches existing in modern New York and focusing their powers on attempts to forward their sex lives—”

“Sex is a powerful motivator, tovarisch,” interrupted Napoleon.

Kuryakin couldn’t help smirking at that. He and the American were still learning about each other; nonetheless he was well aware of Solo’s own somewhat prodigious sexual appetite. Or perhaps it was more an insatiable craving for the trappings of romance that so routinely surrounded sexual adventures in the West. Honestly, Illya wasn’t positive on that score.

“There are no modern-day witches,” stated Illya with unshakeable certainty. “They disappeared with humanity’s mental grasp and emotional acceptance of the various explainable natural forces in the universe. There are today wiccans of course,” he conceded. “But Wicca is no more than another form of religious belief, one centering on those explainable natural forces and classifying them under the deific authority of a duotheistic paradigm representing male and female aspects.”

“You’re just chock-full of Marxist common sense, aren’t you?” teased Napoleon with an impish grin.

Such a remark from anyone else might have affronted the Russian. However Kuryakin had quickly come to terms with Solo’s good-natured ribbing. It was never cruel or condescending or contemptuous. It was just Napoleon being Napoleon: mischievous but always respectful and empathetic, tongue-in-cheek but always optimistic and forward-thinking.

Illya smirked again. “So tell me then, Napoleon, do you believe that in this day and age there are confirmable witches in New York? Or Moscow? Or Paris? Or London? Or anywhere else in the civilized world?”

“Well no,” admitted Napoleon. “Not exactly,” he then hedged.

“Not exactly?” repeated Illya in a questioning tone and with definite surprise.

Now it was Napoleon who shrugged. “Guess it’s my Catholic upbringing. Of course I don’t believe there are individuals who can work magic with spells and potions and the like. But I do

believe there are individuals who themselves genuinely believe they can do such things, and that belief in and of itself can sometimes lead to..." Napoleon hesitated.

"Lead to what?" prompted an intrigued Illya.

"Chaos. All those explainable natural forces of the universe you so casually mention being tilted out-of-whack."

"I don't see how," persisted the stubborn Russian. "There's no science to support any such notion."

"The human mind," forwarded Napoleon thoughtfully, "is an extremely potent force in and of itself. We comprehend so very little of its power. We really don't have a clue what the mind is capable of creating or altering or destroying. We just don't know, and there's the rub. Because a defiant mind permitted to go wildly on its own tangent path can wreak havoc we don't expect and can't even tag within the realm of our current logic. Because that logic itself is limited, Illya. And that's the plain truth."

Illya studied the other man for a long moment. Finally he pronounced without reservation, "I don't deny the legitimacy of any of that, Napoleon. Still am I unequivocally convinced there is in this world no such being as a manifest witch."

---

### ***Meanwhile...***

"I understand congratulations are in order," the Thrush captain of the local Manhattan satrapy grudgingly admitted to the woman who sat in the chair opposite his desk. "You indeed managed, as you promised, to get yourself hired into the secretarial pool of U.N.C.L.E.'s North American headquarters."

The woman seated in that chair – a very petite and freshly pretty brunette – smiled wryly at him. "You sound more disappointed than enthused," she noted ironically.

"That's because I'm not at all sure you can be trusted," the captain stated frankly. "Background security checks at U.N.C.L.E. are thorough. So how you avoided them tagging you as suspicious, I have to wonder."

"You forget—" began the woman.

"Yes, I know," interrupted the Thrush with harsh abruptness. "You can bend people and circumstances to your will. You are a witch."

The wry smile returned to haunt the woman's lips. "And you still don't believe that."

"I am a sensible man of the modern world," declared the captain bluntly. "So no, I still don't believe that and I never will. But my belief or disbelief is of no consequence. As long as you can perform as Thrush wishes."

"And what is it that Thrush wishes?" queried the woman straight to the point. "Now that the initial hurdle is past?"

The captain smartly slid a standard 3½x5 black-and-white headshot across his desk toward the woman. She took it in hand and idly examined it. “Handsome man,” was her immediate comment.

“I suppose,” the captain dismissed that observation. “Napoleon Solo: the newly appointed head of Section II, Operations and Enforcement, for U.N.C.L.E. here in North America.”

“Rather young to hold a post of such authority, no?”

“Yes, but he’s touted as a tactical and counterintelligence wunderkind, and it seems Waverly might have big plans for his future.”

“Alexander Waverly? The Command Continental Chief to whom the other four in supposedly similar positions willingly give precedence?”

“Yes, the big man himself. Founder of the organization, first among equals in the upper management circle, etc., etc., etc.”

“And this man,” the woman furthered, lightly tapping the photograph with one burgundy lacquered fingernail, “is his protégé?”

“So it would seem. We’ve dealt with Solo the past eight years as an enforcement agent. He’s clever, an often unorthodox strategist, self-confident with the bravura of all do-gooders. Fearless of course and he can be ruthless, but he does have a compassionate heart that can trip him up now and again.”

“Apparently not often enough to have done him any real hurt,” surmised the woman.

“Why do you say that?” demanded the captain.

“Because he’s alive and a rising star in U.N.C.L.E. Thrush hasn’t yet managed to kill him or take him down in any other way.”

“True enough,” reluctantly conceded the stanch adherent of the Hierarchy.

“So what do you want of me with regard to this man?” the woman finally asked the most pertinent question. “I’ve already told your masters that my powers do not extend to paranormal deaths or permanent vanishings. And I absolutely will not put myself in a position to be arrested and imprisoned for committing murder.”

The captain waved his hand dismissively. “What we want from you is simple: just be the means of providing a little internal conflict for Solo. A few manipulated doubts, a few avoidable missteps...”

“And he is a wunderkind no longer,” acknowledged the woman.

“And his star stops rising,” concluded the Thrush.

“Thrush does not want this man someday at the helm of U.N.C.L.E.,” decided the woman.

“Thrush does not want to deal with this man in any greater capacity than necessary.”

“You would see him demoted from his status as the head of Section II?”

The captain shrugged. “Whatever can be achieved to shoot down his rising star is to our benefit.”

“Then such is my mission,” accepted the woman gamely as she lifted her handbag from its resting place on the floor beside her chair. Opening the purse, she slipped the picture inside its confines and then closed the handbag with an audible snap.

---

### ***One Week Later...***

Walking down one of the many gunmetal gray corridors of U.N.C.L.E. HQ in Manhattan, his eyes scanning through the contents of a file on a newly discovered Thrush satrapy in the hinterlands of Connecticut, Napoleon Solo unexpectedly encountered a compact object directly in his path. That “object”: a petite young woman carrying a heavy armload of such files.

“Ooofff!” exclaimed the woman in a reactive huff of breath as the folders made abrupt contact with her middle and then tumbled from her arms.

“So sorry, miss!” apologized Napoleon as he bent to help the woman retrieve the upset contents of the portfolios now scattered in every which direction across the gunmetal gray floor.

“Perhaps you should keep your eyes focused on what lies ahead of you,” she chastised mildly.

Stack of refilled folders now tucked in the crook of one arm, Napoleon stood upright and looked for the first time upon the being of the sudden “obstacle” he had encountered on his way to his office. She was extremely small of person, a brown-haired doll of a female with assets that fit her petite structure but were nonetheless very femininely pleasing.

“I usually do,” stated Napoleon with one of his most brilliant smiles, “and definitely when the scenery is well worth the noticing.”

She beamed rather than blushed, and something about that reaction registered in Solo’s mind as downright intriguing.

“I’ll forgive you since you compliment so prettily. Talia Barne,” she introduced herself. “That’s Barne: singular. Not Barnes: plural. Folks are always making that mistake.”

Napoleon laughed lightly. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Barne,” he emphasized her proper surname. “Napoleon Solo,” he then returned the introduction.

“Oh, I know who you are, Mr. Solo. The other secretaries in the pool gossip about you ad infinitum.”

Oddly, it was Napoleon who now found himself blushing. “You won’t hold that against me, will you?” he queried a bit sheepishly.

Talia laughed: a melodious sound if ever there was one. Something inside Napoleon unconsciously attuned itself to the rhythm of that laugh.

“Oh, I should think not,” she assured him. “In fact I rather like a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to go after it.”

Again Napoleon found himself blushing, an unusual phenomenon indeed. “You make me sound rather... greedy with regard to my admittedly liberal dating habits.”

“A liberality of nature that gives pleasure to many,” teased the woman with amiable good grace.

Solo smiled at her again, taking in with his gaze the unique color of her eyes. Some would undoubtedly call them simply brown. Yet there was a distinctive undertone to the common hue, reddish-purple like the finest burgundy wine. Her hair had similar highlights that caught the ambient light and reflected it about her face in a warm magenta glow.

“You are new here, I take it?” Napoleon at last posed the obvious question.

Talia nodded. “Recently hired into the secretarial pool.”

“U.N.C.L.E. is keeping you remarkably busy by the look of it,” observed Napoleon as he gauged the heft of the pile of folders he held.

She laughed that tonal tapestry of a laugh again, its varied notes weaving skillfully into the warp and weft of Solo’s psyche.

“The necessary accouterments of my temporary assignment,” Talia informed him readily, “as where there is authority, there is also burden.

“Seems you are assigned to someone of import then.”

“You might say that.”

“Do let me make amends for my clumsiness in knocking these from your lovely arms by conveying them wherever you need.”

“Very gallant of you, Mr. Solo.”

“Napoleon, please.”

“Then I must be Talia.”

“Yes, you must,” Napoleon readily agreed. “So in what place of authority is this burden to be deposited?” he inquired regarding the folders.

Talia pointed to the closed door of an office nearby... his office. Napoleon blinked and Talia grinned impishly at his dumbfounded reaction.

“I am the temporary replacement for your regular secretary,” she revealed at last.

“Something wrong with Mitzi<sup>1</sup> then?” inquired Napoleon with true concern. He liked Mitzi and worked well with her.

---

<sup>1</sup> Character introduced as Solo’s assistant in the MFU TV series episode **THE ARABIAN AFFAIR**.

“She broke an ankle skiing this weekend. She’ll be out at least six weeks recovering.”

“Poor girl,” commiserated Napoleon. “I should send her some flowers along with my sincere get-well wishes.”

“Yes, you should,” agreed Talia. “However, until she is back on her feet – literally – you have me to boss around. Now mind you treat me gently.”

Those burgundy-illuminated brown eyes of hers were bright with mischief, and Solo found himself instinctively responding to the playful promise in those eyes.

“Like a princess in a fairytale,” pledged Napoleon, placing his free hand over his heart.

Talia focused her arresting eyes directly on his. “Will I get a happily ever after then?” she queried in a manner that left Napoleon wondering if the request was intended as no more than rhetorical jest.

---

### ***A Few Days Afterwards...***

“I am somewhat surprised by this, Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly chastised his new CEA with uncomfortable bluntness, “and most definitely disappointed.”

“I understand, sir, and I assure you it won’t happen again,” apologized the definitely discomfited Napoleon.

“It was sloppy background checking,” persisted the Continental Chief. “That is not something I have ever seen from you before, and certainly U.N.C.L.E. cannot afford to see it again from one in your position.”

“Again, sir, I do apologize and pledge to be more vigilant in future.”

“I have taken a forceful stand in promoting you at this time to Chief of Enforcement for Northwest, Mr. Solo. Most of my colleagues, though all see the potential in you for the future in such a post, thought and still think you at present too young to handle so much authority. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that you are a crackerjack field agent. However, the head of Section II for the Command’s main branch needs to be more than that. You need to have a firm handle on ongoing operations, you need to take the lead in strategizing, you need—”

“I do realize that, sir,” Napoleon interrupted his superior, perhaps unwisely. But his frustration was getting the better of his discretion as he just didn’t know what further Mr. Waverly wanted from him. “I made a mistake,” he stated without adornment. “What more can I do other than freely admit to it and make a concerted effort to ensure it is never repeated in the future?”

Waverly’s tone softened just a fraction as he noted, “I want you to understand, young man, it isn’t that you made a mistake that concerns me. I don’t expect you to be superhuman. It is the nature of the mistake that I find disturbing.”

Napoleon bit his lip. There was no acceptable comment he could make to that plainspoken assessment.

“Many see you as needlessly reckless, Mr. Solo. I know, however, that isn’t the case. I know what you do is based on proper research into the situation at hand, as well as reliance on your natural instincts. I’ll grant your research isn’t always the ‘this steps rationally into that’ type of logic. You can extrapolate effect from cause in unexpectedly accurate leaps and bounds. That is an extraordinary gift, young man, one that few possess and one that I, as an administrator in this organization, value highly.”

“And I do most sincerely thank you for that, sir,” softly acknowledged an unusually embarrassed Napoleon.

Waverly nodded shortly. “See to it you do not betray my confidence in you again. You are dismissed, Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon left his chief’s office feeling largely dispirited. He did freely own to the error that had cost U.N.C.L.E. success in a very long-gestating sting operation. He would never try to excuse his apparent inattention to very important details of the setup because of a series of unfortunate external circumstances. Yet, if the full truth was disclosed, such circumstances had indeed played into this particular situation.

When Solo entered his own office, he was none too happy to find Illya waiting there for him. He just wasn’t in the mood to deal with anyone, even a friendly someone.

“I’m not much for chatting right now, Illya,” he attempted to dismiss his friend as he seated himself in the chair behind his desk.

“It’s true then? Waverly gave you a thorough verbal drubbing?”

Solo gazed at Kuryakin with sudden wariness. Eyes narrowing he demanded, “So, is it all over U.N.C.L.E. HQ that the Old Man dressed down his new CEA for the Lyle screw-up like he was a half-assed greenstick?”

Illya shook his head. “Waverly’s assistant is very experienced at ensuring what happens privately in the ‘inner sanctum’ never becomes ready chatter for the gossip pool. No, I heard it rather exclusively from that saucy little baggage who is filling in for Mitzi.”

Napoleon quirked an eyebrow in the other man’s direction. The reaction was both a non-verbal request for further explanation, as well as surprise at the Russian’s description of Talia as “that saucy little baggage”. Never before had Solo heard Kuryakin refer to any of the Command’s female personnel in such dismissive language.

“I stumbled upon her in here bawling her eyes out,” clarified Illya straight-to-the-point, “and blubbing how her carelessness had gotten you into bad trouble with the higher-ups. So what happened exactly?”

Napoleon shrugged. “All perfectly innocent. She didn’t get some reports filed as quickly as she should have.”

Now it was Kuryakin who quirked an eyebrow at Solo.

“One of those reports happened to be the latest intelligence on the full extent of Lyle’s personnel chain. Our operatives thus went into the sting with outdated information.”

“And?” prompted Illya.

Napoleon wearily scrubbed a hand across his face before answering. “It was a major fiasco: a half-dozen agents wounded – two critically, no retrieval of any of the data we needed, and the loss of our sole informant into Lyle’s network.”

“Yancey Kilredge?” the Russian sought confirmation on the outcome with regard to the informant.

“Dead. Shot through the head by one of Lyle’s people who we hadn’t tracked as being in the inner circle.”

“Hadn’t tracked?” Illya pressed for clarification.

“In the outdated reports. That inevitable shooter, a female, was uncovered by Section IV personnel during routine business transaction checking. Her identity was in the report I didn’t get prior to dispatching the enforcement team on the final mission regarding the Lyle syndicate. Yancey apparently got too cozy with her and we never got the chance to warn him to back off the relationship.”

Kuryakin’s only response was a low whistle.

“I assume you advised Mr. Waverly about your temporary assistant’s incompetence?” the Russian asked after his initial flabbergasted reaction.

“Why would I do that?” hedged Solo.

“Because the fault wasn’t entirely yours.”

“Yes, it was, Illya. I knew Talia was new and I should have double-checked that she understood the necessity of timeliness on specific case filings.”

“Wait,” Illya put up one hand in protest. “When exactly did you become a trainer for those in administrative positions within this organization? That’s the job of Carla Drosten’s second-line people in Personnel. A temp assigned to the CEA should be thoroughly vetted in procedural issues, and even provided a quick refresher course before the actual assignment.”

“Illya, what would you have me do? Play tattle-tale on a young woman who got understandably flustered in her new job? I’m not built that way.”

“Napoleon, you are not your brother’s – or in this particular instance – your secretary’s keeper. Every individual has a level of accountability within this organization. I can make allowances that this Miss Barnes—”

“Barne,” interjected Napoleon immediately.

“What?” countered a bewildered Illya.

“Her last name is Barne, not Barnes. It was something she emphasized to me right off as she said most made the mistake of adding the s to the end of her surname.”

“Maybe you should have emphasized to her right off the burden of responsibility you carry as Chief Enforcement Agent and how it has a trickledown effect with regard to your assistant’s specific duties.”

“You’re a hard man, Illya Kuryakin.

“I’m a pragmatist,” corrected Illya bluntly. “Something your penchant for rescuing damsels in distress is not permitting you even slightly to be in this instance.”

“Just let it go, Illya,” suggested the emotionally embattled Solo. The rational part of him was mentally insisting that he indeed should speak to Waverly about Talia. But the compassionate part of him remained staunchly resistant to the idea. “It’s over and done,” he therefore finalized as he let compassion win out. “The Old Man has chewed me out royally, and I’ll be sure to ask Talia about the existence of any unfiled reports next time. I’m also sure not immediately filing key reports on active cases is a mistake Talia won’t be making again either. Lesson learned for both me and my secretary.”

Though he was less than satisfied with his friend’s determination on this score, Illya accepted that it just wasn’t his place to protest further. With regard to the said Miss Barne however, Kuryakin had to mentally concede an insidiously growing dislike of her, even on the bare-bones evidence of very short acquaintance.

---

Admittedly she didn’t make that same mistake, but in the days that followed Talia definitely made more than her fair share of other avoidable miscues. Fortunately it turned out none of these actually proved costly to any other ongoing U.N.C.L.E. operations, but all unquestionably proved costly to Solo’s standing with the Continental Chiefs. Waverly remained adamant regarding the readiness of his chosen CEA for the pressure and responsibility that came with that elevated position. More and more, however, the Old Man was being forced to defend that stance to his colleagues, and that definitely made him short of patience with said CEA.

For his part, Napoleon seemed to be relying heavily on his temporary secretary’s presumed competence, something of which Miss Barne had not shown any tangible indication. He continued to take the sole heat for any blunders, which irritated his friend Illya no end. The silken thread of gallantry could only be expected to stretch so far in the Russian’s opinion, and Napoleon’s pull in that direction had, to his way of thinking, already extended the strand well beyond the breaking point.

The two men continually clashed on this particular, arguments ensuing more often than not. So much so, that Napoleon in the end simply refused to discuss Miss Barne, one way or the other, with Kuryakin. That refusal only served to further exasperate Illya as he began to suspect his friend’s career was being purposely sabotaged by the manipulative Miss Barne of the burgundy-brown eyes.

Taking matters into his own hands, Illya decided to discreetly inquire about Talia Barne within other sections of the Command. His first stop was the supervisor of the secretarial pool.

“She’s a corker, that one,” noted Lois McKenna in her distinct Irish blas<sup>2</sup>.

“A corker?” queried Illya uncertainly.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gaelic for accent

“Yes, you know. A smooth operator who always manages to get people on her side.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Lois shrugged. “Diabhal fhios agam!<sup>3</sup> She’s pretty in that petite gamin sort of style, but not outrageously good-looking. She’s sharp enough with regard to making her own way in the world, but not extraordinarily brainy. But she is at least one thing in triplicate for sure: ambitious, ambitious, ambitious.”

“I take it not in a good way?”

Again Lois shrugged. “Exploits too many shortcuts to get where she wants from my perspective. Take her temporary assignment with Mr. Solo. She certainly wasn’t my first choice: too new to the Command. But she lobbied hard for the place.”

“And quite successfully it would seem,” noted Illya disapprovingly.

That prompted still another shrug from Lois. “Miss Drosten said to give her a chance.”

“Carla Drosten? Head of Section VI, Security and Personnel?”<sup>4</sup>

Now Lois chuckled. “Only Miss Drosten I know of in this organization. She stated that as Miss Barne was fully vetted with regard to security and her resume showed quite good secretarial skills, no reason she shouldn’t receive the assignment, even being a new employee at U.N.C.L.E., as the assignment was indeed only temporary.”

“Still, Mr. Solo, is the CEA of Northwest and—”

Putting up the index finger of her right hand as she interrupted, Lois stated straight-to-the-point, “Tá tú ag preacháil leis an gcór<sup>5</sup>, Mr. Kuryakin. But one thing I’ve learned over my years here is you don’t argue with your superiors over niggling concerns. You save the arguing for important issues. Mr. Solo needed a temporary assistant assigned to him; Talia Barne is a vetted member of the secretarial pool here in HQ; her appointment to the position was endorsed by a higher-up; so Talia Barne got the assignment. Case closed.”

“Indeed,” summarized Illya tersely.

“Seems Mr. Solo trusts her, from what I hear.”

“Indeed,” repeated Kuryakin even more tersely.

---

Kuryakin’s next inquiry regarding Talia Barne had to be with Carla Drosten herself. That was a tricky maneuver. Carla had been with the Command a good many years and was highly regarded in the managerial circles of the organization. So Illya knew his approach had to be diplomatic, minus even a subtle suggestion that maybe Carla had overstepped the bounds of acceptable influence-peddling at U.N.C.L.E. by supporting Talia Barne’s request to be assigned as Napoleon’s temporary assistant.

---

<sup>3</sup> Damned if I know!

<sup>4</sup> Carla Drosten was a character used in the MFU TV series episode **THE WAVERLY RING AFFAIR**.

<sup>5</sup> You’re preaching to the choir

After a discreet knock, Illya let his badge automatically open the pneumatic door to Carla Drosten's office.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Kuryakin?" Carla greeted the Russian in her doorway with a ready smile.

"Could I perhaps impose upon you for a moment of your time, Miss Drosten?"

"Of course. Always especially happy to help out our Section IIs however I can. You men are truly the backbone of this organization."

"It's just a question on standard policy," Illya initiated the meat of the discussion as he made his way fully into the precincts of the office. At her wordless gesture of invitation, he sat himself in a chair opposite Carla's desk.

"Ah," remarked Carla simply. "Then privacy is required I think," she further noted as she set the manual lock on the pneumatic entrance to her domain.

"A simple question really," Illya assured her.

"And that question is?" prompted Carla with another ready smile.

"Well, I was wondering... I know all administrative personnel here at HQ are strenuously investigated for security purposes."

"They are indeed," confirmed Carla. "We leave nothing to chance."

"And there are of course the routine psychological tests to insure mental and emotional stability."

"Published policy, the details of which are provided every employment candidate who has first passed the security check. Where is this line of discussion going, Mr. Kuryakin?" Carla requested a more straightforward route to the Russian's point, whatever that might be.

"Well..." Illya considered how to best word what he would ask. "What is the usual period of initial adjustment for any new administrative employee? How long before such a new employee is considered acceptable for more... sensitive positions?"

"All positions within U.N.C.L.E. are sensitive," Carla meaningfully reminded the enforcement agent.

"Yes, of course that's true," back-peddled Kuryakin, "but what I mean is—"

"I do know what you mean," interjected Carla. Then she leaned forward and neatly folded her hands on the tidy surface of her organized desk. "This is about Talia Barne, isn't it?" she queried without prologue.

Looking the woman across the desk directly in the eye, Illya admitted without further prevarication, "Yes."

Carla gave a resigned if dramatic sigh. "I realize, with her still so new to the Command, I probably shouldn't have championed her application to serve as Napoleon's temporary

assistant. But you see..." She paused for a moment; then resumed her explanation. "She is so desperate to make her mark here. She wants a real career very badly, a career that includes future advancement. And I just..." Carla bit her lip. "I know how that feels," she confessed, "to want that. And it's difficult for a woman to achieve... even here.

"Don't get me wrong," she assured Illya. "U.N.C.L.E. offers women within its corporate structure much more opportunity for advancement than is usual. But still, it's a challenge. I know. I took on that challenge myself some years ago."

"So you empathize with her?" suggested Illya.

Carla nodded. "Likely more than I should have in this particular instance. However, she has the prerequisite security clearance and the necessary skills," she guaranteed the other U.N.C.L.E. employee. "So it wasn't any true violation of policy to assign her. Questionable skirting of accepted practice perhaps, but no more than that."

"And you skirted accepted practice because you saw yourself in her? Yourself back at the start of your career?"

Carla nodded. "I'm embarrassed to admit my rationale for backing her request came down to no more than that. Still, our life experiences make us all who we are, and no doubt influence our actions and reactions even when we don't consciously realize it."

"But in this case you did consciously realize it, yes?"

Again Carla nodded. "I did. Undoubtedly much as you consciously realize your experiences with roaming packs of wild dogs as a child influence your persistent aversion to even people-friendly pet dogs now."

This was not something Illya wished to discuss with the head of Personnel. Yes, he realized she knew of his past fear and current dislike of canines because it was all there in his core background file. And, as head of Section VI, there were few if any portions of that file inaccessible for her perusal. Yet his personal antipathy when it came to dogs was a private matter he declined to discuss with anyone other than the psychiatric professionals Waverly insisted counsel his operatives on a regular basis.

"I am also fully cognizant of the fact my... going with my gut feelings on this occasion may have been less than judicious." Carla saved Illya the trouble of veering the conversation back on track. "As head of Personnel, I am aware of some things kept private from the rank and file. I know Mr. Waverly has had some issues recently with Mr. Solo's performance as CEA. And I do realize all that seemed to start with Talia Barne taking up the temporary position as his assistant."

"And have you spoken to Mr. Waverly regarding this possible adverse connection?" demanded Illya a bit harshly. Alerting Waverly was her prerogative, not his. And if she hadn't acted on that prerogative...

"I approached Napoleon directly, suggesting that mayhap Miss Barne was not yet up to the level of accountability necessary to act as his assistant," Carla surprisingly informed Illya. "I guaranteed him it would neither be measured as a damaging reflection on her record nor negate

her chance at future advanced assignments should he decide his preference would be to have someone else assigned as his secretary for the remainder of Mitzi's absence."

Illya schooled himself to keep from gaping outright at this revelation. Perhaps all this could be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Napoleon would get a more experienced temporary assistant who would be less prone to making newbie mistakes, Miss Barne would not be accused of anything that would limit her future with the organization, and Mr. Waverly would never have to be advised of the detailed ins-and-outs of what had gone on in this regard.

"And Mr. Solo's decision was?" he prompted.

Carla shook her head sadly. "He said no. He would keep her on until Mitzi returned."

Again Illya fought his reaction to simply gawk. "He what?" he requested confirmation.

"He refused to have another temporary assigned," repeated Carla frankly.

Illya simply could not believe it. Napoleon had been offered an "honorable" way out of his current dilemma with the unseasoned Miss Barne and he had turned it down flat.

"So have you now approached Mr. Waverly?" Illya regained his mental composure enough to ask of Drosten.

Carla bit her lip. "I have no proof that Miss Barne is even partially responsible for Napoleon's recent lapses of judgment as he has taken all reprimands for such failures fully upon himself. And knowing Napoleon's..." she hesitated, searching for acceptable words. "Affectionate tendencies with regard to women," she finally settled on a fairly neutral statement, "I didn't want to bring down any unneeded wrath upon his head, especially at this time."

Illya ran a hand through his hair in complete frustration. It seemed his friend's Don Juan reputation had really backfired on him this time. The Russian more than suspected Carla Drosten was somewhat smitten with Solo, but that her attentions had gone substantially unrequited. So, if Napoleon was having an affair with Talia Barne and was thus desirous of keeping her for the moment close at hand... Well, Carla Drosten would simply let the CEA stew in his own sauce (or was it juice?), as the saying went.

But then again Miss Drosten had been amazingly forthcoming. When he considered more carefully, that she had confided to him as much as she had was quite an unexpected boon. Perhaps such was her means of righting the situation without explicitly interfering, if indeed Napoleon was in essence exchanging antics in the bedroom for silence in the conference room. And, if that was indeed why Carla had spoken so freely to him, it seemed likely that it was Solo's charm prompting this candor from an infatuated Miss Drosten. Though that still placed the whole messy business right back in Illya's own lap.

"I thank you for your time and honesty, Miss Drosten," Illya politely expressed his gratitude as he rose to leave.

Carla nodded as she pushed the button to unlock the pneumatic door for Kuryakin to make his departure.

---

Illya Kuryakin barreled through yet another pneumatic door in New York HQ, this one granting access into the office of the Chief of Enforcement for U.N.C.L.E. Northwest.

Slamming his fist hard down on the desk in front of his seated friend, he demanded brusquely, "Are you sleeping with her?"

Napoleon gazed up at him through startled eyes. "Her who?" he asked in complete bewilderment.

"Talía Barne!" Illya spat out almost as if the name itself was a form of venom.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Napoleon questioned.

"Carla Drostén let you know you could have Miss Barne 'unassigned' from the position as your assistant without negative consequences to her, and you refused."

"Why the hell would Carla tell you about something that is absolutely none of your business?" queried Napoleon, now somewhat angry himself.

"Why did you refuse?" Illya ignored his supervisor's legitimate query as he made his own demand.

"That's private," quietly stated Napoleon through clenched teeth.

"So you are sleeping with her!"

"Is that what you think of me? That I'm someone who cannot fail but lead with his cock?" Napoleon's fury was palpable as his voice became even softer and his words very noticeably deliberate.

"I want an answer!" pressed Illya.

"And I want you to leave," countered Napoleon.

"No!" stubbornly counter-counterèd Illya.

"That's not a wise choice," threatened Solo.

"So report me for insubordination," egged Kuryakin. "You're my superior: do it!"

"You think I won't?"

"I want you to!" the Russian pushed.

"I don't think you want me to call security in here," the American warned.

"I do! Because then you'll have to provide the specifics on why to Mr. Waverly and finally, finally the truth about Talía Barne will come out!"

Napoleon's anger deflated like a popped balloon. "What is it with you and her, Illya? Why are you so against her?"

“She’s destroying your career.”

“Let’s not be melodramatic.”

“She’s destroying your career,” uncompromisingly repeated Illya, “and you’re letting her do it.”

“Illya, she is just a wide-eyed gal with a temporary job that sometimes overwhelms her.”

“Then send her back to the secretarial pool where she belongs.”

Napoleon sighed sadly. “That would be the same as confirming her misgivings about not being good enough.”

Illya felt the facts in his head about Talia Barne begin to whirl in confusion. He sat down abruptly, as if dizzy from the ensuing mental chaos. “Her what?” he questioned with a blink.

Napoleon sighed once more. “She’s convinced she isn’t good enough to really make a go of it within U.N.C.L.E.”

“Good enough how?” Illya wanted something more concrete to aid in his understanding of the matter.

Napoleon shrugged and then responded, “Not smart enough, not quick enough, not disciplined enough, not worthy of trust.”

“Yet she desperately wants to rise high within U.N.C.L.E.,” Illya added.

“I don’t know about that,” Napoleon quickly reflected on the notion, his brow furrowing in thought. “I just know she really doesn’t feel she will ever measure up.”

“To what?”

“Expectations,” finalized Napoleon.

Illya glanced askance at his friend. Was he seeing a pattern here? With Carla Drosten Talia Barne had played the “woman seeking professional advancement in a biased world” card. With Napoleon Solo she was playing the “afraid of not being what everyone expects of you” card.

He was familiar of course with the gist of Waverly’s expectations for his friend. Yet Illya Kuryakin was not privy to the contents of Napoleon Solo’s personnel file. He did not have the clearance status within U.N.C.L.E. necessary for such access. He did know, however, that Napoleon had been raised from infancy by his maternal grandparents, and that his maternal grandfather had served as U.S. ambassador to several different countries under several different American presidents. He was indeed a highly regarded diplomat with a pristine reputation. Undoubtedly such a man had his own expectations with regard to the grandson he had nurtured basically from birth.

There was no doubt Napoleon exuded an extreme self-confidence. Yet Kuryakin was keenly aware of the methods one learned to cope with personal stresses. He had his own psychological demons and had no doubts Solo possessed his own as well. And it would seem that Talia Barne was uniquely talented at tapping into those private anxieties people kept hidden on the surface, even those that kept them as well concealed as likely did Napoleon Solo.

*"That's one manipulative little bitch,"* Illya mentally condemned the absent Miss Barne. But in that moment Illya Kuryakin realized to defeat the skillful manipulations of Talia Barne, he was going to have to abandon any attempt at an understated approach.

---

"You understand what I want you to do then?" Illya Kuryakin demanded of the muscular brute who stood here in this alley facing him.

The man nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"Good," stated Illya tersely. "Then this conversation is at an end."

As Illya turned to leave, the man spoke out in what could honestly only be called a whine. "Look, Kuryakin, I'm doing this because—"

"Because you have no choice," interjected Illya brusquely.

"Thanks to you!" the brute spat back at the Russian. "Ever since that raid on the Brooklyn satrap where you threatened to make it look to the bigwigs—"

"If such a term can rightly be applied to the small minds of Thrush," Illya interrupted again, disdain dripping from his every word.

"You left me no options other than to become an informant for U.N.C.L.E.!"

Illya shrugged. "There are always options."

"Yeah, well, I rather wanted to live then and I still want to live now. Heat is starting to scorch me, Kuryakin. Those toadies setting their sights on a position at Central are always looking for ways to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Stepping on a few bodies crisped through the slightest suspicion of betrayal is a very viable means of doing just that. And I see them all glancing my way, analyzing the possibilities as they calculate the cost."

"My heart bleeds for you."

"You goddamn Commie bastard, I want a guarantee!"

"I can guarantee you that all men die. It is the nature of the beast."

"If I do this, I want a guarantee," persisted the Thrush, ignoring Illya's brutal sarcasm, "that U.N.C.L.E. will relocate me with a new identity."

"And I've already told you I will endorse such a plan with Mr. Waverly."

"I want it in writing!"

"You have my word."

"No, not good enough. I—"

“You complain of having no options,” interposed Illya flatly. “Well, now I am giving you options. You can either take your chances with me or with the self-serving members of Thrush. It is entirely your choice in whom it would be shrewdest to place your trust.”

The brute chewed on his lower lip, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably in his ill-fitting cheap suit. None of this was going his way. But again he really did want to live. So he’d take his chances with Kuryakin.

---

“It was an attempted kidnapping?” Alexander Waverly requested verification from the Section II agent now briefing him on the regrettable situation.

“Apparently so, sir,” stated Illya Kuryakin with an emphasizing nod.

“Thrush initiated?” The Continental Chief pressed for further confirmation of the details on which he was being updated.

Kuryakin nodded once more.

“I do recognize that Thrush often needs little logical motive for its actions,” granted the first administrator within U.N.C.L.E. “However, in this particular instance, with Miss Barne being no more than a member of the secretarial pool—”

“For the past three weeks she has been subbing for Mitzi Harrington during her medical leave.”

“Ah yes, Mr. Solo’s assistant. Bad ankle fracture while taking one of those learn-to-ski courses at the Craigmour resort in New Jersey.”

This garnered yet another corroborating nod from the Command’s Russian operative.

“So is this nasty business related to Miss. Barne’s temporary assignment?”

“We believe so, sir,” substantiated Kuryakin. “Prior to the incident Miss Barne and a few of her colleagues from the secretarial pool were chatting in a Manhattan bar. Miss Barne admits Mr. Solo’s name came up in conversation.”

Mr. Waverly raised one bushy eyebrow.

“No mention was made of U.N.C.L.E. itself, sir,” the agent forestalled his boss’ concerns. “Nor of Mr. Solo’s particular position within the Command. Yet... Well, we have been aware for some time that Thrush is cognizant of Mr. Solo’s recent promotion.”

“Indeed,” spoke Waverly with a short nod of his own. The speed of Thrush’s information network was a constant trial to both this man and the organization he had founded. “Continue with your report, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“Miss Barne and her companions left the drinking establishment around 9 p.m. She separated from her friends to walk home to her nearby apartment. A man, who had apparently followed her from the bar, then physically accosted her and attempted to force her into a nearby vehicle. During the scuffle that ensued he tried to inject her with a syringe, saying something to the effect of having no intention of letting her get away because grabbing Mr. Solo’s assistant on his

own initiative would surely raise his image with Central. Those of Thrush do often have loose tongues, sir," added the Section II agent by way of personal commentary.

"Lips, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The English colloquialism..." began Waverly. "Never mind," he then broke off that line of discussion. "Yes, we are agreed that Thrush minions do tend to speak without considered thought. Miss Barne managed to overpower her attacker?"

"The self-defense training the Command provides its staff aided her to doing so, sir. She – uh... Simply put, sir, she utilized her purse to strike her male assailant in the gonads and then made a hasty retreat."

If a small smirk appeared momentarily on Alexander Waverly's face at this blunt summation of how Talia Barne made good her escape, such was perfectly understandable. It was definitely satisfying to receive evidence that the physical training programs of his organization paid off at all levels, not just the ones dedicated to enforcement.

"And she is substantially unhurt?"

"Some cuts and bruises. Medical is giving her a once-over right now to ensure nothing in the syringe actually made it into her bloodstream from where the needle scratched her. She is naturally emotionally shaken, however, and the psychiatric personnel have advised she thus be housed overnight at HQ for her personal peace of mind."

"Of course, Mr. Kuryakin. I'll authorize her temporary use of one of the personnel lodgings here in headquarters immediately."

Kuryakin made his nod of acknowledgement apropos to his superior's decision.

"And the man that assaulted Miss Barne." Waverly required particular information. "Has he been apprehended?"

Kuryakin gave a dissatisfied shake of his head. "Security was summoned by Miss Barne to her apartment. So, by the time said Section V personnel had received the necessary details on the location of the actual attack, the man had long vanished. We do have feelers out on the ground, sir."

"And a description?"

"Miss Barne was unable to provide one. The man seized her from behind and never faced her. She performed the defensive maneuver with her handbag by slamming it backward toward where, by gauging his height relative to her own, she sensed his privates to be."

"Unfortunate that she never saw his countenance."

"Indeed, sir," agreed Kuryakin. "And with regard to that, I would like to make a further suggestion concerning Miss Barne's future safety."

"Go on, Mr. Kuryakin," consented the Section I head.

“Though we have no evidence that the man in question tracked Miss Barne to her nearby apartment after the failed abduction, I still believe it would be prudent to outfit her living space with upgraded security equipment. As a member of the general secretarial pool within U.N.C.L.E., the security with which her home was previously fitted is only first level. I would suggest it be upgraded to third level.”

“That routinely given to full-time assistants of Section Chiefs?”

Kuryakin nodded. “For the nonce, sir. It can be downgraded again once Miss Barne’s temporary assignment is completed.”

Waverly nodded in his turn, thus approving the plan. “Have it done at once, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“Yes, sir. I will see to it personally,” pledged Illya more meaningfully than was the general wont.

---

“Thank you, gentleman,” Illya properly expressed his gratitude to the Section V personnel who had taken on the quick-turnaround, late-night/early-morning task of outfitting the apartment of Talia Barne with an upgraded security system. “I can handle the final coding input myself. Go home to your families.”

The men all nodded their own gratitude and then willingly packed up their equipment and made their departures. After their exits, Kuryakin properly set up the new coding sequence for the system as he had stated he would. Then, however, he wandered throughout the apartment. This was not done aimlessly, but rather with an eye toward finding something that might prove of use in his self-appointed task of removing Miss Barne from her temporary assignment as assistant to U.N.C.L.E.’s North American CEA.

He didn’t know specifically what he was looking for and he was well aware he would most likely find nothing at all. Talia Barne was simply an ambitious and manipulative go-getter who was looking to advance her position within the Command through shortcut methods. What evidence could be found to block her current chosen path of too hasty advancement, he had no clue. Still, it was an absolute certainty he would indeed find nothing if he never took the time to look.

Illya mentally congratulated himself on how smoothly his scheme to get privately into Miss Barne’s living quarters had come to fruition. Making use of one desperate Thrush contact who had all but outlived his worth as an informant and dropping a subtle hint around some of the more gossipy members of the typing pool that Talia Barne might wind up a permanent replacement for Napoleon’s assistant was all the setup that had been necessary. Of course it always paid to keep an ear to the wall and thus have a ready handle on when and where members of the secretarial klatch regularly socialized outside the office.

Illya methodically searched through Talia’s apartment, taking care to examine everything yet alter nothing from its current placement. He surmised Miss Barne had a French background from the personal photos and memorabilia he discovered amongst her things. Odd that he had detected no accent with regard to her speaking of English. Apparently she also had something of a green thumb, as many types of thriving plants grew in painted clay pots perched on the windowsills of the entire living area: herbs in the kitchen, verdant greenery in the parlor, flowers in the bedroom. She seemingly preferred coffee to tea, wine to hard liquor or beer, and baguettes to pre-sliced bread. Her refrigerator contained a large assortment of paper-wrapped wedge cheeses, her bookshelves a modest selection of tawdry romance novels, and her linen drawer a carefully stored collection of handmade and likely antique lace table coverings. None

of what Illya observed within the space gave him anything with even the remote potential of aiding him in his mission.

He was in his final tour of the premises, meticulously rummaging through Talia's bedroom closet, when he at last came across something that held the promise of making his painstaking search worthwhile. There was a wall safe at the back of the walk-in wardrobe. Sealed via a combination lock of course, but then Illya Kuryakin was an expertly trained spy. There were few if any locks he couldn't defeat and this one proved no exception. He cracked the code with surprising ease, yet was puzzled to find within that small safe not money or jewelry or documents but simply another combination lock attached to one of the unit's side partitions. Expecting his ready foiling of the second combination to at last reveal whatever trove of treasures Miss Barne was striving so diligently to keep protected, Illya was taken aback when what resulted was the entire rear wall of the closet opening onto a secret room beyond.

Quickly regaining his composure and instinctively drawing his weapon, the U.N.C.L.E. agent entered the admittedly cramped confines of that exposed chamber. A plethora of open shelves lined the walls of the room, as if indeed its original intent had been for the hidden storage of valuables. Yet what Miss Barne was warehousing within seemed to Illya far from meriting such extreme safeguarding techniques. Candles by the score – a few in holders but most lying flat upon the shelves, a multitude of bells of various sizes and metal compositions, and perhaps a dozen thick and, judging by their outward condition, rather old tomes. Those books might indeed have some intrinsic worth, but the rest?

For the moment the room was lit only by the flame of a single candle set in an iron holder on one of the middle shelves. Holstering his special, Illya drew closer to that one current source of illumination with the idea of examining the nature of the volumes housed here. Subsequently he discovered the ledge holding that candle also held one of the brass bells, the thickest of the tomes open midway through its breadth, ...and a burgundy-framed, 3½x5 black-and-white photograph of Napoleon Solo.

"I'll be damned!" remarked Illya in astonishment.

He didn't understand this. Was it intended as some kind of shrine? It made no sense.

"Are you mayhap unwholesomely obsessed, Miss Barne? Psychologically unbalanced?" he rhetorically queried the absent woman.

Then a cold trail traveled the length of his spine. The title reference of that movie he and Napoleon had viewed the month before came unbidden to his mind.

"Ring the bell, open the book, light the candle," he murmured quietly. "I don't believe in any of that," he then sternly reminded himself in a much louder voice.

Still, he suspected he now had a means to his desired end.

And still before closing back up the hidden room, he did something he had purposely avoided doing anywhere else within Talia's apartment; that is, leave outward evidence that someone had been snooping here. With simple determination: he lifted the bell and shook it once quickly, setting its clapper in brief sound-filled motion, slammed the book loudly shut, and then snuffed out the flame of the candle between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

---

Talia Barne was definitely surprised by the knock on the door of the living quarters in HQ that had been given over to her. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, she saw it was yet some minutes before five in the morning. Whoever was seeking her attention so early?

“Just a moment,” she called through to the unknown visitor beyond the portal. From the foot of the bed she gathered up the standard dressing gown she had been provided by housekeeping as returning to her own apartment to pack an overnight bag had not been an option. Pulling the oversized robe on over her likewise standard issue and likewise oversized pajamas, she moved to the small reception area of the quarters, switched on a light, and then pressed the button to release the manual lock on the pneumatic door.

“You should have asked who was seeking entrance, Miss Barne,” Illya Kuryakin reminded her from his spot in the now open doorway.

“Here within headquarters, I didn’t think—”

“It is always advisable to think,” interjected Illya. “May I come in?” he then immediately queried.

Talia nodded mutely and Illya walked into the standard suite, letting the pneumatic door swoosh shut automatically behind him.

“Please have a seat,” Talia invited her uninvited guest with a gesture toward the one overstuffed chair within the ‘living room’

“Thank you.”

“I’d offer you coffee, but I’m afraid I haven’t put a pot on yet,” she explained pointedly as she herself sat on the sofa in that living room.

“You are very kind, but I am here on official business. So there is no need for standard hostess amenities.”

“Official business?” Talia queried uncertainly.

The Section II agent nodded briskly. “I wanted to inform you that the new security system has been installed in your apartment and is now fully functional.”

Talia nodded her gratitude, all the while wondering why this very standard news couldn’t have waited at least another hour to be delivered.

“Nothing within your permanent living space was found to be compromised,” further forwarded Kuryakin.

Talia sat up straighter. “Did you expect it would be?”

“As an enforcement agent, I don’t go into any situation with preconceived expectations, Miss Barne. To do so could prove extremely dangerous.”

Something about the way he was speaking to her sent her mind into turbulent motion. She instinctively realized it was not what he was saying, but what he wasn’t saying that was of real import.

“You’re Russian, yes, Mr. Kuryakin?” she asked with an ingenuous smile. “We have, therefore, a similar background in some regards I think. As a young child, I lived in Dijon during the Nazi occupation. I remember very little of that time of course. Except the fear.”

Kuryakin didn’t respond. Talia moved her head a bit so the ambient light caught her eyes in a certain way, bringing out their unique burgundy highlights.

“The imperfect memory of childhood allows one to forget particular horrors once you reach adulthood,” she continued undaunted, “but never the base fear.”

Kuryakin set his gaze directly on hers.

“Miss Barne, we could mayhap commiserate about our lost childhoods as we confide to one another barely remembered tales of woe, but we will not,” he stated straight-to-the-point. “I have come to you to ask a particular question.”

“And that question is?” required Talia with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Are you a practicing Wiccan?”

“Whatever prompts such a question?”

“During standard security inspection, I came across an oddity in your home. A kind of shrine.”

Though caught off-guard, she was honestly somewhat amused by this scenario. The Russian enforcement agent was resistant to her mystical talents it would seem. Or perhaps he was constraining his inner being to remain resistant.

“A shrine? That’s an uncommon reference.”

“Are you a practicing Wiccan?” Kuryakin steadfastly repeated his question.

“You mean a practicing witch?” insinuated Talia bluntly.

“A practicing Wiccan,” emphasized Kuryakin uncompromisingly.

“Would that be a problem for U.N.C.L.E.?”

Illya shook his head in negation. “U.N.C.L.E. is tolerant of all religious beliefs. And of course at hiring you made specific mention of your own affiliation with such religion for notation in your personnel record.”

Talia laughed her musical composition of a laugh. “You know I did not.”

“No, I didn’t know,” he assured her. “At least not until you just told me. However, therein does lay a problem: not with your religious beliefs themselves but with your purposeful concealment of them.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t purposeful,” she suggested.

“And perhaps the moon really is made of green cheese,” countered Illya rhetorically.

Another laugh bubbled out of Talia's throat. This was all so wonderfully droll. "You really are a cynic, aren't you?" she then queried of her 'interrogator'.

"So everyone tells me," Illya observed without a single qualm.

"What happens now?"

He shrugged. "Nothing earthshattering. There will be an investigative review regarding your background: all very standard. Likely you will receive an official reprimand and there will be the end of the matter. Of course you understand," he then dropped the bombshell, "it would be an unacceptable breach of security for you to continue in your temporary assignment as assistant to the Command's Northwest Chief of Enforcement during any such review. Or indeed be assigned again to any similar advanced position within the organization for a standard period of probation after receipt of such an official reprimand."

Talia smiled wryly. "Must everything be standard to satisfy your peace of mind?" she baited him.

"Not everything," hedged Illya with a wry smile of his own.

"My one pressing question now asked and answered," he noted further as he rose to his feet, "I'll leave you to resume your interrupted sleep. My sincere apologies for so disturbing your rest."

The pneumatic door had already opened when Illya turned back into the room. "By the by, I quenched the candle in your safe room. Fire hazard you know."

"Indeed," spoke out Talia as she focused her burgundy-brown eyes steadfastly on his blue ones.

He was halfway out the door when she called out his name to regain his attention. As he obligingly turned back yet again, she inquired, "If I do have powers, don't you fear me using them against you?"

"You have no powers, Miss Barne," determined Kuryakin unequivocally. "Certainly none to compare with those I face on a constant basis as an instrument of order battling the forces of would-be human chaos."

Then he was gone.

For a few moments she simply sat staring forward at nothing. Then she began to laugh once more: her enchanting symphony of a laugh. She would leave U.N.C.L.E. voluntarily of course. There was no further reason for her to be here. She had no fear of any form of retribution from those of Thrush. Push come to shove, she could manipulate them as easily as she could anyone else. Anyone, that is, expect perhaps Illya Kuryakin.

In truth Thrush had no reason for complaint. She had performed as promised. That Napoleon Solo would rather easily and quite quickly regain any status her machinations had cost him, she had no doubt. But she had never promised Thrush that it would be impossible for Solo to redeem himself in the estimation of his U.N.C.L.E. superiors. Only a very foolish witch would ever make such an unsustainable pledge. No magic was ever foolproof.

---

**Several weeks later...**

“I want to congratulate you, Mr. Solo,” Alexander Waverly praised his Chief of Enforcement. “The strategy you set in motion for the Caracas mission was nothing less than brilliant.”

“I appreciate the compliment, sir,” stated Napoleon Solo as a heady mix of pride and satisfaction filled his inner being.

“It was a touchy thing, a touchy thing indeed,” continued the Old Man, “and you pulled it off without a hitch.”

“Thorough intelligence and careful coordination provided the key, sir.”

Waverly nodded. “And the suggestions you have made with regard to future enforced policy for the temporary assignment of administrative personnel here in HQ,” he furthered as he glanced down briefly at the open contents of the top folder of the pile on his desk. “Quite thoroughly thought out, young man. I very much approve.”

“Your approval means much to me, Mr. Waverly.”

“And that I can give it to you wholeheartedly means much to me,” ventured Waverly with somewhat surprising sentiment. “I will admit the seeds of doubt had been planted in my mind with regard to you. I’m glad in the end I refused to water them to let them grow into confidence-strangling weeds. From our first meeting, Mr. Solo, I have sensed something in you. I am pleased I did not sense wrong.”

Napoleon made no return comment, but Waverly honestly expected none. He knew, though Solo gave no outward expression of this, he was flustering the young man with his open verbal show of confidence.

“Now, get back to work, Mr. Solo,” Waverly considerately ended the private conference. “World disorder and Thrush intrigues wait upon the convenience of no operative of U.N.C.L.E.”

“Yes sir,” responded Napoleon as he rose swiftly to his feet.

After the exit of his Section II head, the Continental Chief pondered on recent events. It never ceased to amaze him how those under his authority imagined that, because he said nothing outright, he remained ignorant of what was going on under his own roof here at headquarters. He was a seasoned spymaster. He knew you always waited upon the right moment and the right operative to handle any situation.

“So, Mr. Kuryakin,” he spoke quietly to no one but himself, “you took it upon yourself to have Mr. Solo’s back. That has possibilities. Definite future possibilities,” he finalized with a wry spymaster smile.

**—THE END—**

