

Author's Note: This story was written for **QUOTEME: Challenge 1** on Section VII.
I should also note that the mission detailed in this story takes place about seven weeks after the MFU series' episode **The Terbuf Affair**, that originally aired in late December 1964.



You have enemies? Good.
That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life.

Winston Churchill

SUBROGATION OF THE SOUL

BY [LAH](#)

Late February 1965
Slovak Karst in the Carpathians

"I understand you have indeed managed to capture Napoleon Solo," Ciriaco Uripides commented in grudging compliment to his first lieutenant within this particular Thrush satrapy.

That lieutenant, Budek Jahoda, smirked in obvious self-satisfaction. "Just as I vouched I would. Currently have him all snugly confined within one of the underground caves."

"Those caves are riddled with unexplored passages," Uripides cautioned pedantically. "You sure Waverly's golden boy won't simply find a way out?"

The Slav Jahoda bristled at the suggestion by his Greek superior he might be slipshod in his performance of his responsibilities. Truth was Budek had little liking for Uripides, accounting him a priggish elitist. He knew Ciriaco had reportedly earned every iota of his status in the organization through the merits of unique planning with regard to various Thrush ventures. Still, Budek himself was a hands-on, blood-under-the-fingernails type who much preferred to deal with men of his own ilk.

A hulking presence at least six-and-a-half feet tall with a physique literally bulging with muscles, Jahoda would be viewed by any adversary as an immediate bodily threat. As well he had a natural affinity to all modes of physical violence that had garnered him a grisly reputation unique even within the likes of Thrush. Uripides unspokenly considered the other man a tactless thug, someone who had no concept of the finer points of mental manipulation and thus not someone who would ever be of more than peripheral importance in the most sophisticated strategies of the supra-nation. Budek, in contrast, accounted the supra-nation's ultimate goal of world domination as something that in the end would only be achieved by the likes of men such as himself, men who didn't shrink from the most gruesome of ruthless physicalities.

"Napoleon Solo will not escape this time," Jahoda guaranteed.

"Napoleon Solo has made many who said the same eat their words. Those good looks of his are not what led to the achievement of his position as U.N.C.L.E.'s top man in enforcement in North America, you know. He has incalculable wit and guile, as well as skill and dedication well beyond the ordinary. And now that Thrush has solid reason to believe he is being groomed as Waverly's successor—"

"Waverly will soon need to have his throne-in-waiting fitted for a new backside," irritably asserted Budek.

"Solo undoubtedly has information the Council will want to extract," Ciriaco superfluously mused.

"There are many extraction methods with which I have intimate familiarity."

"All in good time." The Greek let his dismissive tone purposely rankle the Slav for, while he was aware Thrush had some interim need of men like Jahoda, Ciriaco personally found such brutes unimaginative annoyances. "A more delicate hand will initially be called for in this particular case."

Budek snorted. "A delicate hand?" Jahoda let his tone be just as dismissive of Uripides' idea of extraction methods as the other man had been of his. "With an U.N.C.L.E. agent of Solo's caliber?"

"Exactly so. Solo has been tortured more than once by those of our organization, many of them reputed as extraordinary technicians in such regard. Never has it gained Thrush so much as a single jot of useable information regarding U.N.C.L.E.," the Greek pointedly reminded his subordinate.

"This time will be different," stubbornly insisted Budek.

"While it is laudable you have such confidence in your own abilities," Ciriaco put that trivializing tone in his voice again as he spoke, "it is better I think to attempt something new and perhaps

unexpected to get what we want from the man, something to stretch the limits of his psychological boundaries.”

“And that would be?” Jahoda could not keep the derision out of his own voice.

Uripides rubbed his chin in seemingly idle thought for a moment, though idle thought was seldom something that honestly occurred with the man. Yet he could feign such remarkably well. “That girl, the hydrogeologist’s daughter: she is still under house arrest here, yes?” he then asked.

“I know Solo is a noted Casanova, but that girl is just that: a girl, not a woman. I never heard tell of the man being attracted to adolescents.”

Now it was Ciriaco’s turn to project a very self-satisfied smirk. “Perhaps not, but innocents are always in such need of protection, at least according to those with lofty ideals.”

“She’s no innocent,” refuted the Slav, practically spitting out the observation.

“In the eyes of our ever righteous though sometimes sentimental U.N.C.L.E. agent,” proposed the Greek certainly, “we shall see.”

Act I: The devil is in the details

Evening...

“Still nothing substantial to report, Mr. Kuryakin?” questioned Alexander Waverly in a tone that left no doubt he was less than pleased with his operative’s reports thus far.

Ilyya Kuryakin momentarily bit his bottom lip to keep from making too short a retort in response to the Continental Chief’s accusatory query. He and his makeshift partner had been searching these less-than-hospitable rugged reaches of Czechoslovakia during every hour of available daylight for two long days. Now evening again closed in around them without the setting sun marking any achievement of success in their current quest. He was tired, he was cold, and the tent in which they were encamped offered extremely little in the way of creature comforts. Even the food wasn’t as plentiful as he could have wished.

“Unfortunately not, sir,” Ilyya answered into the mike of the shortwave radio over which he was currently communicating with his superior. “We still have reason to believe that the Thrush base is hidden somewhere in these mountains. Yet the cave systems are extensive, and—”

“I am aware of that, Mr. Kuryakin,” interrupted Waverly abruptly. “However, I am also aware that time may not be on our side.”

“Sir, I realize there are undoubtedly valid security reasons why you didn’t provide all specifics when you assigned myself and Mr. Steffensen to this task,” Ilyya adeptly prefaced his next informational request, a request that could perhaps be viewed as bordering on insubordination. “However, I do think it important for us to have a heads-up regarding whatever Thrush may be working on in this satrapy.”

Hell, a heads-up? Ilyya at this moment would settle for a charades-like hint. All he and Steffensen had been told was: “Locate the local Thrush den in Czechoslovakia, and do it

pronto.” Sometimes it did seem to Illya as if Mr. Waverly kept the finer points of U.N.C.L.E.’s undertakings a bit too close to the vest.

“There is no physical project housed within this Thrush unit. Or at least none of which we have current knowledge. There was a proposal of one, but that failed to come to even marginal fruition,” the Old Man finally delivered details to his agents. “Thus the agenda for this particular satrapy during the present timeframe is apparently different.”

“In what way?” Illya found himself bluntly demanding.

There was a silence of long seconds, countable to fully eighteen or twenty, before Waverly next spoke.

“We originally received intelligence that the Czechoslovakian section of Thrush might be testing a means to cause flooding in underground cave systems, enough to destabilize large masses of land. So I dispatched Mr. Solo to investigate that possibility a week ago.”

“While I was still on assignment in Madrid.”

“Indeed. Unfortunate set of coincidences there. Though in the end perhaps not so coincidental.”

“Excuse me, sir? I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Illya openly voiced his confusion.

Again a silence of countable seconds before Waverly spoke again.

“We now have reason to believe our received intelligence was nothing more than a clever ruse propagated by giving purposeful notification of a since outdated and shutdown scientific enterprise.”

“To what purpose?”

“To bring Mr. Solo within ready reach of the operatives of this well-hidden Thrush satrapy.”

Illya glanced over at his partner for this mission, the rather high-strung Tage Steffensen, and noted the other man was nibbling on one of his cuticles as he listened somewhat bug-eyed to Waverly’s words. Though an agent with an above-average record in the field, the big Swede certainly had none of Napoleon’s self-ease and composure.

“Mr. Solo is a feared enemy operative to be sure, sir, one Thrush would dearly love to put permanently out of commission,” admitted Illya. “Yet why go to such particular trouble at this time?”

Waverly harrumphed noisily, the sound rumbling roughly over the airwaves. “It is possible,” he began. “No, it is likely,” he purposely corrected himself, “Thrush intercepted a communiqué that enticed them into this pointed action.”

“What could possibly—” Illya himself began, and then fell silent. He knew, of course he knew. Waverly had sent a message through supposedly secure communication channels to the other Continental Chiefs forwarding Napoleon as his own eventual successor. It was something that had been broached with Solo by the Old Man quite a few months back, but Solo had only

recently provided his superior his final agreement to the plan. With that done, it had become imperative the other chiefs be advised as soon as possible and allowed to voice their opinions on the decision. “Oh, I see,” Illya thus commented in complete comprehension.

“What, Illya, what?” anxiously required Tage. “What’s going on?”

“Later, Tage.” Illya cupped his hand over the microphone as he put off the other man’s plea to be brought out of the dark. “I’ll explain what I can later.”

“I’m glad you seem to have gotten the full drift of the issue, Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly conceded with unmistakable gravity.

“Yes sir.”

“Mr. Solo’s last contact was four days ago,” Waverly provided this necessary fact. “At that time he believed he had located the satrapy and advised that he would be out of transmission range as he ventured into the Carpathians to verify his hunch. We uncovered the unreliability of our initial information but a few hours later, but were unable to regain communication to apprise him to abort the mission.”

“So we now more than suspect that Napoleon is in the hands of Thrush. That is, if they haven’t killed him already.”

“In such a situation—”

Now it was Illya who interrupted. “Indeed sir. Killing him would be the last stroke, not the first.”

“Nor even the second stroke,” furthered Waverly. “Whatever plans Thrush ultimately has for Mr. Solo, they do need to be thwarted, Mr. Kuryakin. Not merely for his sake, but for that of the organization as a whole. Currently we remain in danger simply because we have no consistent handle on their full intent.”

“We’ll find him, sir,” pledged Illya certainly. For he had absolutely no intention of letting Thrush make some foul use of his friend simply because of a position he had been recommended to one day attain.

“Stand back, Solo, well back!” commanded Budek through the iron bars that sectioned off a portion of this underground cave to serve as a cell. Jahoda’s demand of course was punctuated with the business end of a Thrush rifle sited through those bars directly at Napoleon’s midsection.

Having already been thoroughly roughed up before his incarceration in this prison, Solo considered it the better part of valor to heed the Slav’s instructions and stay alert for any opportunity that might come as a result. Raising his shackled hands palms up in a gesture of submission, Napoleon shuffled his equally shackled feet backwards till he stood at the end of the natural stone enclosure furthest from the door. The iron grate then was swung open and two underling guards, also brandishing distinctive Thrush rifles, slammed Napoleon back against the far wall and held him there, the barrel of one’s gun shoved forcefully into his chest and the barrel of the other’s shoved even more forcefully into his stomach.

Budek entered behind them. After seeing that the U.N.C.L.E. agent was for the moment firmly under the control of his subordinates, he nodded his head toward the door. A girl of perhaps fifteen or maybe sixteen but surely no more entered the lockup between two more armed guards. Yet they didn't hold her and she wasn't struggling. She simply walked between them resignedly, her face a mask of perfect calm.

"Though I know U.N.C.L.E. likes to claim Thrush has no knowledge of the boundaries of justice, we do indeed conform to a certain organizational code. And we make examples, Solo, of those of our own who pointedly break that code. We thought an U.N.C.L.E. man would enjoy firsthand observation of Thrush's form of self-administered justice. Something to ease your boredom," Jahoda spat out contemptuously, "while we wait upon the arrival of those of the Council who would personally chat with you."

With that, Budek nodded once more toward the door and another man, this one in a white lab coat, made an entrance. He was unarmed... except for a hypodermic needle he held in one hand with a small bottle of some solution in the other.

"We ready then?" the white-coated man questioned Jahoda once he had filled the syringe from the bottle.

"Do it and do it quickly," advised the Slav. "Keeping Solo contained is a count-your-luck-by-seconds thing."

The tech nodded shortly, turned and efficiently stabbed the girl in the right arm. She didn't even flinch.

"Hey, what are you doing?" demanded Napoleon as he recklessly pushed through the guns of the Thrush muscle restraining him and propelled his body, despite his shackled ankles, toward the girl.

Budek brought the butt of his own rifle down sharply across the nape of Solo's neck, felling him to the ground in a single blow. He then pressed the barrel of his weapon directly against the back of Napoleon's head. "All in the name of justice, Solo," he declared with a half-laugh.

Jahoda kept his gun firmly anchored against Napoleon's skull as he signaled the other men to leave the premises ahead of him. Seeing stars from the heavy bash to his neck, Napoleon was inopportunistically in no condition to tackle Budek before the Slav made his own exit from the cell, the heavy iron-barred door being swung firmly shut behind him.

"You all right?"

As she spoke, Napoleon looked up into the face of the girl who was now kneeling beside him. He smiled crookedly. "I've survived worst."

"So I've heard tell," she countered.

"What was all that about?" he then asked her straightforwardly.

The girl shrugged. "Life as it is for me."

"What kind of life is that? Who are you anyway?"

“My name is Klara: Klara Jablonska.

Napoleon swallowed convulsively. “Clara? Your name is Clara?”

“Yes, but with the Slavic pronunciation. Bit different emphasis on the first syllable. In English you would spell it with a K instead of a C, I believe. I’m Polish, you see.”

“I thought I detected a bit of an Eastern European accent to your otherwise excellent English,” Napoleon commented in an attempt to keep his voice clear of the emotion that had unexpectedly overwhelmed him upon hearing that this girl shared the name of his one-time great love.

“And, in Czechoslovakia, you expected to find North Americans instead of East Europeans?” challenged the girl.

Napoleon gave her an amused smile as he awkwardly pulled himself into a seated position from his previous one flat on his stomach. “I guess I expected to find only Czechs and Slovaks,” he teased.

That elicited a bit of a sheepish grin from the girl. “Touché. Or, as we say in Polish: Dotykać!”

“Łaskawie uznała¹,” responded Napoleon, his accent far from perfect but not too patently awful.

“You speak polski?” inquired Klara in some surprise.

“Unfortunately only a few phrases my partner taught me,” Napoleon conceded. “He’s Russian.”

Klara crinkled her nose in distaste. “Bah! I have no use for Russians.”

“And what about U.N.C.L.E. agents?” Solo asked with a tilt of his head. His curiosity had been piqued by his captor’s comments regarding this girl being dealt a form of Thrush organizational justice with that injection. “You have a use for them?”

“I am completely Thrush in my beliefs, if that is what you are asking.”

“That’s what I was asking. I suppose you were put in this cell with me to some undermining purpose then?”

Once more Klara shrugged. “I am here because I did something of which the Council did not approve.”

“Why don’t you tell me what that was? If the Council didn’t approve, I most likely will.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Klara pledged with an odd smirk.

“Why don’t you try me?” pressed Napoleon.

Klara looked him straight in the eye as she declared with surprising ease and without an iota of regret, “I killed my father.”

¹ Graciously acknowledged.

Napoleon cleared his throat a bit uncomfortably. Such a no-frills revelation was certainly not what he had expected. “There was a reason I presume?” he subsequently asked, wanting full facts before he drew any hasty conclusions.

“Of course there was a reason. He had failed Thrush.”

“What?” The stunned Napoleon couldn’t hide his initial shock at such an uncompromising answer.

“He was the aquifer specialist in charge of Thrush’s groundwater incursion project here. His efforts in this regard were rather spectacularly unsuccessful. He had been given years to accomplish what was needed, yet his results were in the main unproductive.”

“And for that I’m sure the Thrush hierarchy tagged him for extermination, perhaps not in a humane manner. So you decided to make less miserable his inevitable end.”

“What a poetic scenario you paint,” Klara mock-complimented him as she sat back on her haunches. “Only someone with U.N.C.L.E.’s ideals seeded deep in the very neuron network of his brain would make of my barefaced assertion such a quixotic possibility.”

Napoleon instinctively hunched and unhunched his shoulders in an attempt to physically relieve the mental and emotional tension that was building in him at this girl’s arbitrarily bizarre admissions and intensely cool attitude in making them.

“Tilting at windmills is my specialty,” he giped somewhat awkwardly. “So what’s the actual scenario?” Solo then inquired with as much detachment as he could himself muster.

“He failed Thrush; yet the Council was willing to give him a second chance. I knew that was a mistake, knew that he hadn’t the internal discipline to achieve what they wanted. And I knew what was unquestionably required was punishment for his abject failure. So I doctored his food one night with a heavy sleeping potion and subsequently shot him as he lay in drugged unconsciousness.”

Napoleon’s jaw reflexively dropped in a soundless “oh” of stunned amazement. He simply couldn’t find words adequate to express his reaction.

“Yet realize there is still humanity in me,” forwarded the girl. “Thus I ensured it was all quick and clean: one precise bullet to the right temple. I didn’t see any point in making him suffer unnecessarily.”

“Very...” Napoleon stumbled as his mind tried to capture an appropriate word.

“Charitable?” proposed Klara. “Generous? Considerate?”

“I was thinking more unemotional,” responded Napoleon as neutrally as possible.

“Emotion clouds judgment; thus it should have no place in difficult decisions.”

“I disagree, as emotion is what in the end accounts us as fully human.”

Klara shrugged: a seemingly habitual gesture with her. “Then account me as inhuman, if it satisfies some inner moral principle in you to do so. The opinion of one knotted Gordian-like within the apron strings of U.N.C.L.E. matters not to me.”

“What was in that syringe?” Solo avoided further venturing into the previous sensitive subject and instead inquired into a topic more plain fact-driven.

“A slow-acting poison,” stated Klara without a qualm. “Eventually it will kill me, but not at once, and not with that single dose.”

“So Thrush intends to draw out your death? Nothing quick and clean?”

The habitual shrug. “It is justice.”

“I would more readily call it torture,” hedged Napoleon.

“Because you are U.N.C.L.E. and therefore do not understand.”

“I would hope the reason is more that I am human and therefore do not understand.”

“Perceive it as you wish.”

“So they will have to give you more injections? To complete their... justice?” Napoleon again backed away from one confrontational topic, though likely stepping smack-dab into another.

“Yes. Three more. Six hours between each.”

“Twenty-hour hours to live then?”

“Such is the expanse of life planned for me, yes.”

“Yet plans don’t always go to plan, do they?”

Klara shrugged. “There is always an element of unpredictability in life... and death.”

Napoleon found he could not disagree with that sentiment, even when expressed by one of Thrush.

Act II: The devil has a sweet voice

Night...

“Madzeija,” Ciriaco Uripides called out through the open door of his office into the outer perimeter where the desk of his secretary was located.

“Yes sir?” queried Madzeija Jablonska as she quickly made her way into the frame of the doorway.

“Get me Mademoiselle LaChien on the wire,” ordered Madzeija’s boss.

“At once, sir,” Madzeija acknowledged as she entered the premises of Uripides’ office and made her way to the communications console located at the back of the room.

“She is still in Spain, I believe, spearheading salvage of that economic project that U.N.C.L.E. recently sabotaged in the outskirts of Madrid.”

“Yes sir,” confirmed Madzeija. “She communicated with my Daiya from there this morning.”

“Takes a special interest in that younger daughter of yours, doesn’t she?” asked Ciriaco with some curiosity.

“Yes sir,” was all Madzeija provided by way of reply to that question.

Truth was, Madzeija really didn’t know why Angelique LaChien had within the past eighteen months developed a seeming attachment for her currently twelve-year-old child, but she had her suspicions. She suspected, more than suspected, that the Spider Lady – as so many in the organization referred to LaChien because of the multiple webs of intrigue she adeptly spun – was making use of Daiya as a spy. Certainly Daiya would have been more than ripe for recruitment as such by LaChien. The preteen idolized Thrush women who fell into Angelique’s category of spy, aspiring to one day be counted among their number. Daiya’s mother was now absolutely convinced initial details of how badly had been faring the groundwater incursion project once centered in this Thrush unit had come straight from the girl’s lips into the ready ear of LaChien. Yet just as definitively Madzeija was now in no position to call out the Thrush femme fatale on the disturbing possibility of her daughter’s hypothetical “training” in this regard.

Madzeija, you see, was the widow of Hajnrich Jablonski, the hydrogeologist who had once been in charge of the development of Thrush’s groundwater incursion venture, a venture that had come to an abrupt end in abysmal failure approximately eight months ago. Hajnrich had expected to lose his life for that disaster. Indeed he had so lost it, but not as both he and his wife had originally thought he would. After months of tense waiting for some resolution, he had been given a one-time reprieve by the Supreme Council only to be subsequently murdered by his own eldest daughter Klara.

All of this was a mass blur of confusion for Madzeija, who only knew she had to stay neutral to ensure continuance of her own life and that of her younger child. She was an efficient secretary, and a more than efficient communications technician, but nothing more. She had no grand degrees to tempt Thrush. And, though surely an attractive woman, she certainly had none of the seductress qualities the supra-nation so valued in its top female operatives.

There had been so much personal expectation in her and her husband’s enlistment into the ranks of Thrush a dozen years ago. Hajnrich at that time already possessed something of a reputation in his field. He was considered one of those bright young men with impeccable scientific credentials that so intrigued Thrush. With a small child and another expected baby to provide for in the uncomfortably restrictive Communist system in Poland, the couple was lured by the promise of a comfortable life of plenty: prestige, all manner of creature comforts and money to spare. Madzeija even dared hope that they would be stationed in a satrapy somewhere outside the hem of the Iron Curtain. That hope, however, proved an idle one.

Still, the couple brought up their two girls to admire the values of Thrush. There was no compromising in the Jablonski household. The principles by which life was to be lived were dictated by the ideas and goals of the supra-nation. Both Klara and Daiya firmly embraced

those principles from toddler-hood, and it was very true to say the Jablonska girls were far more devoted to the conceptual essence of Thrush than either of their parents.

Hajnrich was assigned over the years to various Thrush scientific undertakings in Bulgaria, Romania, and USSR-annexed Belarus. Though his career in this regard was successful, his roles were always subordinate. That is until three years ago when he was put in charge of the massive groundwater incursion project here in Czechoslovakia. He worked hard to make the supra-nation's plans come to fruition, but from the beginning the objectives were just too ambitious. Perhaps the only outcome ever likely for the project was extreme misfortune. Perhaps even the Council itself secretly acknowledged this reality and such was the reason they ultimately "pardoned" Hajnrich for the unfortunate debacle. Honestly Madzeija didn't know. She only knew what did happen is that the unerring education in full dedication to the standards of Thrush she and her husband had given their offspring resulted in an unforeseen family tragedy.

Life, Madzeija inwardly granted, was just too hard, but then death had nothing to offer by way of consolation.

"Good evening, Miss LaChien," Madzeija spoke into the microphone after the communications tech in the Madrid satrapy had connected her to said woman.

"Good evening to you, Madzeija," responded Angelique. "And how does darling Daiya tonight?"

"She is well, Miss LaChien. I have Mr. Uripides ready to take the line with you," Madzeija effectively cut short any further chit-chat on the part of the famed Thrush manipulator.

"Then by all means I will take full advantage of his readiness," Angelique insinuated in a subtle form of double-entendre.

Madzeija nodded to Uripides and rose from the console as he turned his attention to the subsidiary communication unit sitting on his own desk.

"Angelique, my dear, we have him," Ciriaco all but crowed into the mike of his specialized radio unit as he broke the news to his current lady-lust.

Madzeija made her exit, Uripides appreciatively watching the back-and-forth movement of her admittedly well-formed gams before she finally closed the office door behind herself.

The momentary distraction dispensed with, Ciriaco continued his self-satisfied braggadocio.

"We have Napoleon Solo under lock and key, or rather between rocks and iron bars."

"I congratulate you, darling," came the perhaps-and-perhaps-not French-accented voice over the wire. "But be vigilant: he can be a slippery one."

"No mousés of distress over your sometime bedmate's ensuing fate?" teased Uripides.

"Darling, Napoleon Solo is U.N.C.L.E. to his bones and I am Thrush in every drop of my blood," clarified Angelique coolly. "True, I have enjoyed private encounters with the man now and again," she downplayed her fascination with Solo. "Yet never once to the true detriment of our mutual organization. I have always known one day Thrush would make good Napoleon's end, and truth to tell that inevitability has never fazed me in the least."

“Perhaps that only made your precarious assignments the more sweet,” suggested Ciriaco readily.

Though Uripides was a handsome man with many sexual conquests to his credit (or perhaps discredited), he harbored a secret jealousy toward Napoleon Solo with his renowned lady-charmer reputation. Thus he would like nothing better than to psychologically twist the other man’s mind like a pretzel, and perhaps permanently deflate the confident air that was as much what attracted women to Solo as his looks.

“Perhaps so,” conceded Angelique, though admittedly with indifference. “Adding mental spice to the physical mix can be quite enticing.”

“Well, my plans for Solo include adding emotional salt to idealistic wounds.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, a silence that Ciriaco thought went on much too long. He would remember that.

“You were ever an inventive one, Ciriaco,” Angelique finally purred in praise, “when it comes to non-physical forms of manipulation.”

“And this will be my greatest triumph,” Uripides guaranteed her. “I doubt not it will lead to a seat on the Council itself.”

“An admirable goal.”

“We all in Thrush are goal-oriented, wouldn’t you say?” pressed Ciriaco.

“We all have our desires to be sure,” stated Angelique ambivalently. “But for moment, darling, I must run. I have endeavors of my own to pursue in the name of Thrush, you understand.”

“Oh course, sweetheart. Do the attacking bird proud.”

“You as well, darling. Adieu.” And with that the communication line disconnected with unexpected immediacy.

Uripides muttered to himself as he secretly fumed. Angelique just wasn’t demonstrating the respect his coup deserved.

When he had been assigned to this satrapy a month ago, it had been to cost-and-time effectively close down the operation. He had initiated that shutdown with a knowledgeable hand. Personnel here were now down to a mere two dozen men and women, with most reusable equipment already moved to other locations where such would provide best advantage to Thrush. But then there had been an unlooked-for change in direction in Ciriaco’s mindset when another unit of Thrush had somehow broken into a secure U.N.C.L.E. communication line and retrieved a rather intriguing message.

Oddly, Uripides had gotten wind of the content of that tapped transmission from Angelique herself. The gist of it had resulted in very feminine coos of self-satisfaction from her, coos she had found it too tempting not to share with a man she knew had the same designs for an ascendant position in the Thrush hierarchy as she did herself.

It had taken some days for Thrush's highest level cryptographers to even partially decode the meaning of the dispatch, and even then the Hierarchy was not completely positive they had everything right. Still, what seemed fairly certain from the communiqué was that Napoleon Solo was being officially forwarded by Alexander Waverly as his future successor. The same Napoleon Solo with whom Angelique so willingly played stimulating cat-and-mouse. Thus in their future assignments she now had an opportunity to gain confidential intelligence that previously may not even have been available to glean. True, Napoleon really never "spilled" while in bed with her any information that could be accounted as vital to the operation of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. He had an exceptionally firm handle on the limits he personally placed on their association. Yet Angelique had supreme confidence in her own abilities to in due course alter that unsatisfactory scenario to something more in her own favor, and she certainly was not shy about suggesting so to various members of the Council.

Being forced to endure all this likely unfounded gloating on Angelique's part is what had set germinating the seed of Uripides' brilliant subversion of her smug self-importance. The groundwater incursion project was deader than a doornail. Yet U.N.C.L.E. had never caught wind of it initially and surely had no direct knowledge of its current abandonment by Thrush. So why not use the failed endeavor to some constructive purpose?

If enough communication could be initiated from the Czechoslovakian satrapy to make the undertaking seem very much active and very close to fruition, and that communication could as well be set up to ensure U.N.C.L.E. intercepted it, wouldn't the Command send a top agent to investigate? Everything could be broached in a manner to make the discovery of the Thrush Czechoslovakian initiative seem absolutely top priority. Thus who would Alexander Waverly – who had a tendency to appropriate the most vital of missions into his own direct sphere of influence – have handle such a critical, onsite investigation other than Napoleon Solo, admittedly his top enforcement agent?

Ciriaco knew from his back-and-forth radio tête-à-têtes with a miffed Angelique at the time that Illya Kuryakin was busy sniffing around the economic scheme Thrush was orchestrating in Madrid. He also knew – as did admittedly most of Thrush since the supra-nation tended to take particular note of such things – that Solo had recently returned from a successful lone mission. A mission where he had suffered no serious injuries and from which he required no recovery time to clear his system of enemy drugs. Thus U.N.C.L.E.'s North American Number 1 in Section II was not only readily available for roping into the baited trap, but as well conveniently partnerless. With meticulous point-by-point delineation of these details, Uripides forwarded his own proposition to the Council.

The elite members of the Thrush hierarchy saw nothing to lose and in fact much to gain in the enterprise. They were risking no current organizational designs and, if the ruse worked, they would have Napoleon Solo in their clutches. Not for the first time to be sure, but then again Ciriaco was a man of vision who saw a more inventive approach to compromising Solo's iron will when it came to loyalty and dedication to the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. So the Council agreed to Uripides' intrigue, but specified they would not, in order to consummate that intrigue, authorize any new personnel to bolster the nearly depleted ranks of the Czechoslovakian satrapy. Their one concession on that score was to assign him the services of Budek Jahoda, considered amongst the cream of Thrush's crop of torturers and musclemen.

Uripides had to admit, despite his dislike of the man, that Jahoda had proven his worth. He managed to swiftly snare Solo once the groundwork had been set to get him within striking range of that target. It was Madzeija who guaranteed the success of much of that groundwork. Her skills with communications were really quite extraordinary. She orchestrated the “leak” of the necessary intelligence to U.N.C.L.E. in a manner that had effectively bypassed all of the Command’s various security verifications. That was something Ciriaco would see stood the woman in good stead. Despite her husband’s colossal botch job in his first position of authority within the Thrush scientific community, and despite her older daughter’s wayward private interpretation of the ethics of the supra-nation, Madzeija had personally demonstrated her own value to the organization.

Now if only the damn woman would get a clue about wearing shorter skirts to show off more of her rather spectacular legs.

Solo sat on the floor of the cave-cum-cell with his knees drawn up to his chest and his head resting on those knees. He was trying in vain to get some rest, but this approach to sleeping was hardly conducive to that. Nearby, lying upon the one poor excuse for a bed within the space, Klara shivered fitfully. That “bed” was nothing more than a niche carved into one of the stone walls with a lumpy straw-stuffed mattress set inside it. There was no blanket, not even a thin sheet, and Napoleon didn’t have so much as a jacket as he had been stripped and given but a lightweight prisoner’s jumpsuit to wear before being locked up.

“Sorry I haven’t any covering to offer you to ward against the cold,” apologized Napoleon as he raised his head and looked toward the uncontrollably shaking girl.

“It was enough that you surrendered the bed to me,” Klara assured him.

That brought a cockeyed grin to Napoleon’s face. “You call that a bed? No springs, no legs, no frame, no—”

“Nothing for a resourceful U.N.C.L.E. agent to fashion into a tool or weapon,” interjected Klara with her own lopsided grin. “Thrush is very aware of your ingenuity you know, Solo.”

“My reputation precedes me,” granted Napoleon with an easygoing chuckle.

“Most definitely,” guaranteed the Thrushie. After a short and somewhat awkward silence ensued between them, Klara told him frankly, “My reaction to the cold is a bit intensified because of the poison. It is not of concern.”

“Maybe it is to me,” refuted Napoleon.

“Why? Why should that be the case, Solo? You and I are sworn enemies.”

“Currently it seems to me we are both prisoners. And won’t you call me Napoleon? Since we are rather stuck with each other’s company, no reason to be so derogatorily formal in addressing one another.”

“I wasn’t being derogatory, formal or otherwise. To me you are simply Solo: the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement’s Number 1 in Section II of North America. You have more than earned the distinction of ready recognition by your surname.”

“Well, I refuse to refer to you as Jablonska.”

“I have no reputation preceding me, Solo. Thus being called by my given name – a name that holds no particular significance in the ears of anyone – is all the distinction I deserve.”

Napoleon didn't voice his reaction, but in his head the silent declaration buzzed: *“It's a name that has significance in my ears, more than you will ever know.”*

“Some given names are badges of distinction,” Napoleon chose to keep their chatter impersonal.

“For Popes and kings, with maybe a handful of ancient philosophers and medieval artists thrown in for good measure,” Klara disputed his logic.

“Well, in your own organization there is Angelique,” he intimated.

Klara smiled mischievously. “Ah yes, Angelique. Someone of Thrush with whom you have an intimate acquaintance.”

“You've been listening to idle gossip,” suggested Napoleon dismissively.

“Despite numerous and apparently quite intense bedroom liaisons between the two of you, you've never given her any of the information she particularly seeks,” Klara continued. “That's not idle gossip, is it, Solo?” she badgered.

“My reputation precedes me,” he repeated, this time with a dramatic sigh, causing Klara to break out in a full-bellied laugh.

The girl's mirth was short-lived, however, as the laugh transformed into a wild cough, her breath audibly catching in her chest. Disturbed by this turn in events, Solo made his way to the niche where she lay, though he was inhibited by the chain connecting his ankle cuffs that provided him not more than eighteen inches of slack to walk.

“Here: you should sit up,” Napoleon advised as he slipped one arm under her back to support her in doing that. Again a chain extended between manacles, these on his wrists, inhibited his movements. Still he managed to get her seated upright to aid her in breathing more easily.

“The poison eventually suffocates,” she finally gasped out in explanation. “It is not of concern.”

Napoleon's brow furrowed in distress. “It is of concern to me,” he openly challenged her chilly detachment this time.

She turned her countenance toward his and studied him intently for a moment or two, as if he was a particularly intriguing specimen being viewed under a strongly-powered microscope.

“The heart of U.N.C.L.E.,” she finally spat out contemptuously.

“Always preferable to the soul of Thrush,” he retorted with impatience.

“I thought U.N.C.L.E. believed those of Thrush had no souls?” she countered pointedly.

“Even dark souls are souls,” gainsaid Napoleon just as pointedly.

Seemingly thoroughly amused by his response, she then guaranteed him, “Thrush will crack you open like an egg.”

“They have tried before, much more than once, to no avail. You see, there are certain areas where I am rather hard-boiled.”

“Well, isn’t this a cozy.” The mocking comment came from the lips of Budek Jahoda who – ubiquitous rifle at the ready – stood in the area just outside the bars.

“Nothing about this place is cozy,” snapped Napoleon as he turned toward the voice.

“We don’t treat captured U.N.C.L.E. agents to the Ritz,” sneered Budek.

“The least you could do is provide a second lumpy mattress.”

“What’s the problem, Solo? Finally found a female you don’t want to sleep with?”

“You truly are a cretin in every sense of the word,” Napoleon condemned the other man in complete disgust.

“And immensely proud of it,” retorted Jahoda without a qualm. “Now stand aside, Solo: the good doctor has another shot to give our wayward little miss.”

“He’s not a doctor,” remarked Klara matter-of-factly. “He’s a second-rate lab tech.”

“Thrush rates him highly enough to administer fatal injections to you,” Jahoda goaded. “So guess you’re pretty low on the totem pole yourself, sweetcakes.”

Klara just gave her habitual shrug in unruffled response to the gibe.

“Still probably tiers higher on the Thrush organizational chart than you are yourself,” Napoleon goaded back on Klara’s behalf.

Budek stared daggers at the imprisoned U.N.C.L.E. agent. “You know, Solo, if I hadn’t been specifically ordered by my superiors not to do it, I would shoot you right here and now. Smack-dab between the eyes,” he intimated as he leveled his rifle to the proper position to do just that to the unflinching Napoleon. Lowering his gun meaningfully, he noted, “Lucky for you I follow the directives of the Council, unlike your current sassy little roommate.”

“More like an unusually big, but still just-as-dumb lemming, huh?” pressed Napoleon with a wicked grin.

“Enough of this senseless male posturing,” interjected Klara with some irritation evident in her voice. “Are you going to continue with the comparative testosterone exhibition, Jahoda? Or oversee the dictate of the Thrush hierarchy with regard to my next injection?”

“Stand aside, Solo,” repeated Budek, his manner back-to-business though still quite evidently annoyed.

“I rather like where I’m currently standing,” countered Napoleon.

Before another verbal back-and-forth could commence, Klara quickly stood up, planting both feet firmly on the length of chain between Solo's ankle manacles, and shoved him roughly to ground. The captured chain tripped him up and caused him to land abruptly on his backside a short distance from the cot niche.

"I don't need or want your protection, Solo," she then stated bluntly.

"How the hell do you know what you need or even what you want?" questioned the exasperated Napoleon. "You're what? All of fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Klara corrected him. "And I am quite old enough to know my own mind. So please refrain from your unwelcome grand overtures in my behalf."

"Fine," conceded Napoleon through tightened lips.

With a very amused smirk, Budek then nodded to the other guard with him to open the cell door. Stepping inside, the big man pulled the rather less-than-thrilled lab tech in by the arm. The barred portal was again slammed home as Jahoda unceremoniously propelled the tech toward Klara. The white-coated man performed his task quickly, with Klara completely unresisting, and then sought to make a hasty retreat to Budek's side. Jahoda, however, had his own agenda.

He drew rapidly toward Solo, who had raised himself to his knees in a clumsy attempt to get to his feet while encumbered by the restraining lengths of the interconnected ankle and wrist shackles. Rapidly spearing and wrapping the less-than-foot-long chain between Solo's wrist cuffs around the body of his rifle, Budek subsequently grabbed the back of the cable encircling Napoleon's waist that connected the two sets of shackles and twisted Solo's body at an awkward angle backwards toward himself. He then slammed a heavy boot down on the chain between the fettered man's ankle manacles, disabling the U.N.C.L.E. agent from rising. Finally he pulled up his chain-wrapped gun, forcing Napoleon's hands first over his head and then painfully behind his back. Distinctly audible in the echo-chamber-like atmosphere of the stone-walled cave was the loud pop as one of Solo's shoulders was dislocated by the rapid enforced movement of his arms.

As Napoleon grimaced in silent agony, Budek bent down so his lips were close to Solo's ear. "I don't much care for your smart mouth, Solo," he warned. "So I suggest for your own health you learn to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Your task is done here, Jahoda," Klara emphatically reminded him. "So I suggest you get about your other business."

Jahoda's eyes shot to hers. "I don't answer to you, wayward miss.

"At the moment it would seem it is you who is the wayward one. Or have you permission from Mr. Uripides to rough up Solo?"

Jahoda slackened his pull on the chain-wrapped rifle that was currently holding Napoleon's body in an uncomfortably contorted position. "The Greek with the unorthodox ideas," bitterly complained Budek. Nonetheless he slipped the coiled metal links off the long barrel of his Thrush weapon, purposely grabbing Solo's injured shoulder and tossing him sideways to the ground as he did so.

Napoleon landed with a grunt, painfully rolling off the affected shoulder. Jahoda strode to the cell door, shouted at the guard outside to open that door, and then exited the enclosure, again dragging the lab tech by the arm with him. The portal closed behind them with a loud bang followed by the distinctive metallic swooshes and clicks of numerous electronic locks slipping into place.

As the sound of feet tramping away from their cell location reverberated through the stone caves, Klara knelt beside the stricken Napoleon where he currently lay on his back on the ground. "You should not challenge Jahoda," she cautioned.

"So that is the infamous Budek Jahoda," Napoleon acknowledged his captor's standing in Thrush.

"You know of him then."

"His reputation precedes him too," conceded Napoleon. "Though, until being captured by your Thrush cohorts this time around, the two of us never had the inopportunity to meet face-to-face."

"Well now you have," concluded Klara with one of her characteristic shrugs. "And I'm sure you appreciate that his reputation is indeed well-earned."

"Oh, he is such a big man," Napoleon impugned his tormentor as he gingerly raised his upper body to a seated posture, "when wielding that gun of his against someone cripplingly confined in wrist and leg irons."

That observation brought an amused smile to Klara's lips. "You truly are incorrigible, Solo. Will you be so glib when the Council decides to have Jahoda work on you in earnest?"

"Indubitably."

"I must admit," granted Klara with another small smile, "I find it very gratifying that your reputation is also well-earned. Does anything faze you at all?"

"Watching innocents ritualistically punished kind of gets my goat."

Klara's smile faded. "I am not an innocent."

"When did I ever insinuate you were?" nonchalantly batted back Solo.

Napoleon restively shifted his right shoulder. Damn! It hurt like hell. Yet he knew he had to get his arms back over his head and once again in front of him to have any chance of repositioning the shoulder joint. Biting his lower lip to keep from crying out, Napoleon began to slowly raise his arms above his head. Understanding his intent, Klara supported his right elbow in the palm of her hand and aided him in painstakingly rotating his arms back in front of him.

"Not sure it's fully repositioned," Klara candidly mentioned once this task was done.

"But it's better," granted Napoleon, unwilling to reveal how much the injured shoulder still hurt.

"It will be better still if the strain on it is eased. Let me make a sling," she suggested as she tore off a large swatch of fabric from the slip she wore under her long flowing skirt.

“You shouldn’t surrender any of your clothing to such purpose, Klara,” Solo sagely advised. “What with the cold bothering you so much.”

“Well, you’ve certainly nothing I can use for the job,” she pooh-poohed his concern as she folded the material into a general triangular shape, “what with just wearing that jumpsuit. Leastways I still have undergarments.”

That caused Napoleon to laugh out loud. “Guess it’s obvious I don’t.”

“Fraid so, Solo,” Klara forthrightly confided.

“Do pardon my lack of proper attire then, panienska². That’s certainly no way for a gentleman to make a good first impression on one of the fair sex.”

“Przeprosiny przyjęte, choć nie mam żadnych zastrzeżeń.³”

“I know you accepted my apology,” allowed Solo with a somewhat sheepish grin, “but beyond that I’m at a loss.”

“That is enough for you to know,” Klara decided as she knotted the silk on the two narrow ends of the triangle and slipped the whole over Napoleon’s head. She balanced the main of it on his good left shoulder; then with remarkable care placed this right arm in the makeshift cloth cradle. “There: that should at least take some of the pressure off that bad shoulder.”

“It does, thank you,” Napoleon expressed his gratitude. It made the throbbing ache at least bearable and under the circumstances that was all the relief he could honestly hope for.

“Though I will admit I don’t understand why you are doing this at all. I mean, aren’t we, as you so unequivocally stated, sworn enemies?”

Klara sat back on her haunches and let her eyes hold his as she declared, “Let me explain something to you, Solo. If Jahoda came back in here right now with orders to use every means of force and torture to extract from you specific information Thrush requires, I would stand back and do nothing. Say nothing. In fact I would openly applaud him as he worked.

“Yet what he did just now,” she clarified, “well, it had no meaning, no goal. Things done to no purpose: that is what... gets my goat,” she utilized his own previous terminology to bring home the essence of her attitude.

Napoleon searched her face, unsure what to make of her personal thought processes. “You’re hard to fathom,” he told her.

“I don’t ask to be ‘fathomed’, especially not by one of U.N.C.L.E.,” she resorted to her more brusque method of communication. “Now, I think you should take the bed. You’ll need to relax that shoulder as much as possible.”

“I’m afraid I can’t agree to that,” refuted Solo. “What with the cold affecting you so much, you can’t just lie on the ground to sleep.”

“I’ll manage.”

² young lady

³ Apology accepted, though I do not have any objections.

“You’ll manage on the cot. Lumpy as it may be, at least it’s better than the rimy earthen floor in here.”

She stared at him in defiance for a long moment. “All right then, we’ll share,” she partially relented.

Napoleon blinked for a moment, his astonishment evident. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he opposed her compromise.

“Object to sharing a bed with a woman you don’t intend to screw, Solo?” she mocked in a semi-rebound of Budek’s former question, her unexpected coarse language causing Napoleon to blink in shock yet again.

“You’re hardly a woman,” he responded harshly.

“And I’m hardly inviting you to an Angelique-esque liaison,” she countered just as harshly.

Napoleon set his chin, jutting it upward rebelliously. “You take the bed: I insist on it.”

“And I insist otherwise.” Klara set her back perfectly erect in her own unswerving show of rebelliousness.

After several minutes devoted to this standoff with neither side seemingly willing to give so much as an inch, Klara sighed heavily.

“Oh look,” she forwarded, her frustration with Solo’s continued chivalrous stubbornness palpable, “simply sharing the bed so we both can get some sleep is so much better than wasting time arguing back-and-forth. And the mutual body heat will provide me added warmth.”

Napoleon couldn’t deny the logic of that point. “All right,” he reluctantly yielded. “We’ll do it your way because, as you say, it’s better than arguing.”

“Something that would serve absolutely no purpose,” reiterated Klara as she rose to her feet and dusted off her skirt. Then she extended a hand to the shackled Napoleon to aid him in getting to his feet.

Before accepting that hand, he looked up at her for another long moment.

This blond-haired, gray-eyed adolescent girl didn’t look anything like his Clara, she of the name that started with a C. Yet there was something about this Klara with a K, something on which Napoleon just couldn’t put his finger, something that made his memories of the other Clara itch with a persistent sting he thought had long since receded into a sensation no more concentrated than a pinprick.

“Likely just the fact she can be as pigheaded as Clara was sometimes,” Napoleon dismissed that suddenly penetratingly sharp stab of emotion... or at least he tried.

Act III: Dancing with the devil

Morning...

When he first heard it Tage Steffensen was sitting before the shortwave radio console receiving from Section IV in New York HQ standard mapping information on another area of the Carpathian Mountains. However he couldn't be sure exactly what it was he heard. After all, daybreak was just showing its first flush on the horizon and thus he was still rather sleepy. And what he heard was no more than a quick background hiss that was just as quickly gone. Yet he doubted it was merely standard radio interference.

That hiss lasted no more than a second. So he let the report from Section IV continue. And then there it was again: the same low-frequency hiss.

Tage cut off the mike. "Illya," he then called to his temporary partner, "come listen to this."

Obligingly Kuryakin came and stood beside the other man's chair as they both listened intently. It took a moment or two, but then the hiss came again – barely audible yet distinctive as separate from generic static.

"Our transmissions are being tapped," Illya confirmed Tage's suspicion.

Steffensen made to completely cut off contact with HQ when Illya laid a hand over his to halt this standard reaction.

The two agents were about to begin the third day of their search and still they had not located the local Thrush hideout. They suspected the entrance was somewhere in the underground cave systems, but that labyrinth was seemingly endless. Eventually, if they continued their current trial-and-error method of spelunking into every major and minor cavern that presented a reasonable possibility, they would likely locate their target. But, as Waverly had stated, time might not be on their side. What they needed was a bit of guidance to focus their efforts in the right area. And that guidance might just have quite miraculously come their way from an enemy source.

"This is only a routine transmission. Nothing classified," Kuryakin noted matter-of-factly. "Let the frequency stay unchanged for now, Tage."

"Let Thrush monitor?" Tage questioned dubiously as he again nibbled at a cuticle.

Illya nodded. "Because if they are monitoring, we can trace the source. And that might give us some coordinates to aid in targeting the satrapy location."

"The birds will catch on before we can manage that," protested Steffensen.

"Not necessarily," insinuated the Russian.

"It's risky, Illya. We've be giving them a handle on our location as well."

"Of course it is risky," conceded Illya perhaps a bit impatiently.

"And it could be a trap you know," Tage ventured. "Like the one they laid for Napoleon."

"It could," Kuryakin admitted.

Still it was a risk he was willing to take and on this mission he was, after all, the senior agent. Such decisions were his, and he wasn't going to ignore a possible chance to rescue Napoleon. He simply couldn't.

"My orders, Tage: we do this."

Biting the cuticle on his right index finger for another moment in consternation, Steffensen finally nodded his nervous acceptance of the tactic. He didn't like it, but Illya did have seniority.

Kuryakin pulled a stool up beside the other man's chair where it was set before the console. He then nodded for Tage to reactivate the mike and continue requesting general information from Section IV as he himself set about working with specialized dials and switches auxiliary to the radio unit in an attempt to track the trackers.

"It's U.N.C.L.E., isn't it?" questioned the intently listening Daiya as she sat beside her mother before the main communications console in the Thrush Czechoslovakian satrapy.

"Very likely," Madzeija kept her answer ambivalent. She really couldn't say why she did so. It was perhaps some hazy maternal instinct in her that warned her to be vague. "I can only get frequency, not specific communications. So it's difficult to confirm that it actually is U.N.C.L.E."

Fluctuating the radio oscillation of her own transmissions in a way to keep whoever might be monitoring her tracking operation from pinpointing exact coordinates, Madzeija held the trace on the discovered frequency as steady as she could. Daiya, meanwhile, watched her mother's intricate maneuvers in some frustration.

"I bet you could get specific communications if you stopped altering your own frequency like that, Mama," suggested the inexperienced twelve-year-old.

Madzeija smiled indulgently at the preteen. "What I am doing is called ghosting, moja droga. It may keep us from overhearing the actual conversations of the target, but it also keeps the target from easily finding us."

Always meticulous in her work, Madzeija carefully wrote down into a logbook the frequency she was tapping. Daiya diligently paid attention to everything her mother was doing, mentally filing it all away. Angelique might have an interest in this and if so...

"Is it a rescue party for that high-profile U.N.C.L.E. man we have imprisoned here? Napoleon Solo?" the daughter inquired pointedly.

That possibility turned over a gear in Madzeija's mind. If U.N.C.L.E. came soon enough for Solo, perhaps Klara would be spared her fate. If the Command captured her elder daughter, they would surely do something about the poison in her system. Klara might live...

"Possibly," Madzeija conceded. "Or perhaps U.N.C.L.E. still believes the groundwater incursion project active and is continuing to look for a means to stop it."

It would be easy to just misstep a hairsbreadth with the ghosting. Just stay on one wavelength long enough to become more than a phantom presence that could be estimated but not

completely placed. No one else now in this satrapy was skilled enough in communications protocol to even guess she might have performed that misstep on purpose. So she wouldn't be risking herself by doing it. And it could mean Klara might live...

Still, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Klara had cold-bloodedly killed her husband, the girl's own father. Thus had Klara demonstrated in no uncertain terms that she belonged heart-and-soul to Thrush with no emotional commitment leftover for family. Yet Madzeija's own body had bred and brought forth the girl into this world. And if that child of her womb could yet live...

Madzeija was noncommittal, conflicted. Her practical soul and her protective heart were at odds. And then she looked over at Daiya seated beside her and she knew she didn't need make any choice at all. All she had to do was let Daiya report everything to Angelique LaChien, as her younger daughter was more than wont to do.

Madzeija knew Angelique and Solo had something of a past... and a present. She had "accidentally" overheard enough radio conversations between Uripides and LaChien to be more than aware of the truth of that. And of course the salacious details of that "dangerous liaison" were bruited about the various corners of Thrush with the regularity of any such tantalizing gossip. So she could simply let the choice be entirely someone else's, and she didn't have to concern herself with the actual "how" of it at all. She didn't even have to know the whys or wherefores. All she had to do was let happen whatever would happen.

"I always log tracking frequencies, Daiya," she pointedly reminded the girl as she let the communications register fall back into place on the cord that kept the book readily connected to the side of the console. "It's a good habit to get into. Such information can prove invaluable."

As Daiya's eyes narrowed in speculation regarding the prospect of what invaluable intelligence she would have to provide Angelique this morning, Madzeija let all responsibility for anything that might occur with either Solo or her eldest daughter wash completely clean from her conscience.

He was in a room with many narrow passages, most seemingly much too constricted to accommodate even the sideways width of a normal-sized human being. Standing beside him was his Clara, she with the name starting with C. He knew as one always seems to know such realities in dreams that they had but a limited amount of time to find their way out of this enclosed area before something truly disastrous occurred. Exactly what was that something, he wasn't sure. Nonetheless, like the sword of Damocles, it hung with the persistence of impending doom within the very air around them.

One passage, the third to the left, seemed slightly wider than the others. It was this passage where Clara wanted to take a chance on finding a way out. Napoleon was on his cigarette-case communicator with Mr. Waverly, however. And the Old Man was advising his operative that, despite how it might appear to the naked eye, Section IV was sure the only way out of that room was through the second passage on the right.

"That opening is much too narrow for us to make it through," objected Clara.

"On the contrary," the Continental Chief's disembodied voice offered ready assurance. "U.N.C.L.E.'s calculations on this are precise. You will indeed make it through, and that is absolutely the only way out."

“All right, Mr. Waverly, we’ll follow those instructions,” Napoleon verbally articulated his acceptance of U.N.C.L.E.’s directive.

“You can, Napoleon,” Clara stated bluntly, “but I won’t. I don’t have your supreme faith in U.N.C.L.E.,” she further declared, “and therefore would much rather choose based on what I perceive with my own senses.”

Before Napoleon could make any argument, she strode swiftly to the third passage to the left and sidled through. The walls of the channel immediately closed in around her, hiding her completely from Napoleon’s view.

“Clara?” he called desperately. “Clara, are you out?” There was no response. “Clara, are you all right?” he cried out again.

“Take the second passage on the right, Mr. Solo,” Waverly spoke again over the communication line.

“Sir, I need to go after her. I need to know she is okay.”

“She made her choice, Mr. Solo. Having elected to ignore U.N.C.L.E.’s insight into the situation, she is no longer a concern of ours and therefore no longer a concern of yours.” ...

Napoleon awoke with a start. Momentarily disoriented by his disquieting nightmare, the pain in his dislocated right shoulder quickly cleared away any lingering mental cobwebs and served as a physical reminder regarding his current situation. He turned his head to see Klara, she with the name starting with K, wide awake and watching him.

“So even righteous men from U.N.C.L.E. suffer from bad dreams,” she taunted. “I didn’t try to wake you because I know how dangerous that can be with a trained enforcement agent.”

“Very prudent of you.”

“And what would have happened if I had woken you? Would you have strangled me with your one good arm?”

“Probably with the chain between my wrist shackles,” supplied Napoleon with annoyed nonchalance.

With abrupt swiftness then, Klara sat up. Yet her action was not quick enough for her to avoid a sudden gasping for breath.

“You’re having even more trouble breathing now, aren’t you?” Solo demanded as he too sat up upon the bed.

“It is not of concern,” readily declared Klara as she swung her legs off the side of the cot in preparation to stand.

“Oh yes,” acknowledged Napoleon with noticeable bitterness. “You have made your choice, so are no longer a concern of mine,” he then paraphrased Waverly’s words from his undeniably disturbing dream.

Somewhat dumbstruck, Klara swiveled her countenance back to his. "I was never, am not now, and will never be your concern," she reminded him matter-of-factly. "We two, Solo, have always been, are now, and will always be sworn enemies."

"You are too young to be anybody's sworn enemy," batted back Solo in frustration.

"I am not too young," bristled Klara.

"You are too damn young to even realize you are too young," countered Napoleon rather heatedly. "You imagine yourself in some way or other spectacularly capable of making your own way even in the most dangerous of circumstances, just like every other innocent."

"I am not an innocent!" protested Klara even more hotly now.

"Sorry, you just won't convince me of your complete understanding of everything you say or do, little girl."

"Why, you arrogant, sanctimonious, pretentious prig!"

"Sticks and stones may break my bones," jeered Napoleon, "but words will never hurt me. And kiddo, all you got is words."

"Leastways I don't have the presumption to think I need to save every human being from him or herself. The protective, nurturing worldview of U.N.C.L.E.," she sneered sarcastically.

"Admittedly at odds with the destructive, self-serving worldview of Thrush."

"The world is not a spiritually generous place, dream-drunk U.N.C.L.E. man.

"It's not a heartless miserly pit either, delusion-diseased Thrush girl."

"You can't win this argument you know, Mr. U.N.C.L.E. Agent," came another female voice from just beyond the perimeters of the cell.

Both Klara and Solo turned the focus of their attention from each other to the woman who stood beyond the bars carrying a food tray in her hands.

"There may be ways and means to seek goodness in this world," the woman continued in a resigned voice, "but the paths are all too often self-defeating."

"Good day, Mama," Klara greeted the older woman.

"I have food for the two of you," Madzeija more or less snubbed her daughter's greeting.

"Reduced to waitressing now?" questioned Klara in a condescending tone.

"I suggest you eat the soup while it is hot," again Madzeija ignored her daughter's pointed remark to her. "I shouldn't count on being given more than this one meal today."

With that Madzeija electronically opened a small panel at the very bottom of the cell door and slid the tray inside, closing the panel immediately after the tray cleared the access point.

Since Klara made no move to do so, Napoleon shuffled forward, then bent and took the tray awkwardly within his chained hands, further encumbered by his sling-bound right arm. "Thank you," he, with one of his winning smiles, nonetheless readily expressed his gratitude to the woman.

In a gesture eerily similar to that displayed so habitually by her daughter, Madzeija casually shrugged. "Mr. Uripides said to see you were fed, so I'm seeing that you are."

"The condemned ate a hearty breakfast," paraphrased Klara unflappably.

"Not so hearty," Madzeija amended. "Just soup and bread."

"Still appreciated," Solo assured her.

There were no utensils included with the meal. The soup was contained in shallow wooden bowls with two chunks of thick black bread laid out beside them on the tray. Napoleon set the serving platter on the only elevated surface in the cell, the mattress within the cot niche. He then lifted one of the bowls and sipped gingerly at what smelled and looked like some sort of thick mushroom soup.

"Delicious," he noted after his first mouthful. "My compliments to the chef," he added particularly as he turned another winning smile Madzeija's way.

"Zupa pieczarkowa," stated Madzeija with another casual shrug. "Simple enough to make. Eat quickly. I am to wait and take the dishware away."

"What's the problem, Mama?" queried Klara aloofly as she lifted her own vessel of soup off the tray. "Jahoda concerned our shackled and disabled U.N.C.L.E. agent might still be able to fashion some kind of weapon out of a plain wooden bowl?"

"I am not privy to Mr. Jahoda's concerns," replied Madzeija with equal aloofness. "I was told to wait and take the dishes away once the food was eaten. So that is what I will do."

"Klara is your daughter?" Napoleon ventured further dialogue with the older woman.

"The eldest of my two daughters, yes," answered Madzeija factually.

"So you have not mentally disowned me?" questioned Klara rather flippantly.

Madzeija simply shrugged. "Co to jest, jest."⁴

"Undoubtedly the essence of your entire philosophy of life, Mama," mocked the girl.

"I realize you believe there are abstract ideologies worth giving your life for," Madzeija criticized her child, "but I personally have never found it to be so."

"So Thrush for you is but a means to an end?" submitted Napoleon, very familiar with this type of self-seeking allegiance amidst the fold of those voluntarily associated with the supra-nation.

"Once upon a time, perhaps," confessed Madzeija. "Now?" Again the shrug. "Co to jest, jest."⁴

⁴ What is, is.

“You could always change what is,” suggested Napoleon.

“Are you trying to convert my mother to the ideals of U.N.C.L.E.?” demanded Klara in somewhat astonished vexation.

“Why not?” teased Solo. “I certainly couldn’t fare worse than I would in any attempt to so convert you.”

“I don’t believe in conversions in any form, Mr. Solo,” Madzeija spoke her own mind. “Such require a sense of internal conviction I simply do not possess.”

“How sad,” was Napoleon’s only comment. Then he added, “Yet your daughter seems to possess a surplus of such internal conviction, and all of it centered on the skewed global outlook of Thrush.”

“My husband and I brought up both our daughters as we thought reasonable in our current set of circumstances. Little did either of us ever suspect that pragmatic decision would in the end burn our family so badly.”

“I resent the implication that I am the result of some sort of misdirected childrearing,” Klara offered her own take on the situation. “My beliefs are based on my own understanding of the world.”

“An understanding your father and I aggressively encouraged in you,” mother noted plainly to child, “without ever truly allowing you to actively seek another viewpoint. But we have paid for our mistake. So there is no call for needless self-recriminations or penitential breast-beating. The only regret that might be is that you too must now pay for that mistake.”

“I have no qualms regarding my punishment,” Klara herself noted just as plainly, “though I still believe what I did needed to be done.”

“And therein lies the tragedy,” forwarded Madzeija, “because, moja droga, abstract philosophies – no matter how grand – are in the end cold and impersonal, with little room for true humanity in their spheres.”

“That rather depends on the philosophy,” submitted Solo certainly.

Madzeija smiled with benign indulgence at Napoleon. “You would of course think that, Mr. U.N.C.L.E. Agent, but I would submit you think just as wrongly as does my Klara.”

“You won’t convince me of that,” Napoleon informed her with just as benign a sense of indulgence.

“I’m not trying to convince you of anything, Mr. Solo,” Madzeija guaranteed him, “no more than I would try to convince Klara of anything at this stage in her life. Yet I will remind you of one undeniable truth: Life is hard, and death offers nothing by way of consolation, even if you die for a cause.”

“Take the dishware and go, Madzeija,” ordered Uripides as he made his way into the area trailed by a single rifle-toting guard and the browbeaten lab tech. “It is time for Klara’s next injection, and I don’t want to subject you to watching that take place.”

“How considerate of you,” mocked Napoleon.

“I am a considerate man, Mr. Solo,” Ciriaco recommended himself to his prisoner. “As you should appreciate since it is my express instructions that are keeping Jahoda from going to work on you with all his famed methods of intelligence extraction.”

It was Klara who placed the tray containing the empty bowls near the access point of the sliding panel and pushed it back through as that panel was again electronically opened by her mother. Madzeija bent and pulled the tray toward her; closing the panel immediately after doing so. She then lifted the serving platter and walked away from the cell block without another word.

Uripides followed Madzeija’s retreating figure with his eyes. “Damn, but that woman has one fine set of legs,” he seemingly complimented yet at the same time undoubtedly disrespected his secretary.

Klara openly grimaced at Uripides’ off-the-cuff aside. Napoleon merely smirked, realizing here was yet another man who imagined himself some sort of jaunty grand seducer of the female sex, yet who had absolutely no inkling how to actually woo a woman to his side and not just his bed. Why did it so often seem like these types of egotistical Romeo-wannabes found a home amongst the self-deluded megalomaniacs and self-absorbed powerbrokers of Thrush?

“So you are the Thrush in charge,” remarked Solo easily.

“Ciriaco Uripides, Mr. Solo,” Ciriaco introduced himself, “though certainly not at your service.”

“Thrush’s form of service is generally lousy anyway,” quipped back Napoleon without a qualm.

“I can certainly comprehend why you would feel that way, Mr. Solo,” acknowledged Uripides. “I might add, however, that those of Thrush have a similar opinion of U.N.C.L.E.’s form of service.”

“Opposing worldviews and all that,” Napoleon nonchalantly continued the banter.

“Surely so,” agreed Ciriaco, “but at least now you’ve more of an appreciation of our forms of internal justice, no?”

“I think those lousy too.”

“Don’t think murderers should pay the ultimate price?”

“She’s just sixteen years old.”

“So nothing more than an unfortunate, deluded, guileless innocent, heh?”

“There is no need to speak of me as if I am not standing right here listening to it all,” protested Klara irritably.

“Come stand here at the bars, Klara, to get your next injection,” directed Uripides indifferently. And Klara unhesitantly did exactly as she was bid, much to Solo’s obvious chagrin.

“Can’t you even offer token resistance?” queried the aggravated Napoleon as he watched the lab tech insert the needle in Klara’s arm, the white-coated man barely able to properly manipulate the syringe through the close-set bars.

Klara swiveled her countenance toward Solo. "To please you?" she questioned. "Most definitely not."

"Don't you even want to live?" Napoleon demanded of the girl.

"Everyone wants to live," she pronounced dispassionately.

"Done," the lab tech remarked as he withdrew the hypodermic from Klara's flesh and made his strategic retreat.

"Not you apparently," Napoleon acerbically muttered.

The girl ignored him as she went and sat on the ground in one corner of the cell, making a purposeful show of not seating herself beside Solo on the mattress in the cot niche, though it was the only surface raised off the cold earth in the lockup.

"So true, Mr. Solo," Uripides gleefully forwarded. "All sane people do want to live, don't they? But perhaps our young Klara is somewhat less than sane."

"We all know that dedicating yourself to Thrush is indeed a form of madness," taunted Solo.

That only brought forth a light laugh from Ciriaco. "What if I offered you a chance to save the stubborn little lady from herself?" he then tempted.

Napoleon's eyes narrowed. "Why would you do that?"

"Because Klara Jablonski is not very important to us. While you could provide us information that would be."

"From what she herself told me, one more injection is all that is required to complete your 'ultimate justice'."

"True enough, and I can't guarantee her survival. Yet, if she isn't given that last injection, there is a chance she could survive, with some treatment."

"Will you provide her that treatment?"

"Will you provide me the information I seek?"

"I don't even know what that information might be," hedged Napoleon.

With that, Ciriaco took a folded paper from his inside jacket pocket, knelt, opened the sliding panel at the base of the cell door, and propelled that paper forcefully within. The panel snapped shut with an aggressive click as the paper fluttered forward on the ground a few feet.

Rising from the cot once more, Solo shuffled forward in his shackles until the paper was directly before him. For a moment he hesitated to even lift it, to even look at it. Then, taking a deep breath, he raised the missive, opened it, and scanned it quickly.

"You know what that is?" questioned Uripides.

"As indeed do you," Napoleon minced no words. "It is a Level 1 Command communiqué."

“Continental Chief to Continental Chief,” acknowledged Ciriaco with a condescending smile. “It was intercepted over the wire exactly as you see here. Of course it is encrypted.”

“Of course,” agreed Solo.

“Yet you know what it says, don’t you, Mr. Solo?”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe, if you tell me, I’ll see to it that Klara doesn’t get that last injection and instead gets treatment for the adverse respiratory effects of the poison. Do we have a deal?”

“I’ll need time to consider,” Napoleon prevaricated.

“Of course, Mr. Solo. I am myself after all, as I have already made mention, a considerate man. Klara is to receive her next injection in six hours’ time; so that is how long you have to consider.”

With that Uripides turned away from the cell to make his departure, but then pointedly turned back. “Do remember: she is just sixteen years old,” he just as pointedly turned Solo’s own words back upon the emotionally ensnared U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Act IV: Staring the devil in the face

Afternoon...

Ciriaco Uripides sat in his office with his feet comfortably raised on his desk and his manner just as supremely comfortable with the workings of his own current game plan regarding Napoleon Solo. Budek Jahoda stood on the other side of that desk, however, in a far from satisfied mood with the other man’s strategy.

“What the hell does it benefit us,” demanded Jahoda of his current boss, “for Solo to provide information we already have?”

“We don’t actually have all the information to be gleaned from that missive. However, the primary goal here is not the information he will provide,” Ciriaco explained in a condescending tone, “but the feelings of self-doubt and internal moral conflict the simple idea of providing such will engender in him.”

“Psychological bullshit!” Budek offered his opinion of this tactic. “You think U.N.C.L.E. agents aren’t trained to the max to successfully handle such ‘feelings’?”

“Of course they are,” Uripides with some annoyance agreed, “but that training is controlled by U.N.C.L.E. ideals. If Klara Jablonski was someone other than who she is and Solo agreed to my bargain to save her, there would be no internal moral conflict in him about that action. He would be protecting an innocent as both his own conscience and the Command states he should. But to do this for Klara? That is not such an easy decision. No matter how he decides, he will mistrust the wisdom of his choice. Is he saving an innocent? Or betraying U.N.C.L.E.? Or conversely, is he abandoning an innocent and thus his own ethical code, a code reinforced by U.N.C.L.E.?”

“And this mental chess-game garners us exactly what in the end?”

“It garners us a top-level U.N.C.L.E. agent with hairline fractures in his invincible shell of altruistic scruples and organizational dedication. Surely even you understand, Budek, that such a man is much more likely to fully crack when further pressure is applied. And of course you will shortly enough be applying such further pressure via all your most infamous means of intelligence extraction.”

That soon he would be allowed to use more tried-and-true methods to squeeze information out of Napoleon Solo satisfied Jahoda for the moment. Still he found he had to inquire, “And you have faith that the Jablonska girl, young and inexperienced as she is, is the right instrument to set in motion these ethical hairline fractures within his psyche?”

Uripides smiled a very superior smile. “As you yourself noted, rather shrewdly I might add, that girl is no innocent,” he stated by way of candid answer.

Napoleon Solo sat staring sightlessly at the copy of the Level 1 U.N.C.L.E. communiqué he held within his fingers. He had been gazing unseeing at the paper this way for nearly the entire time since Uripides had left after making his unexpected offer. Solo's brain was bombarded with a repeating meteor shower of colliding thoughts. On the one hand that this dispatch revealed him as the official one-day successor to the post of Continental Chief currently held by Alexander Waverly was really not much of an issue. Napoleon suspected Thrush had already deciphered this part of the message, and in any case this likelihood had been rumored as probability for long enough that confirmation would hardly come as intriguing news to the Hierarchy. As well, if his time on this earth was nearing an end due to Thrush... well, then it really didn't matter what position Waverly or U.N.C.L.E. might have intended for him in the future, did it?

On the other hand, however, was the fact this particular communiqué was Waverly's response to the opinions of the other four Continental Chiefs regarding his choice of successor. And therein lay the rub, for each of those initial opinions were specifically addressed within the missive, giving valuable insight into Waverly's various working relationships with the other men at the helm of U.N.C.L.E. Such information could perhaps be used by Thrush to initiate discord within the ruling body of the Command, or to exploit weak links to try and break through the gates of U.N.C.L.E.'s authority structure. That kind of intelligence Napoleon couldn't provide to Thrush without considering the possible domino effect of that action on the forces of world order.

Pushing the balancing weight back-and-forth from one hand to the other was the reality of Klara Jablonska, about to be executed by Thrush at just sixteen years of age. Was it wrong to deny one so young a chance at continued life? Or was it just plain foolish to sacrifice so much to give such a chance to a self-confessed coldblooded murderess and fervently avowed devotee of everything Thrush? Was there honestly any hope of reformation in this girl? Or was he just blindly refusing to acknowledge that one's moral barometer could be set irreparably off in mere adolescence?

Solo's disquieting contemplation was interrupted by the sound of heavy wheezing coming from Klara where she still sat on the ground in one corner of the cell.

“Do come and sit on the mattress here,” Napoleon bid with authentic compassion as he dropped the paper from his fingers to a spot just behind him on the bed.

Klara glanced over at him. “Why?” she probed bluntly.

“Because the floor is too cold,” expounded Napoleon. “And because I want to ask you a question that is better asked face-to-face. Please,” he then gently entreated.

With a shrug, Klara rose up from the ground and came and sat beside Solo on the cot. “Feel better about asking your question now?” she then inquired with a sardonic edge to her voice.

Taking one of her hands in his unencumbered left one, Napoleon quizzed her quietly, “Klara, do you want me to do this?”

“Do I want you to betray U.N.C.L.E.?” Klara posed his question to her own liking. “Of course I do.”

If Solo had hoped his query would bring forth some heretofore undisplayed softness in her, he was sadly disappointed. “That isn’t exactly what I was asking,” he noted with a small deflated sigh.

“It seems to me it is,” she countered.

“Do you want to live?” he asked more directly.

“I’ve already confirmed to you that everyone wants to live.”

“Can we cease the game of verbal chess?” Solo prompted in exasperation. “Let me ask something less open to interpretation. Uripides said, if you are not given that final injection, you could survive with medical treatment—”

“He also stated straight out,” interposed Klara coolly, “that he could not guarantee my survival.”

“Let me ask my question please,” forwarded the further exasperated Napoleon.

“Go ahead and ask it then.”

“Would you honestly be provided that treatment by Thrush?”

“Would you have me read the minds and deduce the intentions of those around me? How can I know these things? I believe it safe to say I would not receive that final injection. But beyond that?” Klara shook her head slowly before further speculating. “They might put me in one of the organization’s own infirmaries and see any such treatment through to completion. Or they might do no more than whisk me away in an ambulance to a local hospital and wash their hands of me. Or they might do nothing and simply allow me to try and fight for life on my own.”

“And would you? Fight for life?” pressed Napoleon.

“I would take whatever chance was offered me. Does that satisfy you?”

“Not really,” admitted Solo. “My dilemma remains the same.”

“Ah, but you see, that dilemma is indeed your own, not mine. I will not relieve you of it. The lady or the tiger, Solo?” she ventured as she slipped her hand from his. “You must make a choice.”

Napoleon's eyes held hers. There was undeniable desolation in those hazel eyes of his. Yes, he must make a choice, but what choice? What, in this intolerable scenario, constituted right? His moral confusion on this score was irrefutable.

Resurrected from within his vault of memories rose the image of Clara with a C informing him in no uncertain terms: *"I'm saying it has to be me or U.N.C.L.E. You can't have us both."*

"I do have one boon to ask of you, however." Klara's voice startled Napoleon out of his reverie. "You have of course every reason to refuse it; still I trust you will regard it as a dying wish and therefore grant it me."

"What is it?" required Solo in stunned surprise. She was actually asking a favor of him? A man she repeatedly noted as her sworn enemy? Perhaps she was not as hardened as first appeared.

"If, as it turns out, I do receive that final injection," she projected unemotionally, "I would have you take my dying breath with a kiss."

Napoleon blinked, his astonishment all but tangibly palpable in the very air surrounding him.

"Oh do not think I harbor some secret penchant for you, Solo," she assured him with perhaps insulting candor. "Still, I fit all too well that American description of 'sweet sixteen and never been kissed'. Not really kissed anyway. And I've heard tell you are a marvelous kisser. So what better way to end life than with a first and a last that is also presumably the best?"

Napoleon was saved the necessity of a verbal response by Klara continuing without pause, "You don't have to promise me or anything so fixed in stone. I would just like you to remember it as my dying wish if the time comes."

Something inside Napoleon squeezed and tightened, depriving him of emotional air as surely as that poison was depriving Klara of physical oxygen.

"We were granted the support of a special operations squad of three dozen men from the Soviet airbase in Milovice," Mr. Waverly explained over the wire to his enforcement agent, Illya Kuryakin. "They are currently in the air on their way to your location and should arrive by helicopter within the hour."

Though Illya was somewhat surprised by the composition of the infiltration force winging its way to his command, he made no mention of this fact to the Old Man. Instead he noted rather boldly, "Realize, sir, time may not be on our side, and we've already lost a good many hours of daylight waiting on the arrival of these additional men."

If Waverly was somewhat surprised his agent should throw back at him his own former words about time possibly not being on their side, he likewise made no mention of this fact. Instead he expounded a bit didactically, "Mr. Kuryakin, there were delicate political negotiations that needed to take place. As we have no standing Command force of field operatives behind the Iron Curtain, there was no option other than to seek military assistance from the Soviet government in this endeavor."

"I understand that, sir," conceded Kuryakin, "but it must also be understood that, while we now have a much pared down area to search, we still don't have an exact location. So the sooner we can get feet on the ground to explore that area for the Thrush presence—"

"Yes, yes, quite so, Mr. Kuryakin," interjected Waverly. "Nonetheless my orders remain the same. You and Mr. Steffensen are not to make any possible infiltration attempt on your own. We have no way of knowing the full extent of the personnel strength within this particular satrapy, and having three agents rather than one within the hands of Thrush does not put us at any advantage. It only presents the possibility of the lives of you two men being used as a means of coercion against Mr. Solo."

It was during this conversation with his superior that Illya heard it quite distinctly: that low frequency background hiss. He said nothing to his chief and instead immediately began tracking the source. Whoever was doing the monitoring from Thrush's end this time was nowhere near as skilled as previously, and within no more than a minute Kuryakin had the exact coordinates of the enemy transmission.

"As you say, Mr. Waverly," Illya dutifully acknowledged the directive of the Continental Chief. But then added in a more abstruse manner, "Within the hour then we go in to get Mr. Solo out. Kuryakin signing off."

As Illya cut the transmission he called out to Steffensen, who was outside the tent bundling together weaponry and other supplies for the infiltration mission. "Tage, we have a direct hit! We move as soon as those helicopters touch earth. Or sooner, if those troops don't shake their tails and get here within the hour as promised."

Daiya knew she had made a dire mistake. Angelique had instructed her to monitor the actual content of the transmissions from what they presumed an U.N.C.L.E. field team source nearby. So she had done that, using the logged frequency her mother had noted earlier in the day.

But she wasn't her mother. She had no talent at ghosting techniques. And in any case ghosting would mean not hearing the actual dialogue of the broadcasts. She thus had stayed on the frequency too long. She knew she had. She knew with a feeling of deep internal dread that she had provided the enemy the actual coordinates of the satrapy.

She had failed in her mission. She was a discredit to the mentorship of Angelique. Soon the satrapy would be overrun with adversarial forces and it would be entirely her fault.

She would be captured and imprisoned by U.N.C.L.E. She would be shunned by those fellow Thrush captured along with her, captured because of her. She would be hated and reviled by all. And worst of all, she would be despised as a pathetic incompetent by Angelique LaChien.

She knew she couldn't face this future, if one could even label it a future. She knew she was beyond redemption within the eyes of Thrush. There was only one way out for her.

Daiya, like most young Thrush, had been taught how to use a firearm at an early age. To defend herself from U.N.C.L.E., so she was told. Now that skill would defend her from discovery as a failure and a fool. Now that skill would defend her from a prospect that was, in her imagining, more horrible than death.

There was a small semi-automatic pistol in the drawer under the communications console. It was there as a means of offense should the satrapy undergo attack.

Daiya took that gun from the drawer, knowing it was always kept fully loaded. She cocked the hammer, freeing the locking mechanism. Then raising it against her chest, over her heart, she closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The report of the lone gunshot caught the ears of Madzeija Jablonska as she passed through a nearby hall. With so few personnel in the satrapy now, no one else was close enough to really register that distinctive sound. Knowing Daiya had been at the auxiliary communications console earlier for her daily chat with Angelique, Madzeija made her way into that now mostly unused room in the stripped-down satrapy. And there she saw Daiya lying on the floor near the console, a pool of blood forming around her torso.

Sprinting toward the girl, she knelt down beside her barely breathing younger daughter. "Daiya!" she cried out.

"I did it wrong, Mama," the girl sputtered out in a faint whisper as Madzeija bent her head close to her child's lips to hear. "Angelique said to monitor the transmissions, but I didn't do it right. They will come here now."

The last breath passed from Daiya's body as recognition of what she herself had done washed over Madzeija. She had wanted to get around making any decision regarding saving the life of her elder daughter and, in fulfilling that desire, she had sacrificed that of her younger. Angelique had used her second child for her own purposes, and she had facilitated that callous use of the girl by the other woman. She, Daiya's mother. Klara's mother. There was no escaping her guilt in any of this.

Picking the handgun up from the floor where it had dropped from Daiya's hand, Madzeija placed the muzzle of the weapon in her own mouth.

Life was hard, and death offered nothing by way of consolation. Yet sometimes death was in truth all that remained.

Like her daughter had done before her, she closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The fact that the force invading the satrapy consisted of Soviet troops confused the Thrush within into thinking it some kind of raid by the Communist government in Moscow that exercised sovereign power over Czechoslovakia. Since Daiya, before her yet undiscovered suicide, had not reported on the transmissions she had overheard, that assault was not immediately associated with the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Thus Ciriaco Uripides quite readily surrendered himself to one of the Russian special-ops officers, confident that the supra-nation he served would of course facilitate his release from any form of Soviet incarceration within a matter of mere days if not hours. For the most part the scant Thrush personnel within the satrapy did the same, not even firing a weapon against the intruders.

Budek Jahoda, however, did not take to the idea of supposedly making things easy on himself by letting the Reds take him prisoner and waiting on the Thrush Hierarchy negotiating a quick release. His assignment had been to capture Napoleon Solo, maybe initially to facilitate Uripides' cockeyed scheme, but ultimately to deliver him and any U.N.C.L.E. information inside his head into the hands of the Supreme Council. And Jahoda intended to fulfill that assignment.

Let Uripides yield to unexpected adverse circumstances like a weakling; he was going to get out of this satrapy with Solo as his prisoner and his prize.

Accordingly Jahoda quickly decided on the most likely means to achieve his goal. After gathering what was required to enact his plan, he headed to the cell area where Solo and Klara Jablonska were currently being held. The infiltrators had not made it here yet as the cell block was definitely secluded from the main of the compound, and Budek took the precaution of electronically closing off the area via means of a mechanical firewall. Jahoda arrived with both his Thrush rifle and the timid lab tech in tow. The tech had gone AWOL from the Soviet Army and thus was not in any way anxious to take his chances with the Russian forces. Budek only needed to state that he expected to get clear of the premises without being detected by the Soviets to have the fearful man willing to go along with his scheme of escape with Solo in custody.

When Napoleon caught sight of Jahoda and the tech, he inquired uneasily, "It's surely not yet time for her last injection?"

"You are both coming with me," Budek informed them.

"Why?" Klara wanted to be told.

"Because I am personally delivering Solo directly into the arms of the Council," Jahoda forwarded.

"Has Mr. Uripides approved this change in plans?" Klara demanded.

"Mr. Uripides is currently in the hands of the Soviet elite force that has, for some reason, invaded this place. He surrendered willingly, as did most of the Thrush personnel here."

"I imagine because they understand Thrush will get them released one way or another," supplied Klara.

"That matters not to me," Budek declared. "My assignment was to get and keep Solo in the hands of Thrush. I'm not going to risk that mission by playing footsie with the Soviets."

"This stripped, shackled and shut-in American would prefer to take his chances with the guys waving the ol' star-and-sickle, thanks," antagonistically challenged Solo.

"I don't give a damn what you'd prefer!" spat out Jahoda. "You are Thrush's prisoner and I am going to see you stay Thrush's prisoner."

"So why is he here?" Klara interrupted the confrontation between the two as she pointed at the lab tech.

"Because, if Solo resists, I'm going to have the good doctor here administer that final injection to you right here and now."

"He's not a doctor," corrected Klara somewhat automatically, "but I do commend you, Jahoda, on a well-considered ploy."

"To which you won't accede of course," Solo presumed of Klara.

Klara turned amused eyes to Napoleon. “Why ever not? I’m Thrush first and foremost, Solo. I therefore have absolutely no qualms about being the bait to keep you trapped in Thrush’s snare.”

And with that, Napoleon knew there was no alternative. He had to go with Jahoda because... Well, just because.

Budek unlocked the door and entered the cell. With one arm supporting his gun and one hand keeping a finger ever-ready on the trigger, he with the other hand grabbed Solo by the chain suspended between his wrist manacles forcibly pulling the U.N.C.L.E. agent’s injured arm from its protective sling. The lab tech meanwhile grasped Klara’s elbow in one hand while keeping a firm grip on the filled syringe he held in the other. Napoleon resignedly shuffled forward under Budek’s rough guidance.

Before the four could clear the confines of the lockup, however, an explosion reverberated through the compound, throwing both Klara and her ‘escort’ to the ground and somewhat away from one another. Both Budek and Napoleon were knocked to their knees. In that instant of confusion, Napoleon yanked hard on the chain between his wrists, pulling Jahoda all the way down to land on his back, the Thrush’s gun flying from his grip as a result of the sudden maneuver.

Solo was on top of the big man in an instant, forcing the chain across Jahoda’s windpipe with every bit of strength he possessed. Pain seared through his dislocated shoulder from the strain of the effort as Jahoda, his breath now catching in his throat, desperately tried to pry the metal links upward with his fingers. But Solo kept up the downward pressure, with both hands pushing the chain hard toward the floor and thus tighter across Jahoda’s neck. Those hands of his were visibly shaking as the struggle continued, but a massive rush of adrenaline was giving Solo a surge of surprising power.

Footsteps were heard running toward the cell block. The separating firewall had undoubtedly been explosively breached. No one in the lockup, however, paid those footsteps any attention... except the timid lab tech. Thinking it the Soviets, the white-coated man crawled into one corner of the open-doored cell, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Suddenly Napoleon saw stars. He collapsed sideways to the floor, releasing Jahoda. It took Solo several seconds to register that Klara had hit him across the back of the head with the butt of Budek’s Thrush rifle. She now aimed that weapon at Napoleon to hold him at bay as Jahoda caught his breath. The physically and mentally stunned Napoleon stared up at her in bewilderment.

Then just as quickly the tide turned again as the rifle was pulled from Klara’s hands and she was easily tossed aside to land on her hands and knees nearby. Wheezing heavily, gasping for every breath, shaking violently from the cold, she was in no condition to further resist the interloper in this confrontation, none other than Illya Kuryakin.

“Well, he did say it was the Russians who were invading,” remarked Napoleon with a wry grin.

Meanwhile Tage Steffensen stood over Jahoda with his U.N.C.L.E. Special pointed at the man’s heart. Budek opened his hands in a gesture of capitulation. He then made as if to rise to his feet. Halfway up he attempted to take out the big Swede – a man of much his own height and build – with a heavy body blow. Tage stood steady and responded by cracking Jahoda across

the collarbone with his gun and then landing a firm punch to the Thrush's jaw, a punch so firm it knocked the other man unconscious.

"Impressive, Tage," Illya complimented his temporary partner, "but you could have simply darted him."

Tage grinned. "He's out, isn't he? With no waste of Command-exclusive ammo."

Napoleon, who now sat up, couldn't help but chuckle at that. "I'm sure Mr. Waverly will very much approve of your economy with our assets, Tage. Now though you'll have to figure out a way to get his unconscious hulk out of here."

"Not a problem," submitted Tage. He holstered his weapon, bent and – after only a modicum of grunting – lifted Jahoda's prone form over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"That too is impressive," noted Napoleon in sheer astonishment.

"Meet you topside, Illya," stated Tage as he made his way (staggering a bit now and again, it must be admitted) out of the cell bearing his captive burden.

"Let's get you out of here too, Napoleon," Illya suggested to his regular partner as he offered a hand to aid the other man in getting to his feet.

"Ready, willing and mostly able," Solo declared as he gladly accepted that helping hand. "The girl and the tech shouldn't give us too much trouble. I really don't think they'll need to be cuffed. But we will need to get Klara – the girl," he clarified who that was, "on supplemental oxygen as soon as—"

And it was then that Napoleon looked over and saw Klara lying on the floor, the now empty syringe protruding from the inner crook of one elbow.

"No!" he cried.

"I didn't do it!" the lab tech babbled. "I dropped the hypo when I heard the others coming. She did it herself. I swear it!"

Napoleon moved awkwardly toward Klara, his chained ankles still an unwelcome encumbrance. Illya grasped the lab tech by the arm and asked Napoleon before leading the Thrush away, "Med team, Napoleon?"

"I don't want my last few precious intakes of air compromised by the hovering bodies of useless medics," spoke out Klara in a hoarse and nearly breathless voice, "especially those scented by the plains of Russia. Within the protective, nurturing worldview of U.N.C.L.E., surely the dying wishes of even sworn enemies deserve respect?"

Napoleon swallowed hard, but then turned toward Illya and shook his head. Kuryakin nodded his understanding. "We'll wait outside," he granted the privacy he knew his friend desired in this moment as he led the tech out of the lockup with him.

Kneeling beside Klara's prone form, the disheartened Solo asked her, "Why?"

"I am Thrush first and foremost," she gasped out slowly, the words so faint Napoleon had to lean close to hear them. "In the end, like my father, I failed to achieve what was required of me."

"How? How did you fail?"

"Don't be naïve, Solo. Did you not yourself initially assume, as you ventured to question me, that I was put in this cell with you to some undermining purpose?"

"I don't believe that," countered Napoleon.

"What you believe or don't believe doesn't matter to me," Klara whispered. "And it doesn't change a thing."

"Co to jest, jest?"⁵ suggested Napoleon as a sudden chill ran unbidden down the entire length of his spine.

"If you would have it so," agreed Klara with a lopsided little smile.

"Or at least so you would have it," clarified Napoleon.

"You need feel no betrayal on this score, Solo. I always stated plainly that we were, are and always will be sworn enemies."

"You did indeed," conceded Solo sadly.

"So your heart is free to gloat triumphantly over my death," she submitted between gasps for oxygen to fill her rapidly collapsing lungs.

"No, it is not," Napoleon disavowed flatly.

"Perhaps then I should pity you, but I don't. Your life continues while mine ends."

Napoleon took a deep breath. This turn in events left him emotionally reeling and he didn't know how to stop the wild spinning of his heart. He looked again upon the so young face of this Klara with a K, knowing he was looking his last.

"You had another dying wish..." he reminded her tentatively.

"Ah yes," she granted with a small smile. "How like one bound by the ideals of U.N.C.L.E. to remem..."

Her voice caught in her throat and then simply faded away to nothingness. And with that signal of the impending end, Napoleon pressed his lips to hers and took her dying breath with a kiss.

One week later

NY Headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement

Illya Kuryakin entered Interrogation Room 2 and was surprised to find his partner, Napoleon Solo, seated alone at the table there, his chin resting on his hand and a far-off look in his eyes.

⁵ What is, is?

But then again perhaps it was not in the least surprising that Napoleon should choose to be here rather than in his office where he would be readily accessible to most in HQ. Solo was still restricted to desk duty while he rehabilitated his relocated right shoulder, and that meant every female hoping for a playful flirtation encounter and every male seeking a hail-fellow-well-met cock-and-bull session was seeking him out. Yet right now Napoleon Solo was not his usual amiable, sociable self. The man was definitely still very much emotionally affected by what had transpired in the Czechoslovakian satrapy. Or more specifically, by what had transpired with the Jablonska girl.

“You can’t continue brooding over what happened to her,” Illya sagely advised his friend.

“Reflecting, Illya,” corrected Napoleon, “not brooding.”

“A matter of semantics,” the more pragmatic man forwarded his opinion on that correction. “You couldn’t save her you know.”

“As things turned out, no,” agreed Napoleon. “But what if—”

“No what-ifs,” interjected Kuryakin strongly. “Things are what they are.”

That brought an odd smile indeed to Napoleon’s lips. “Co to jest, jest⁶,” he asserted in a quiet voice.

“Why are you are speaking to me in Polish?” the Russian inquired brusquely, though he more than suspected the reason.

“That was what she alleged: Klara’s mother,” clarified Solo.

“From what you’ve told me and what I read in your official report, Madzejja Jablonska possessed an extreme defeatist attitude toxic to the healthy existence of any internal code of ethics. Still, that doesn’t mean there is not some truth to the statement.”

Napoleon was silent for a long moment, and then blurted out seemingly completely out-of-context with the current flow of the conversation, “I still don’t know if I would have—”

“You wouldn’t have,” Illya spoke with absolute assurance. “There was too much at stake.”

“Yet to save an innocent surely—” Solo ruminated.

“Napoleon,” Illya interposed with just the tiniest bit of frustration evident in his vocal tone, “are you sure you aren’t seeing Klara Jablonska in your mind’s eye less as how she was and more of how you wanted her to be?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Her name was Klara,” pointed out Illya bluntly.

“Don’t even go there, tovarisch,” cautioned his friend.

The flash in Solo’s dark eyes served as further warning to Kuryakin that he not pursue this particular tack. The emotional wounds Clara Valdar had reopened in his friend’s heart just a few months before were all still too fresh, too raw.

“The Jablonska girl didn’t want saving, not by you or U.N.C.L.E. in any case,” Illya returned to a more straightforward approach. “Weren’t her final acts evidence enough of that for you?”

⁶ What is, is.

“She was sixteen, Illya,” Napoleon reminded his partner with a bit of frustration evident in his own voice. “Yes, a murderess, someone mentally twisted by Thrush into a being hard and uncompromising, but still only sixteen years old.”

“The fortunes of war, my friend, are seldom fair or even essentially reasonable.

”No more ‘reflection’,” then prompted Illya. He went to the door, automatically activating the pneumatic lock and thus opening the portal to the corridor beyond. He stood there, not letting the door close again as he spoke on. “Now go; prowl the premises for a date; relish the softness of a willing female body held close to yours; revel in the floral scent of silky hair and feminine skin; savor the sweet taste of a woman’s eager lips pressed against your own.”

“Because that is so what I do best,” Solo cynically denigrated himself.

“No, my friend,” contradicted the other man. “What you do best is risk your life for the principles you believe in. What you do best is dedicate yourself to the welfare of the world at large. What you do best is feel deeply for humanity.

“But all of us in this sometimes soul-trying profession develop our own methods for coping with the madness that so often accompanies what our consciences tell us we must do. Your method is no more worthy of deprecation and no less worthy of acceptance than any other.”

For another moment Napoleon remained seated where he was. Then he rose to his feet and went to the door his partner was continuing to keep open.

“Perhaps I’ll see if that gal in Section VI who just transferred in from Copenhagen has gotten a chance to really explore the town yet,” ‘reflected’ Napoleon as he walked through that door.

Because ultimately he knew Illya was right. There was no other way forward but to accept what was and let go of tormenting yet futile self-recriminations.

—THE END—

