

Author's Note: This story was written for **Mood-Y: Challenge 5** on **LiveJournal's Section VII** community.

The key mood is: **spooked**.

For this story, I have returned to the scenario of my trilogy: [CHIMERA](#), [IGNIS FATUUS](#) and [OF ILLUSION AND DELUSION](#). I do recommend reading those tales (in that order) to get a full grasp of the setting for this one.

As an additional note, the references to the little Norwegian albino girl and Napoleon's loss of his appendix as the result of a recent mission scenario involving her derive from the flashback sequences in my story [THE WAVES OF CHANGE AFFAIR](#). However, those background references can stand on their own in this tale.



"I saw her, in the fire, but now I hear her in music, in the wind, in the dead stillness of the night," returned the haunted man.

Charles Dickens

THREE
BY [LAH](#)

Spring 1965

“What on earth, or rather in hell, did you do?” Alexander Waverly demanded, with noticeable irritation, of the defected Thrush scientist on the other end of the phone line.

That former Thrush inventor was the supposedly dead Dr. Rimheac, a man very much alive but in secret protective custody by the Command. Custody indeed so secret, the Number 1 in Section I Northwest had kept that information from even his own Chief of Enforcement.

In what could only be described as something of a whine, the presumed dead man now sought to explain the situation with which his protector was taking issue. “I warned that the results might be unpredictable. That... Well, it’s all rather difficult to control.”

“I beg to differ, Doctor. Your initial warning was obtuse. Vague in the extreme is the only way it could be categorized.”

“Still I warned you!” responded the scientist defensively, his voice noticeably rising an octave in pique. “It wasn’t possible to be more specific because—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” conceded Waverly. “It was all too unique to accurately detail in words.”

“Thus the demonstration,” reiterated Rimheac.

“You mean the experiment,” Waverly corrected tersely. He was less than pleased what had been assumed to be merely a form of show-and-tell had metamorphosed into an unapproved trial run of something so patently perilous.

“What would you have had me do, Mr. Waverly? I was well aware your agents are trained for hazardous work, and you pledged to send your best. Thus—”

“My agents are also trained to assess inherent risk versus possible reward in all such dangerous situations,” interrupted the Continental Chief of U.N.C.L.E. Northwest. “In this scenario my best operatives were not given any such opportunity.”

“It had to be as it was,” insisted Rimheac.

“So you say,” Waverly challenged icily. “No prior information was made available that would have permitted me to knowledgably gainsay that opinion.”

“Well, it’s all over and done with now.”

“Not for my two men.”

“Yes, it’s done. I’ve managed to leverage some control,” Rimheac revealed unexpected good news.

“About time,” Waverly stated bluntly, even as he inwardly breathed a cautious sigh of relief.

Act I: Ghosts of missions past

Autumn 1966

Napoleon Solo tried unsuccessfully to suppress a yawn. Truth be told, he was exhausted. And there was no excusable reason for that as he was currently on a fortnight of desk duty after a run-in with another Thrush mad scientist that had in the end cost him his appendix. Thus he could not claim that any hectic assignment was interfering with his regular patterns of sleep as he was for the nonce mired in naught but the more boring part of the CEA job: paperwork.

Yet, if he was honest with himself, he had to admit there was indeed cause for his undeniable exhaustion: the nightmares.

It was not unusual for a Section II enforcement agent to suffer from an occasional bout of bad dreams and sleeplessness due to something that had happened during a mission scenario. They were all only human after all, and some of the things they witnessed and endured would drive the sleep from the eyes of the very Sandman. Yet again if Napoleon was completely honest with himself, he also had to admit the nightmares preoccupying him of late were of an entirely different variety and thus infinitely more disturbing.

For in his chilling night visions, she was always there: the lonely young girl with the sad, golden eyes. He hadn't consciously thought of her in over a year. Not since that strange incident in the spring of last year when he had slashed his hands and arms breaking through a window in a Thrush prison cell. At least that was what supposedly happened. His personal recall of the episode was... well, hazy at best.

Anyway that was the very last time she had come into his mind at all: the forlorn little girl with the woe-filled golden eyes. Until recently, that is, when she had started to constantly invade his nightmares. And now she inhabited not just his sleeping hours. Even waking he sensed her... everywhere.

His most recent Command mission had indeed involved a rather strange young albino girl who was part and parcel of an unfathomable Thrush experiment. But that child had been five or six at most, and the girl of his nightmares was more like twelve or thirteen: a juvenile on the cusp of adolescence.

Both children were haunting, no question. Both seemingly victims in Thrush's never-ending quest for world dominance. Yet the golden-eyed girl was different: in the main because he wasn't sure she really even existed. She was there in his mind like a memory, and yet... Surely she was nothing more than a hallucination generated by the electrical shock he had received in Dr. Rimheac's lab two years before? Anyhow that was his first recollection of her... if it was actually a recollection.

Napoleon rubbed his forehead, somehow hoping the gesture would relieve the ache in his very brain. He knew he likely should discuss these particular nightmares with a professional of some sort, but he had a Section II's natural loathing of shrinks. It was all fine and good for such medically trained individuals to hear and assess, confidently assuming they understood the mental shadows that plagued an enforcement agent. Yet the truth simply was that they could never really understand. They had never been in the field; they had never experienced the real-life terrors such operatives faced on a seemingly regular basis. Thus they were, in the most fundamental sense, clueless.

Blissfully intruding upon Solo's uneasy ruminations, the pneumatic door to his office slid aside, revealing the person of his partner, Illya Kuryakin, newly returned from a lone assignment.

"Glad to see my not-quite-smiling face, Napoleon?" teased the other man with a small half-grin.

"Glad to see you back in one piece from Australia," conceded Napoleon as he indicated with a casual hand gesture for his partner to take a seat in one of chairs set before his desk.

"It was a rather tame mission honestly," conceded Illya in turn.

"Which is why I still don't understand that I couldn't be released to join you."

"Napoleon, you only recently had your gut sliced open without benefit of anesthesia while a madman removed a perfectly viable organ from your body. Mr. Waverly was right to sideline you for a bit."

"I'm fine." Napoleon used Illya's standard line with just as much nonchalance as the Russian usually did.

Kuryakin cocked his head and assessed his friend. "Are you, Napoleon?" he queried pointedly. "You do look rather peaked for someone who has been on desk duty more than a week."

Solo gave the other man a smile, but it was irrefutably a rather wan one. "Just bored," he hedged.

Illya was quiet for a few moments. Then he ventured, "I will admit paperwork is boring and therefore rather enervating, but I get the feeling it's something more than that."

"It's nothing." Napoleon attempted to dismiss the matter. "Nightmares. You know the deal. Sometimes they can be rather intense."

Illya's expression changed, became somewhat distracted. "Yes, I know the deal."

Now it was Napoleon who silently assessed his partner. "You've been having them too, haven't you?" he finally asked.

"We all have them from time to time." Illya made his own attempt at dismissing the issue.

Napoleon shook his head. "Not like this. Has she been invading your dreams too? The girl with golden eyes?"

Kuryakin uncomfortably shifted his body position in the chair. Yet it was truly not a physical discomfort that assailed him. "She never existed, Napoleon," he stated firmly, almost as if he would convince himself as much as Solo.

"She doesn't need to have actually existed to be part of our nightmares, Illya."

"We recently completed a very stressful assignment," Kuryakin endeavored to rationalize. "During that very stressful assignment we came in contact with an unusual young girl who, under the influence of Thrush, could be perceived as evil—"

“She wasn’t evil,” interrupted Solo. “She was used. She didn’t understand half of what she was doing.”

“We don’t agree on this, Napoleon, and we never will.” Illya was well aware his partner had a form of sympathetic empathy for the Norwegian albino girl. Kuryakin, however, had a less romanticized view and, from personal experience during the Great Patriotic War, knew that children weren’t always innocents. “Be that as it may; it is perhaps only natural that she recall to mind that incident in Rimheac’s lab where we thought to have encountered another seemingly Thrush-victimized child.”

“I wish I could just conveniently tag it like that, Illya, as a perfectly natural mental correlation. But...” Napoleon sighed as he ran a hand through his dark hair, though whether in frustration or confusion Illya couldn’t say.

“It’s not just the dreams... nightmares...” He subsequently revealed. “I see her eyes in the glow of an incandescent light; I feel her presence whenever I’m alone; I hear her voice in the softest whistling of the wind.”

“How can you know it is her voice when she never spoke?” Illya chose to focus on a logical caveat.

“How can you know she never spoke if she didn’t exist except in our minds?” submitted Napoleon in turn.

“In the manifestations,” Illya tried to backtrack, “her lips never moved.”

“But we heard her voice in our heads nonetheless, didn’t we?” pressed Napoleon.

Kuryakin released an exasperated sigh. “Yes,” he acknowledged, albeit reluctantly.

“I never understood what we experienced in Rimheac’s lab.” Solo expressed his dissatisfaction with the supposed facts of that previous event.

“There was an electrical short that caused a complete blackout of the facility and an arc of sufficient magnitude to knock us both unconscious,” declared Kuryakin sensibly.

“That is all we actually remember,” pointed out Napoleon more intuitively. “I think there was more that happened that we don’t remember... except as supposed hallucinations.” Solo now eyed his obviously discomfited partner. “And so do you.”

“This is all pointless speculation,” determined an exasperated Illya.

“It isn’t pointless if it rids me... us,” he then corrected with another assessing look at his partner, “of the nightmares. Of our fixation with this... illusion... or whatever she is.”

“Delusion,” proposed Illya, “for we are sadly deluded to account her in any way real.”

“We are sadly deluded if we do not pursue what further information we can,” steadfastly attested Solo. “We owe ourselves that much leeway, Illya,” he pressured persuasively. “We owe ourselves that peace of mind.”

Reluctantly, after a rather long moment of pause, Kuryakin nodded his agreement.

Despite his initial acquiescence to the idea, Ilya remained unsure whether acceding to Napoleon's resolve regarding further pursuit of whatever might have (but more than likely didn't) happen in Rimheac's lab two years before was a wise decision or not. It was all over and done after all. And Rimheac himself was dead; so there could be no clarification of any sort from the source. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that it would all lead back to the same dead-end it had at the time.

Still, he had to admit his own nightmares were of late as beset by the image of the golden-eyed girl as apparently were his partner's. That the same imaginary manifestation had simultaneously invaded both their subconscious minds was profoundly perturbing and palpably eerie.

Their actual nightmares, from what little Solo had willingly revealed of his, did not seem to be at all the same, though they were all rooted in unsettling happenings from their past lives. Yet into the mix of those often reality-stretched and macabrely exaggerated memories had come the golden-eyed girl: a central figure and yet not. An inserted presence of which one could not help but be viscerally aware.

She stood like a sentinel on the outskirts of every shattering reflection. She said nothing in the dreams themselves; both of them agreed on that. Napoleon though insisted he heard her voice elsewhere: in the wind, in music, in any form of ringing whether it was the insistent chime of a telephone, the intrusive peal of an alarm clock or the boisterous clang of a church bell.

For himself Ilya could not say he had experienced the same phenomena. Or at least he couldn't say for certain. Instinctively his more analytical side fought against accepting any such unscientific notions. But now, as he forced himself to ponder on it, he realized the undeniable truth there existed the distinct possibility he had indeed sensed the same. And that possibility left him even more disquieted and definitely uneasy in his mind.

So perhaps a bit of investigation, just to allay those mental distresses, was indeed the sensible solution.

"The mission report for THE RIMHEAC/CHIMERA AFFAIR isn't part of Central Records, Napoleon," Ilya informed his friend three hours later after an initial forage in the U.N.C.L.E. archives.

"And I managed to glean from Dr. Pirelli's very pretty and rather sassy assistant that the psychological evaluations we underwent after those incidents last spring – when we couldn't recall the exact causes of several injuries we'd suffered? – are no longer part of the good doctor's medical records," Napoleon informed his partner in turn.

"That might not be related," stubbornly suggested the pragmatic Russian.

"Yet we both mentioned the Rimheac mission to Pirelli during those interviews, didn't we?" insistently forwarded the intuitive American.

"Yes," Ilya reluctantly conceded.

“Then my gut tells me it’s related.”

Illya let out a huge sigh. As little as he liked to acknowledge it, Napoleon’s hunches turned out to be spot-on nearly all of the time. It was a rare occasion when his friend’s perceptual instincts failed him. “So what then do we do next?” Kuryakin instead pressed rather than questioning the reliability of Solo’s inherent sixth sense.

“Well, my guess is, if those reports continue to exist at all, the one place to find them would be in the Old Man’s private files.”

“Napoleon, we can’t!” protested an emphatic Illya.

“Why the hell not? We are spies, aren’t we?” stressed Napoleon in turn.

“We are talking about the confidential files of Alexander Waverly, the Continental Chief of U.N.C.L.E. Northwest.” Kuryakin reminded the other man pointedly.

“We are also talking about our potential sanity,” batted back Solo just as pointedly. “Look Illya,” he then softened his stance, “we don’t intend to use anything we find against U.N.C.L.E. or Waverly or the Queen of England, for crissake. All we are after are answers to assure our own peace of mind. We are entitled to that.”

“And I don’t disagree with that in theory,” Illya allowed. “However, in reality we would be doing something highly debatable with regard to the tenets of our service with the Command. Less you forget, we are bound by rules we agreed to by contract.”

“If you don’t want to be part of this, tovarisch,” suggested Solo, “I’ll understand. Still, with you or without you, I am going to do this. Frankly, I need to know. I need to halt the nightmares. I need to cease seeing, hearing and sensing that golden-eyed girl everywhere and in everything. And just as frankly, I won’t be of any further use to U.N.C.L.E. if I can’t somehow free myself from this haunting.”

“Now you’re bringing ghosts into the equation?”

“Why not?” Napoleon badgered. “Oh not the boogie, floating-down-staircases and disappearing-through-walls archetype, to be sure. But ghosts in a very real sense nonetheless: mental specters of missions past.”

Illya was silent for a long time, a time long enough for even Napoleon to wonder what thoughts were going through his friend’s head. What moral scales was the Russian utilizing to weigh the positives and negatives of what Solo was proposing?

“You don’t have fingers light enough to pull this off without me.” Kuryakin finally voiced his acceptance of the plan in an acerbic manner very much in character.

Napoleon broke out in a patented, teeth-flashing, eye-crinkling smile. “Is that an offer of assistance, I’m hearing?” he queried teasingly.

“For someone who manages to catch the sound of hidden voices in the wind, your auditory processes leave much to be desired,” grumped Illya, again very much in character. “Yes, that was an offer of assistance.”

Napoleon clapped his partner companionably on the back. "We'll do it right, Illya; never fear. Once we have some credible intel to go on, we'll confront Mr. Waverly in person. I'm not hankering to become a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"I think all the female personnel here in HQ would disagree about the wolf part," gibed Kuryakin.

"But it's you who owns a shearling overcoat, I.K.," Solo good-naturedly gibed right back.

Act II: We are spies

"Do you enjoy sitting in the big chair, Napoleon?" asked Heather McNabb as she set a tray holding several tall glasses and a pitcher of iced coffee on Mr. Waverly's round desk-cum-conference table. Around that table currently sat Solo in Waverly's chair, Illya Kuryakin as the stand-in head of Section II, and the Section V Security Chief Jason Corinth.

"For the nonce only on the rare occasion, Heather my sweet," Napoleon responded conversationally to McNabb's question. "My heart is still in field work."

Heather nodded her understanding.

"That's true of Section IIs till the day they die, isn't it?" Corinth inserted something of an unintentionally callous outsider's opinion.

"While getting shot at, tortured, chased and otherwise harassed by dangerous foes does have its challenging moments, we Section IIs are indeed a stubborn breed." Illya made his somewhat snarky contribution to the casual exchange.

At that Heather could not suppress a smile. "No question about that. Have a good meeting, fellas. Let me know if you need me to take any notes." She then sashayed out of room, Napoleon taking admiring note of her backside as she exited.

The meeting commenced as scheduled with the three men all enjoying a cooling glass of the iced coffee on this Indian-summerlike autumn day. It was indeed rather a routine gathering, with Corinth detailing to Napoleon various security protocols that would be in place for his personal protection while he served as Waverly's proxy. Once that order of business was concluded, Corinth rose and took his leave after offering Solo a hearty handshake.

"We likely don't have much time." Illya summarily focused his partner's attention on the task next at hand.

Napoleon nodded. "Right. Can you get a clear fingerprint off Jason's glass?"

"Checking," stated Illya simply. He had already pulled on a pair of latex gloves to handle the object in question. "It was rather fortuitous that Mr. Waverly wound up having a meeting in the Geneva office with the new head of U.N.C.L.E. Northeast," he mentioned offhandedly as he dusted the glass for the needed print."

"Yes, wasn't it?" returned Napoleon with cool nonchalance.

His partner's vocal tone caused Kuryakin to quirk an eyebrow in the other man's direction. "You had something to do with that, didn't you?"

“Moi?” protested Solo in mock surprise.

“Tu,” rejoined Illya bluntly. “Napoleon, others may be sufficiently deluded to imagine your much-touted luck some form of cosmic intervention, but I’ve known you at least long enough to realize in the main you make your own luck.”

“Ratted out by my own partner,” commented Napoleon with a huge pseudo-sigh.

“So how did you manage it?” Illya wanted to know. “Getting Mr. Waverly on a plane to Geneva?”

Napoleon shrugged. “I might have put a bug in someone’s ear about beefed-up security in the reopened Geneva HQ being a subject that deserved face-to-face dialogue between the Continental Chief of Northeast and the CC unofficially his superior.”

Illya couldn’t help gawking. “Harry Beldon took advice from you?” he inquired with unconcealed incredulity.

Beldon had been in the position as CC of U.N.C.L.E. Northeast for less than a year, promoted shortly after the bee infiltration in the Geneva headquarters in January had resulted in the death of Carlo Farenti. It was not exactly a secret that Beldon was less enamored of Waverly’s ‘golden boy’, Napoleon Solo, than were the other top members of Command administration.

“Would never happen,” agreed Solo as he watched Kuryakin take the impression of one of the prints on the glass he held and transfer it onto what could only be described as a wax finger.

“It couldn’t have been Gerald Strothers either,” surmised Illya regarding Solo’s counterpart CEA in the Northeast region. “He is so jealous of you, he is lucky his eyes don’t glow green when you are so much as mentioned in passing to him.”

Again Napoleon shrugged. “Beldon does have an assistant,” he hinted.

“Helga Deniken?” Illya again gawked at his friend.

Napoleon put up a hand to forestall the other man’s likely conclusion. “I hardly know the lady.”

“But you used the legendary Solo charm on her nonetheless,” ragged Kuryakin uncompromisingly. “Amazing how you can successfully employ mere words spoken into a communicator to seduce the ladies of U.N.C.L.E.”

“Hey, you yourself said it, partner: A man has to make his own luck. And speaking of luck, how is that little apparatus of yours working out?”

“We’ll soon see. I do appreciate that you ordered iced coffee that needed to be served in glasses rather than hot coffee that would have been served in mugs. Getting an impression from a cup handle would have been all but impossible.”

“The unseasonal warm weather is something for which I can’t take even minimal credit,” returned Napoleon. “So I guess sometimes the Solo luck really is due to cosmic intervention.”

Illya took a deep breath as he finished putting the final touches on the wax digit. “There. Done,” he announced.

“So we’re ready to make like spies?” prompted Napoleon.

Illya nodded. “As ready as we can be. Maneuver us some more luck, cosmic or otherwise, my friend. Else the best result we can anticipate from this spyly foray is permanent assignment in Antarctica.”

“You know how I hate the cold,” remarked Napoleon with extraordinary ease considering the dicey situation.

The security lock on the Continental Chief’s set of three confidential filing drawers utilized a method of fingerprint recognition. However, without the print of Alexander Waverly himself, it required the prints of two other approved individuals to gain access. The other four Continental Chiefs were all approved of course. As an emergency fallback measure, Solo as Chief of Enforcement here in Northwest and Jason Corinth as Chief of Northwest Security were also both approved.

Moving his chair on its casters somewhat away from the table to provide Kuryakin easier access to the file cabinet behind him, Solo held his breath as his partner-in-this-crime slipped the wax digit onto his own index finger, stood up and moved toward the set of drawers.

“Ready, Napoleon?” Illya questioned unnecessarily. The other man nodded. “Then together,” he instructed.

Illya placed his fake finger down on the lock plate in time with Napoleon placing his own index finger on the plate. An audible click signaled that the cabinet was now unlocked.

“Too easy,” suggested Illya uncomfortably.

“Don’t look a gift-horse in the mouth, tovarisch,” suggested Napoleon in turn even as he was sliding open the top drawer of the cabinet and carefully rummaging through its contents. “Let’s pray the files aren’t stored by codenames or otherwise encrypted,” the CEA voiced his hope.

“I don’t pray,” came Illya’s expected retort as he slid open the bottom drawer and knelt to facilitate delving inside. “No need for prayer in this case anyway,” he then confirmed triumphantly as he held up a yellow U.N.C.L.E. folder clearly labelled THE RIMHEAC/CHIMERA AFFAIR.

Grabbing the file from his partner, Napoleon directed, “See if there’s anything more while I snapshot this.”

That said, Solo placed the report on the table, pulled out a small pocket camera expertly concealed in a cigarette lighter, and began systematically turning the pages of the report and quickly taking a photograph of each page.

“Nothing more I can find,” Illya informed Napoleon after several more minutes of searching through the contents of the drawers.

“Dr. Pirelli’s case studies not there?” prompted Solo.

“Seems not,” stated Kuryakin.

“Makes you wonder what were the good doctor’s recorded observations after the conclusion of those sessions, doesn’t it?”

“I’m too nervous to wonder about anything at the moment, Napoleon. This is a risk we likely shouldn’t have taken.”

“Too late for regrets, tovarisch,” Napoleon determined as he snapped a picture of the final page of the report. “All over and done,” he finalized as he closed the file and slipped it back in its original place in the cabinet.

With a decisive push, Solo closed the last open drawer and the two men had the satisfaction of hearing the distinctive click that indicated the security lock was again back in force.

Handing the camera-lighter to Kuryakin, Napoleon then admonished, “You’ll have to use resources outside of HQ to get these developed.”

“I am well aware of that fact,” the Russian retorted brusquely.

“Bit testy, aren’t we?” the American queried with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t know how I let you talk me into this.” Illya candidly confessed his continued misgivings.

“The legendary Solo charm of course,” Napoleon gibed, perhaps a good deal less candidly.

The two simple words written in Alexander Waverly’s own hand stared back at him uncompromisingly from the developed photo of the last page of the report.

Demonstration complete

Yet supposedly nothing at all had happened in Rimheac’s lab, nothing more than an electrical short that had caused him and Illya to black out. What then did those words, annotated to the very end of the documentation on THE RIMHEAC/CHIMERA AFFAIR, signify? What had comprised the demonstration? How had it been completed? What the hell had really occurred that day in the Thrush scientist’s lab two years ago?

Napoleon was deeply ensconced in his own thoughts, entrenched far enough that he didn’t even hear his partner use a spare key to open the door to his apartment and subsequently disarm the security system as he entered the internal hallway.

Kuryakin rearmed that system as necessary and made his way first to the kitchen where he placed on one of the counters several large paper shopping bags he was toting. “Napoleon?” Illya questioned softly as he finally made his way into the living room where Solo was seated on the sofa, hunched over the coffee table, concentrating intently on the photo laying on that polished surface.

“What does it mean, Illya?” Napoleon queried hypothetically of his friend, for he certainly was aware Kuryakin had no further clue in this regard than he had himself.

“I truly don’t know,” Illya nonetheless responded, somehow sensing this was confirmation Solo needed to hear.

At last Napoleon looked up at the other man, a man as affected by this distressing incongruity as he was himself. Yet somehow Napoleon couldn't acknowledge that. He felt absolutely alone.

"Why are you here?" Solo asked of his faithful Sancho. "I know you blame me for what we did in Waverly's office. I know you'd rather disassociate yourself from me and my ideas. I know you'd prefer not to be here with me now."

Flabbergasted, all Illya could think to do was sit down on the sofa beside his friend and place a companionable hand on his shoulder. "I would never do that, Napoleon," the blond man tried reassuring his dark-haired counterpart. "I would never, even in the innermost secret reaches of my mind, ever harbor any such thoughts."

Napoleon's eyes, when he gazed at the other man, were as sorrowful as Illya had ever seen them: desolate, lonely. Yet, even seeing his friend so devastated, while wondering what he could do to comfort Solo, Illya couldn't help but inappropriately ruminate on how extremely hungry he himself was.

"I've brought dinner," Kuryakin therefore advised rather brightly. "Chinese takeout. Cartons and cartons of it. You should eat something."

"I don't want anything," disputed this isolated Napoleon.

"Surely you must want something to eat," Illya forwarded perhaps a bit desperately himself. "I am absolutely ravenous!" And truthfully he could not hide nor did he even attempt to disguise the look of sheer famishment on his face.

Solo stared at Kuryakin with steady eyes before finally blinking. "Illya?" he began.

"What?" prompted the Russian somewhat testily. Truth be told, he wanted to do nothing so much as tear into the cartons and cartons of Chinese food he had brought with him. Alleviating the American's unaccustomed emotional bleakness at this moment seemed little more than an ill-timed nuisance.

"I want to ask you something... something personal," Napoleon ventured on.

"Whatever," conceded Illya, also uncustomarily. "As long as we can eat after I've answered."

"When we first encountered the golden-eyed girl—"

"Hallucinated her," corrected Illya didactically.

"Whatever." Napoleon now was the one conceding. "I need to know... what you felt. What came into your mind?"

Now it was Illya who stared at his friend with steady eyes for a long moment before finally blinking. "I felt hungry. I sensed she was hungry. I remembered..."

"Yes?" pressed Napoleon.

Illya's discomfit was evident but he spoke the words at last. "I remember nearly starving as a child, and stealing a turnip top from a pack of wild dogs that was all that remained of what the dogs had previously stolen from me."

Napoleon nodded slowly and then sighed shakily. "I felt lonely. I sensed she was lonely. I remembered Clara leaving me, telling me she couldn't be a part of my life if that life included U.N.C.L.E."

A long bridge of silence stretched between the two men. And then suddenly, as if overtaken with a violent ague, Illya began to shake uncontrollably.

Jostled just as violently out of his current sense of secluded melancholy, Solo wrapped his arms around his friend's torso, trying unsuccessfully to stabilize his quaking frame.

"Illya, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know!" shouted out Kuryakin in a hoarse and definitely frightened voice. "I have to eat, Napoleon! Please, I have to eat!"

"Oh God!" exclaimed the now wholly terrified Solo. "It's her! It's her!"

"She doesn't exist!" The wildly trembling Kuryakin tried again to convince himself.

"She does!" insisted Solo. "I don't know how or why or as what, but she does exist! And somehow she is bonded to us!"

Act III: I am three

Three days later Alexander Waverly returned from Switzerland and Napoleon Solo was released for active field duty. He and his partner, Illya Kuryakin, were immediately sent out on assignment. There had not been another incident similar to what had occurred in Solo's apartment; yet was it silently understood between the two men that she was constantly with them: the golden-eyed girl.

Neither "spy" had any idea in what further direction to take their investigation. For the moment they were stymied and instead tried to put it completely out of their minds as they resumed the usual hectic pace of lives as Command enforcement agents. But such purposeful amnesia was not to be. In the midst of their mission, the golden-eyed girl very much made her presence known.

A typical Thrush satrapy had to be taken out. Yet it became apparent, as Solo and Kuryakin got the lay of the land during their initial exploratory forays, that many of the denizens were naught but trainees newly turned to the cause of Thrush. Most of these were little more than teenagers. Thus both Napoleon and Illya thought it possible, more than possible, that some of these adolescents could be brought round from the supra-nation's tenets and safely re-integrated into normal society.

With this idea in mind, the two agents decided on a method to proceed. As was standard practice, Kuryakin set explosive charges to take down the facility. However he used less than he normally might for such a task, pinpointing those pyrotechnics where they would do the most harm to operations rather than personnel. He also would not actually arm the charges until it

became evident most of the youngsters were clear of the immediate concussion range. Solo, from an undercover vantage point, replaced the cartridge in his Walther with one filled with sleep darts. This he did in anticipation of tranquilizing at least some of the trainees as a shift of them emerged from the building for daily drill at the outdoor shooting gallery within the compound.

Suddenly a decidedly huge blast rocked the building, sending the trainees in the rifle range scattering in every direction. And then shots were fired into that crowd of terrified trainees, dropping many in their tracks.

“You weren’t supposed to blow the compound yet!” Napoleon yelled at Illya as the other man came rushing into proximity of Solo’s hiding spot. “Nor use so much damn explosive!”

“I didn’t! And I never armed any of the charges anyhow!” responded Illya in an anxious rush.

“Accident then?” questioned Solo as he aimed another shot.

“Maybe, but what the hell are **you** doing?” Kuryakin demanded in his turn.

“Knocking out the Thrush junior trainees for later pickup by an U.N.C.L.E. cleanup team,” answered Napoleon in some agitation. “What the hell do you think?”

“Napoleon, look at that field! Those downed bodies are bleeding! That’s not sleep darts you’re firing!”

In a state of quiet panic, Napoleon flipped open the chamber of his Special and glanced at the housed cartridge. It contained sleep darts, no question. Such ammunition magazines were always clearly marked. Jamming the cartridge back into the locked-and-loaded position, he cocked the pistol and shot one round into the ground. Picking up the spent round out of the dirt, he examined it quickly and then extended it toward Illya for the other man to assess.

Illya’s jaw clenched. “Sleep dart,” he vocalized what they both clearly saw held within Solo’s fingers.

“I had been thinking... feeling,” corrected Napoleon, “right before I shot... how abysmally alone those youngsters had to consider themselves in order to be seduced by the ‘we are the combined elite’ philosophy of Thrush. “

Illya’s face grayed. “Right before the explosion,” he began his own confession, “I had been thinking... feeling... intensely hungry for revenge against Thrush for so often compromising the young.”

“We have a problem, Illya,” Napoleon put into words what they both realized only too well.

Kuryakin nodded solemnly. “That we certainly do.”

Fortunately the mission did not turn out to be quite the disaster it could have been. Facets of each man’s personality had overridden the sheer dynamism of whomever or whatever was the golden-eyed girl. Napoleon’s inherent optimism kept him from truly considering death as a merciful means to ultimately end the loneliness of those adolescent Thrush trainees. Thus, as incongruous as it seemed, none of his shots proved a kill shot. In Illya’s case, his innate

pragmatism kept the armed charge range of the concussive blast from including what turned out to be the shared dormitory rooms of the trainees, sparing the off-shifts of youths housed within. After all, if one wanted revenge against an enemy for compromising the young, you didn't in the end compromise them yourself.

Thus perhaps it could indeed be argued that luck was a cosmic force, in terms at least of what goes around tends to come around. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin had again and again risked their lives to protect innocents. Thus in the end the universal order would not permit them to be the inadvertent cause of the careless destruction of the lives of any such innocents.

Still, both agents were worried and knew they should be so. They didn't know how far extended the reach of the golden-eyed girl. And they really didn't even know if the things they sensed from her were purposely meditated or purely instinctual. After all, one could not blame a wolf for attacking any viable prey as doing so was only part of its nature for survival. But you could undoubtedly blame a higher-thinking being for assaulting vulnerable targets at will to no seeming purpose..

With all this heavy on their minds, the two men entered the office of their superior shortly after their return to New York. Illya was of the stated opinion that they had to confront Mr. Waverly immediately, but he was at a loss how best to do this. Napoleon advised him to follow his lead and let him initiate that confrontation, as he was more than sure how it needed to be done.

"I was surprised at the sloppiness evidenced in your latest mission scenario, gentlemen," the Continental Chief commenced the interview once his two operatives had seated themselves before his round desk-cum-conference table.

"Yes sir." Napoleon didn't argue or protest this point. Meanwhile Illya waited anxiously for his colleague to do what must be done.

"Fortunately it turned out all right in the end just the same," conceded the Old Man. "All those teenagers are recovering from your thoughtless gunshot wounds, Mr. Solo. None of them were life-threatening. And few personnel, Mr. Kuryakin, were actually killed in the concussive blast of your precipitately set explosion, and none of the trainees.

"So let us table discussion of that matter for the moment," Waverly continued without real pause. "Instead what I wish to discuss currently is another matter entirely. A matter of internal security and also of some sensitivity."

"Yes sir." Napoleon responded simply once more, his eyes never wavering from those of the Continental Chief.

"You know what this is about, Mr. Solo?" put forth the Number 1 in Section I.

"Yes sir." The Number 1 in Section II again answered just those two words.

Illya was at a loss. What was going on here? Something in the manner of these two men was all but giving him gooseflesh, he was so apprehensive of what might happen next. But he trusted Napoleon... with his life ...with his career ...with his very sanity.

"You used your privileges as my second to gain access to my private files," stated Mr. Waverly at last straight to the point.

"I did, sir," came Napoleon's admittance to the clandestine activity in question.

"You knew there would be a record of that access?" further prompted Waverly.

"I did, sir," Napoleon repeated his previous answer.

Illya's head was reeling. There was some kind of logged evidence of their trespass into the Continental Chief's confidential files? Perhaps he should have realized that would be the case; perhaps he should at least have suspected as much and voiced that suspicion. Yet he hadn't; thoughtlessly he hadn't. He had trusted in Napoleon as he had learned in countless less-than-ideal circumstances to do.

"And you talked Mr. Kuryakin into aiding you in this endeavor?"

"No sir," stated Napoleon unequivocally. "As Chief of Enforcement, I **ordered** Mr. Kuryakin's cooperation," he emphasized strongly.

Illya was flabbergasted. Was Napoleon aiming on taking all the blame upon himself? Was that how he intended to approach this? "Sir, if I may—" the Russian attempted to staunch this particular flow of the conversation.

"All in good time," Waverly interrupted his Number 2 in Section II, though his glance never left the dark-haired man seated beside Kuryakin. "For the present I am questioning my Chief of Enforcement." Then he returned his full attention to Napoleon. "Why the devil would you do something like this, Mr. Solo?" he demanded to be told.

"That proof of access you mention, sir, also provides details as to exactly what file was retrieved," Napoleon pointed out, his gaze still steady on that of Waverly. "Thus you already know the answer to your own question."

There was a long moment of standoff between the two men, causing Illya to hold his breath in sheer dread. Napoleon's methods of achieving a desired end had surprised him in the past to be sure, but this was something he had never even imagined his friend doing. The challenge to the Northwest Continental Chief by his Chief of Enforcement was clear in every rigid line of both their bodies and the surprisingly even planes of their faces.

Finally Waverly sighed. The impasse was broken and it was the Continental Chief who blinked.

"I suppose you are entitled to an explanation, gentlemen."

"Who or what is Dr. Rimheac's chimera, sir?" Illya now realized he was free to make his own inquiries.

Waverly shook his head in frustration. "Who knows? I'm not sure even Dr. Rimheac does himself."

"Does?" Illya caught the current nature of the verb. "Dr. Rimheac is still alive?"

Waverly nodded wearily. "We have him in hiding."

"Sir, why were we told he was dead?" Napoleon posed his own query.

“An official determination after consideration of all available options at the time, Mr. Solo. His... Well... His supposed demonstration turned out to be something I never approved. And thus I didn’t believe he could be trusted in any way. It seemed advisable he should be kept close and away from all contact with others, particularly the two of you.”

“Why particularly the two of us?” Ilya sought for the logic in that statement.

“Because you were the subjects of his experiment, what he euphemistically called his demonstration.” Waverly provided the sought-after logic.

“We were guinea pigs?” asked Napoleon incredulously.

“Never with my assent, gentlemen,” Waverly assured them. “But yes, I think categorizing it in such a way is not inaccurate.”

“And it didn’t seem that this might be of especial concern to us?” Ilya now asked just as incredulously.

“There seemed to be no tangible adverse effects,” Waverly hedged. “So I decided to let the issue rest. Then last year, when you both in your post-trauma sessions mentioned the Rimheac Affair, I contacted the doctor for more cohesive data. He informed me at that time that he had gained some form of control over the... creature or phenomenon or whatever it is, and thus assured me it was all over and done.”

“Sir, it’s definitely not all over and done.” Napoleon apprised his superior without prologue.

Alexander Waverly looked from one to the other of his two best agents, scanning their faces with a practiced gaze. The shadows under their eyes told him in terms far more eloquent than any words the unvarnished reality of that appraisal.

“I suppose you’ll want to talk directly with Rimheac?” the Continental Chief solicited of his subordinates.

Both men seated across the table mutely nodded their mutual desire in that regard.

“As soon as possible, sir,” requested Solo.

“He’s been ill some months.” Waverly let them in on the latest status of the former Thrush scientist. “Taken to his bed. Perhaps in such case any control he was able to leverage has now slipped. I will make the necessary arrangements, gentlemen. That is all.”

Dismissed from the inner sanctum, Solo and Kuryakin made their way through the pneumatic door to the hall beyond.

“You had my heart beating like a kettle-drum in there, Napoleon.” Ilya enlightened his friend once that automatic door has closed behind their exits. “I can’t believe you took the risk of standing up to Mr. Waverly like that.”

Napoleon shrugged. “I couldn’t and wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t firmly believed in my heart the Old Man felt guilty about some aspect of the Rimheac affair. And if he in truth hadn’t felt any such guilt, he would never have blinked.”

The Command safe house where Solo and Kuryakin were sent to meet with Dr. Rimheac three days later was something entirely new in such facilities.

"It's all electronically serviced and monitored," Napoleon informed his partner. "No physical presence by U.N.C.L.E. personnel at all."

"I didn't realize we had anything like this," marveled Illya as they passed through the several layers of security features required to enter the inner building.

"It's one of a kind," Solo continued. "As far as I knew, it wasn't even completely set up for operation as of yet."

"Seems its readiness is something else Mr. Waverly didn't share with you as CEA."

Napoleon frowned. "Seems so," he agreed.

Once at last inside the locked-down structure, the two agents walked into a cozily appointed, combination sitting room and library. On a sideboard resided a silver coffee and tea service, the pleasant aroma from the filled pots warmly perfuming the air. The room itself lacked the comfort of good light though, as all the drapes were closed tight against the intrusion of the morning sun with no artificial sources utilized to compensate.

"Please help yourselves to refreshment, gentlemen," spoke the voice of Rimheac. "I'm still a bit too weak to play proper host, I'm afraid."

It was a moment before either Solo or Kuryakin could discern the figure of Rimheac, seated in an overstuffed chair and bundled with myriad blankets, in the very darkest corner of the room.

"Mr. Waverly told us you had been ill." Napoleon casually initiated what all the participants realized was going to be a very awkward conversation.

"Unto death I ride the winds of change," Rimheac responded poetically and somewhat cryptically.

Illya passed Napoleon a wary glance. Napoleon nodded almost imperceptibly, wordlessly acknowledging that he shared his partner's apprehension.

"You wish knowledge of the chimera, yes, gentlemen?" It was Rimheac who plunged headlong into the heart of the matter.

"We do," Illya stated equally straight-to-the-point.

"We need such knowledge, Doctor," Napoleon supplemented Illya's answer, "for our continued peace of mind."

Rimheac made a dismissive gesture with his hands. "What you need and what I can provide are likely two different things. The best intelligence I can offer regarding the chimera is simply that it is."

"It is what?" pressed Kuryakin determinedly.

And it was then it happened: Rimheac's voice changed, became the higher-pitched tonal range of an adolescent female.

"Three," spoke that voice. "I am three."

A cold shiver spiked its way down the spines of both agents. It was Napoleon who saw it first: the image of the golden-eyed girl superimposed over that of Rimheac, her eyes glowing brightly in the darkened room. Just a hairsbreadth shy of simultaneity, the image rose before the gaze of his partner as well.

"Why?" It was Illya who first regained his senses sufficiently to ask.

A simple shrug. "I am always three," came the unsatisfactory response.

"And you've somehow bonded to us? And to Rimheac?" Napoleon now recovered his own stunned senses enough to pose the next pertinent question. "To be three?"

"You are you and he is he and I am three," was the circuitous answer of the chimera.

"And if we do not desire to be part of this sometime symbiosis?" Illya demanded bluntly.

"I am three," the chimera repeated. "I am always three, else I am not."

The image of the golden-eyed girl faded, leaving only the sight of a somewhat crumpled Rimheac in his chair.

"And now, gentlemen," the doctor stated a bit breathlessly but once more in his own voice, "you know as much as I."

Act IV: ...else I am not

"In mythology, Napoleon," Illya offhandedly observed another three days later as the two were reading over Rimheac's often cryptic turned-over case notes, "the chimera was comprised of three animals: lion, goat and dragon."

"Homer in the Iliad included the creature also possessing a tail with the head of a snake," supplemented Napoleon.

"I think we can go with the more widely circulated description in this circumstance," Illya decided, "since the chimera in question described herself as being three."

"But the golden-eyed girl isn't really that kind of mythical monster, Illya."

"Frankly, we don't know what she is." Illya gainsaid his friend's inference. "Though referencing her as she does likewise correspond to mythology since the chimera of legend was always female. From the very sparse documentation with which Rimheac supplied us concerning his various moments of conscious contact with the creature, the description of her as a chimera does indeed seem apropos."

"The chimera of legend was destroyed with a block of lead that Bellerophon, from the back of Pegasus, thrust into her throat with a spear and that her own fiery breath subsequently melted

to inhibit her breathing.” Napoleon, who was himself certainly no stranger to the classics, detailed knowledgeably.

Illya nodded. “Exactly so.”

“Pardon my denseness here, tovarisch, but I don’t see how that helps us with our predicament.”

“Rimheac hypothesizes in his transcripts that the bonding practice of the chimera is related to her central nervous system in some way,” Illya began his explanation.

“And?” prompted Solo.

“Lead can adversely affect the central nervous system, Napoleon. That’s what lead poisoning does in the main.”

“Illya, that could kill her.”

Again Illya nodded. “It could.”

“I’m not okay with that.” Napoleon emphasized with a slight shake of his head.

“We have to be free of the bonding.’ Kuryakin took the logical approach. “Our choices on that score might well be extremely limited.”

Napoleon released an unhappy sigh. “Why do you think she bonded with us? Simple convenience?”

Now it was Illya who shook his head. “I doubt it. Let me propose something to you, Napoleon, something that is very much speculation.”

Napoleon could not suppress a small smirk. “Not like we have much else to go on here.”

“The chimera of legend had three heads: one of a lion, one of a goat, and one of a dragon.”

“We’ve already established that. You perceive that as relevant because?” questioned Solo with the quirk of an eyebrow.

“Think on what the golden-eyed girl invokes in us to manifest. Hunger in me: the earthy quality of the goat that will eat seemingly anything to survive. Loneliness in you: the ethereal quality of the dragon that seemingly makes it always separate from all around it.”

“And in Rimheac?” queried Napoleon with a little squint of consideration.

“The fiery quality of the prideful lion displaying itself as a prime predator always in control of its surroundings.”

“As the scientist in him sought to control the chimera herself and yet failed?”

“That would seem the most likely scenario,” Illya verified.

“So the bonding was brought about by the unfortunate coincidence that we two were the agents Mr. Waverly sent to Rimheac’s lab?”

“That’s my guess,” acknowledged Illya. “And that, at the moment when the chimera realized the resources she required to be three were readily available to her, Rimheac lost any vestige of control and the bonding took place completely independent of him.”

“As a total surprise to him,” conceded Solo.

“I would warrant it was. He likely thought it no more than an unlikely possibility. And then in an instant it was done and he had no ability to make it undone.”

Napoleon massaged his temples, trying desperately to rid himself of this headache that was the reality of a non-fantasy form of chimera.

“Your surmise about the lead though, Illya,” he then forwarded, “we don’t know that this being eats or drinks or any of that. We don’t know if she is in any way physical.”

“We use purified lead and disburse it into the air when she appears.”

“You’re assuming she breathes as we do.”

Illya shrugged. “As you already noted, Napoleon, we have nothing to go on here but speculation.”

Napoleon stared at his friend and partner for a long while before he made quiet mention, “I don’t want to kill her, tovarisch.”

“Honestly neither do I, my friend,” Illya enlightened him steadily.

“I have to agree that there is little choice in this instance, gentlemen,” Alexander Waverly gave his approval of the plan in question.

“It’s still not a move I am comfortable with, sir.” Napoleon placed his misgivings squarely on the table.

“I understand of course, Mr. Solo,” conceded the Continental Chief with a nod. “But we are dealing with complete unknowns here. And Dr. Rimheac refuses to be of much assistance.”

“He’ll have to be in the room when we do this, sir,” Illya advised his superior, “as he appears to be one of the three.”

Again Waverly nodded. “Also understood, Mr. Kuryakin. I’m sure we can arrange to have the good doctor sufficiently sedated in order to insure he doesn’t provide a hindrance to what must be done.”

“The doctor, Napoleon and I will all require protective gear.” Illya detailed particular necessities of the proposal.

“Something to which the golden-eyed girl won’t have access,” commented Napoleon rather glumly.

Waverly’s gaze focused on his Chief of Enforcement. “The situation isn’t ideal, Mr. Solo. Of that there is little question. But after what you and Mr. Kuryakin reported to me regarding the

interference of this... being during your last mission, we cannot take the risk of her further intervention in any of your future actions.”

“I do know that, sir,” conceded Napoleon. “It’s just she always seems so...”

“Lonely, Napoleon? Hungry?” prompted Illya meaningfully.

“Sad,” finalized Solo rather sadly himself.

“Destruction is always a sad business,” Kuryakin analyzed coolly. “And a chimera is always a creature of destruction.”

“What we are seeking ourselves to destroy in this case, gentlemen,” Waverly pointedly reminded his operatives, “is nothing more than her bond with you.”

“Yet sir, she herself told us: she is always three, else she is not,” came Napoleon’s plainspoken conclusion.

There was a small enclosed porch in Rimheac’s safe house that was to be used for the procedure to hopefully break the bonding of the chimera with her three. As Solo and Kuryakin were suiting up as necessary for that attempt, Illya put forth almost apologetically to his partner, “I know you don’t really want to do this. I know it is seemingly more difficult for you than for me. I don’t really understand why, but I do recognize it is so. It’s just that being robbed of my mental independence, Napoleon: that absolutely terrifies me.”

Napoleon bit his lip, ruminating on how difficult it likely was for Illya to confess this, even to him. “And I know we have to do this, Illya. Yet I just can’t pretend it doesn’t make me feel somehow like a cold-blooded murderer. Not like someone killing out of necessity for a greater good.

“You see,” he furthered, willing himself to match his partner’s difficult confession with one equally as difficult for himself, “when I heard her voice that first time, in my head, what I heard her say was ‘Save me’.”

Kuryakin cocked his head at the other man. “Funny, what I heard her say that first time was ‘Destroy me’.”

Napoleon blinked. “Are we being manipulated even now, Illya?”

Illya shook his head in bafflement. “Who can say, my friend? Who can say?”

Napoleon took a deep breath. “Let’s get this over with,” he determined steadfastly.

Illya silently nodded his agreement. He pulled on his visored hood and spoke into its internally housed microphone, a means of communication to HQ as well as amplification of his voice to make it heard through the headgear by those in the immediate vicinity. “We’re set on this end, Control.”

“Understood, Mr. Kuryakin,” an U.N.C.L.E. tech responded. “I do want to remind you fellas that purified lead particles can prove quite combustible.”

“Understood,” acknowledged Illya in turn. “We are all wearing our flame retardant HAZMAT gear. Dr. Rimheac is already inside. I saw him properly outfitted once the tranquilizers had kicked in. As soon as Mr. Solo masks up, we will enter the enclosure.”

“I will remotely activate the lockdown immediately upon receipt of the auto-signal from your monitoring equipment showing you both likewise within the target area,” finalized the tech.”

With proper protocol established, Illya again nodded to his partner, who subsequently donned his own visored hood. Both men then made their way into the enclosed porch. Behind their entrance the door locked with a somewhat unnaturally loud and perhaps ominous audible click.

The shutters on the numerous floor-to-ceiling windows of the porch were all tightly closed. Thus again the atmosphere in which sat a definitely mellowed Dr. Rimheac was extremely dark. Wearing the same type of protective gear as were Napoleon and Illya, he was seated quietly in his chair, the tranquilizers having done their work to leave him somewhat somnolent.

“How did they manage to get the tranquilizers in him without benefit of an on-site physician?” quietly questioned Napoleon of Illya, his voice somewhat distorted by the microphone housed in the appropriate position within the hood. “Sleep dart?”

Illya shook his head. “In his food, so to produce a more gradually sustained effect, as I understand. And I was advised by Section VIII that the lead particles have been stored in a separate tank of the internal air filtration system. Bit of a risk to be sure,” Kuryakin furthered.

“Not any more so than this whole operation, tovarisch,” Solo pointedly reminded his partner. Then addressing Rimheac directly, Napoleon stated in a louder voice, “We wish to make sentient contact with the golden-eyed girl, Doctor.”

“Do you think these measures will offer you protection?” queried Rimheac with a careless gesture indicating their dress as well as his own. “They will be of no more use against the chimera than was the special safety glass of the enclosure in my lab.”

“Still, when facing an unknown,” expounded Illya, “it is always the wisest course to take what precautions one can.”

“We will take our chances,” Solo informed Rimheac. “Can you summon her?” he further inquired.

Wearily Rimheac nodded. “That little I can still do,” he admitted. “Though I warn you that I cannot any longer waylay her other desires.”

“Then summon her,” commanded Kuryakin firmly.

Rimheac submissively closed his eyes and within no more than an instant she was there, manifesting before them all. Her huge golden-eyes seemingly more intensely sad than ever.

“I am here,” came her unspeaking declaration.

“You must detach from us,” demanded Illya in a no-nonsense tone.

“I am three. I am always three,” was her only response.

"We would not be part of the three." Napoleon employed a gentler tone with her.

"I am three, else I am not," she persisted with one-note obduracy.

"We cannot be of your three," Illya stated unequivocally.

"We are beings who can only be one, who must always be only one." Napoleon attempted to explain. "It frustrates and bewilders us to be other than singularly ourselves."

"I am three," she repeated, her lips never so much as moving. "I am always three."

"She doesn't understand, Illya," forwarded Napoleon.

"Or doesn't wish to," suggested Illya in turn. "In any case, we can't use reason here, Napoleon. If she is without higher intelligence, we will never get through to her. Or if her need to stay bonded as three doesn't permit for any mitigating circumstances, we will never convince her of the logic or right of those circumstances. We have no choice."

Napoleon bit his lip behind the cover of his visor, but nodded his reluctant agreement.

"Operation Bellerophon: go." Illya made the necessary declaration into his visor's microphone. Immediately a flurry of purified lead particles were released into the air around them, the motes initially darker than the dark itself. In the next moment, those particles blazed out hotly and briefly, tiny sparks blinking like stars in a midnight sky.

"No!" screamed out Rimheac suddenly, no longer mellow. "No, no, no! You cannot do this!"

With both hands the doctor yanked off his protective headgear.

"Emergency pull-out!" yelled Napoleon into the mike in his own visor as he and Illya both leapt toward Rimheac. In the end the two agents wrestled the surprisingly resistant man to the floor, dragging the defected Thrush scientist bodily from the room. The door was remotely unlocked briefly, permitting their exits, even as a vacuum system started suctioning the very air from the porch enclosure. Immediately as their monitors signaled them all clear of the target area, the door was remotely relocked behind them.

As for the golden-eyed girl, she had vanished... but how or why or even if permanently, neither Solo nor Kuryakin had any clue.

Three Weeks Later

Neither Napoleon Solo nor Illya Kuryakin were plagued by any further nightmares invaded by the presence of the golden-eyed girl. The two men underwent an exhaustive battery of physical, psychiatric and psychological tests and were subsequently declared perfectly fit for active duty, much to not only their own relief but also that of Alexander Waverly. Dr. Rimheac did suffer some adverse effects from his short exposure to the airborne lead particles when he had removed his protective hood. However in the end those effects seemed more a boon than a hardship.

"He doesn't remember anything about the chimera, gentlemen," Mr. Waverly informed his two best operatives. "He has been questioned and undergone psychological evaluation multiple

times with the same result. He doesn't recall anything at all of that particular. He does recall defecting from Thrush because of some experimental project, but he recollects no details at all of what that was and seems perfectly content not to recollect any such details."

"He believes U.N.C.L.E. purposely wiped those memories?" surmised Illya.

Waverly nodded. "He does, and seems as well to think such amnesia a necessary facet of his defection."

"So he holds us responsible but doesn't attach any blame?" queried Napoleon with incredulity.

"Exactly so, Mr. Solo. He firmly believes he was previously in great danger and that the Command has done only what was inherently necessary to assure his present and future safety."

"A convenient turn of the screw for us to be sure," noted Solo, still with some astonishment.

"Sometimes good fortune does indeed seem a welcome turn of cosmic intervention," acknowledged the Continental Chief easily.

That seemingly offhand remark resulted in an askance look passing between the other two men in the room; yet neither verbally remarked anything at all in that regard.

"I do have more news for you both," Waverly continued. "You know of the Thrush lab that was taken down by some of our operatives last week?"

Both men nodded. It was an assignment they might have been part of, but for the fact the medical personnel had strongly suggested the Number 1 in Section I wait upon the full results of the testing on his Number 1 and Number 2 in Section II before again sending them out on missions.

"Some unexpected notations written by a fellow supra-national scientist were found on file there relating to Rimheac's experiments."

"Really?" questioned Kuryakin with obvious interest as he reflexively leaned forward in his chair.

"All somewhat cryptic, I'm afraid," admitted the Chief. "However the suggestion within that material is that Rimheac's supposed chimera was actually some sort of internal manifestation of his own nervous system."

"Internal manifestation?" queried Napoleon with a blink. "You mean like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scenario?"

"Exactly so," pronounced Waverly. "We can't know what he did to exactly trigger the phenomenon of course, but it all seems to make more sense now, doesn't it? The disappearance of the chimera coinciding with Rimheac's accidental exposure to the purified lead and his subsequent memory loss?"

"Perhaps," hedged Napoleon. He just wasn't convinced.

"Self-experimentation is always dangerous, but we know Thrush doesn't halt its scientific personnel from taking such risks, if that self-experimentation could prove to their advantage,"

put in Illya. Contrary to Solo's reaction, this hypothesis made everything perfectly clear to him. "Sir, has the possibility been considered that this whole chimera episode, including Dr. Rimheac's initial defection, was all just an elaborate Thrush scheme to somehow discredit U.N.C.L.E.?" he posed a further thought.

"Indeed that possibility has been considered and is accounted a very viable one," Waverly enlightened them, "postulating from what you two men experienced during your last mission. That whole affair could have been disastrous in the extreme and thus might have tarnished the Command's reputation rather badly. However in the end Thrush wound up shooting themselves in the foot, so to speak, as Rimheac likely had less control of the phenomenon than they had hoped. And now he is our creature instead of theirs."

Kuryakin nodded his accord with this view of the situation. Solo remained silent and skeptical.

"You are dismissed, gentlemen." The CC, having shared what new information was available on the chimera incident, now concluded the briefing. "I suggest you both enjoy the rest of your day of semi-leisure as I expect to have a new assignment for you as soon as tomorrow morning."

As the two men were walking the hall after leaving the inner sanctum of the Number 1 in Section I, Napoleon inquired straightforwardly of his friend, "Do you really think that is all she was, Illya? The golden-eyed girl? Just some alter-ego Rimheac conjured from a test-tube?"

Illya shrugged. "Does it truly matter, Napoleon? Either way, it appears she exists no more, if she ever existed at all."

"The explosives you didn't arm, Illya. The sleep-darts I shot that acted like bullets," Napoleon reminded his partner.

"If she was some delusion foisted upon our minds, likely we were as well deluded regarding the nature of our own actions."

"Meaning you actually did arm the charges and I actually did use real bullets?" prodded Solo dubiously.

Illya stopped up short to stand face-to-face with his partner. "Napoleon, the line between what is perceived and what actually is can often be blurred. How many times has Thrush used drugs or brain-washings or other nefarious methods in attempts to blur that line for U.N.C.L.E. field agents?"

"Too many times to count," granted Napoleon.

"Take comfort then in the reality that they failed yet again. And, as Waverly suggested, accept this bit of good fortune as but a welcome turn of cosmic intervention."

Solo sighed heavily. "You're right, tovarisch. Of course you're right."

"And remember, my friend," Kuryakin furthered as he placed a companionable hand on Solo's elbow, "you are never truly alone. Our friendship bonds us much more strongly than the supposed magical intervention of any would-be chimera."

Now Napoleon smiled his most brilliant smile. “And on that note, how ‘bout I treat you to lunch? I mean I wouldn’t want you to ever go hungry either.”

Illya gave the other man his best patented half-smile. “I thought you would never get around to suggesting it.”

Solo laughed and good-naturedly slapped his partner on the back.

The two men continued down the gunmetal gray corridor of the New York Headquarters for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement as the soft whirr of the air circulation system seemed to whisper “You are always one.” If, however, that gentle hiss offered any improbable formation of actual words, neither man heard it as such.

—THE END—

