

THE WAVES OF CHANGE AFFAIR (PART 1) BY [LAH](#)

December 21st, 2007

New York City, somewhere in the East 40s

In the early darkness of the winter night on this street in New York City she stood completely invisible to all others. To those who passed and to those who paused, to everyone and anyone, but most importantly to her erstwhile handlers. They couldn't see her and they weren't monitoring her because that would have been foolish. It might have inhibited the effects of the suit and, even if it didn't, if all went as planned such a device would have set off the suspicion of the others. Such was not to be risked. So while she wore the suit, she was free of them, free of everything. This freedom though was fleeting. To pursue anything more she would need to use all her abilities: all she had been taught and all she had been given.

This first step would be the most difficult. It had never really been tested, couldn't be. For this her training was useless, worse: counterproductive. Thus for the moment decades of training had to be ignored. If it worked, she would be as a somnambulist during this beginning phase, and she would not remember what her body had revealed. Only her body would know.

Such a reality made her anxious. The second phase was more to her liking. Then she would be able to use all her persevered training. Then her mind would take over. But for now, she must begin at the beginning. There was no other place to start. She had to trust, as she always had, in the one who had given her this means.

She closed her eyes and attempted to let go completely, let go of all concentration, let go of this surest grounding of herself. Her mind had to drift; she knew that. She had to disengage and let her body react, let her nerves stretch and amplify in their attempt to touch another being who was as of yet utterly unaware of her. Was she in close enough proximity? She didn't know. After all, it had never been tested, couldn't be. The only test would be in this finality.

She modulated her breathing, her last fully conscious act, and then the sensations came: fast and furious.

A tangential tingling traveled throughout every nerve in the body of a man seated in the upper floor of an office high above the street. It sizzled downward from his neck to his spine to his arms to his legs and finally to his feet. Caught off-guard by the incredibly strange sensation, he tensed for a brief moment.

In the murky street below the woman's nerves prickled and quivered as sweat poured from every square inch of skin where it lay fully hidden beneath the suit. She began to walk, her feet reacting to the pavement as if grasping hold of a living thing. Neural pathways fired at muscles, sense memory taking over, guiding. Where she went she was never to mentally know. Only her body knew with a knowledge that came from beyond itself, from the body of another.

Her body arrived at the required destination without hesitation, without doubt and without anxiety. The necessary procedures were performed and her body continued its forward movement until the last barrier was breached. She came back to herself in a dense blackness and waited to continue onto the second phase.

The tingling in the man's body subsided and he proceeded to forget all about it, categorizing it – especially on this day – as but an unwelcome manifestation of his increasing years.

Act I: The more things change, the more they stay the same...

Napoleon Solo glanced up from the double-file-folder-sized monitor built flat into the surface of his huge, round, revolving desk to the trimly elegant, expensive, 24-carat gold watch on his wrist. 7:20 pm. He needed to wrap up for the day and head home to change for the party. He had vowed faithfully that he wouldn't be late for this affair.

Absently the man smiled to himself as he ran a hand through his mostly silver hair with its dark streaks that stood out as souvenirs from a bold past. This affair. Strange choice of terminology his head had provided. Back in his heyday as a field operative, he had personally dealt with world-shattering "affairs", as they were politely referenced in espionage circles, on a day-to-day basis. He had plotted, reacted, attacked, infiltrated, killed and come close to being killed himself over-and-over again on the frontlines of a war against the enemies of stability and general world order. Back in the bygone days of the Cold War, he and his Russian partner had been an unusual pairing that had served as a potent force against... Evil? Was that the right word to call it? Or could it all be described more accurately if somewhat more poetically with a phrase like "the lack of caring for humanity as a compelling force in its own right"?

The smartly dressed and still handsome elderly man rubbed the fingers of one hand over his forehead. Seventy-five. He was three-quarters of a century old this day. And still he was fighting the same battle. Only now he fought it from behind a desk as Number 1 in Section I, Policy and Operations, of the North American division in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

An unexpected musing slid into his brain regarding the inane fact that he liked his desk. It was a relic from the past that had been neatly fitted with all the necessities of modernity. Somewhat like himself, he mused further. Then more serious thoughts interjected themselves again.

With the merest flicker of disgust registering in his hazel-brown eyes, Solo mentally acknowledged that Evil, since that was the shorter description of all that insidiously attempted to bring chaos and mayhem into the human condition, never seemed in short supply. It waxed and waned, waxed and waned continually over the years, over the decades, yet somehow always remained.

Napoleon sighed heavily. He had held his current position at U.N.C.L.E. for twenty-two years. Like as not, unless his health failed him, he could and would hold it for perhaps another decade. U.N.C.L.E. didn't believe in enforced retirement for its Section I chiefs, as long as they functioned ably in the job. And Solo functioned more than ably. His personal sphere of power and influence had virtually eclipsed even that of Alexander Waverly, the legendary founder of the organization and wily old fox who had headed U.N.C.L.E. during Napoleon's own salad days as the Chief Enforcement Agent in Section II, Operations and Enforcement.

Solo liked his job, though it was definitely wearing on the spirit. He wholeheartedly believed in the ironically peaceful (considering the often non-peaceful means needed to assure it) directive of U.N.C.L.E. He believed in the ideals of good and right and justice and all of that. Still, he did sometimes wish that all the Evil in the world would just go away, fade into the background of time and become not even much of a memory.

At that precise moment in his intellectual wanderings, the pneumatic door connecting his office to the full inner dynamics of U.N.C.L.E. slid open. Solo broke his attention from his internal reverie as the open portal heralded the arrival of Illya Kuryakin, his one-time partner, always friend, and now the current North American division's Number 1 in Section III, Enforcement & Intelligence.

"You assured Trice on all the graves of every U.N.C.L.E. operative ever lost to Thrush that you would not arrive late tonight, Napoleon," the other man chastised in English accented with a European burr barely discernible as to origin any longer.

Napoleon smirked. "I do tend to make elaborate promises, don't I?" he chided himself.

"In the fine art of exaggeration, you are indeed a connoisseur," agreed Kuryakin.

Then both men smiled easily, an ease borne of years of friendship and trust. Nothing had ever broken that between them and nothing ever would.

"I notice though that you are still puttering about at the office as well, Illya," Napoleon remarked wryly. "Aren't you going to be too late to help out the little lady with all the last minute details of my birthday festivity?"

"You know I am not proficient at handling this kind of social affair," the other man brushed aside the teasing probe.

Affair... There was that word again. Seemingly innocuous, and yet...

"Trice would say I was just in the way," Illya further noted with a shrug. "And it certainly does not take me the same amount of time to get decked out in formal evening finery as it does you, Napoleon," he poked fun at his friend's fastidious sense of style.

Trice was Kuryakin's wife of two-dozen years, an even-tempered, magnificently intelligent, finely featured woman fourteen years her husband's junior. Illya's age was just less than a year shy of Napoleon's own, so Trice was not a young woman anymore either. Still, she remained understatedly attractive and, back when Illya had married her, she had been unassumingly stunning, a carefree beauty in full flush.

"Besides," continued Illya; "since I presumed you would finally be alone at this hour, I thought maybe we could talk... about Natasha."

The Kuryakin couple had not been youngsters when they had wed. As a result they had only one child, Napoleon's goddaughter aptly named Natasha in his honor.

Napoleon chuckled. "Later, Illya," he forestalled his friend, "we can argue about Natasha later."

"She is just out of Survival School, Napoleon," the other man stubbornly attempted to pursue the subject anyhow.

Solo raised one finger in warning. "Having graduated top in her class," he unnecessarily reminded his friend. "From now on, she's an Enforcement Agent, Illya," he pronounced in his most authoritative Section I, Number 1 voice, "and one with some of the best potential I've ever

encountered. I'm not going to coddle her, and honestly you know that deep down you don't want me to do that either."

"What I want is for her to live to see her twenty-fifth birthday," muttered Kuryakin discontentedly.

"Illya, I'm living to see my seventy-fifth," the other man reminded his Russian colleague. "The world is full of wonders."

Kuryakin sighed in defeat. "We will talk later about this, Napoleon," he pledged in a deadpan voice and with a steady look in his ice-blue eyes that left no doubt as to his steely determination in this particular matter.

Solo nodded. "We will. Simple promise this time, Illya; nothing elaborate." And then he smiled one of those enormous, spirit-lifting smiles of his, filling the room with a sense of warmth that spread right into the heart of the other man.

"Disarmed again by the Solo charm," thought Kuryakin ruefully to himself. *"Why has he always been able to do that so effortlessly?"*

"Go home and get ready for the party, Napoleon," Illya now verbally pressed in frustrated defeat for the moment. "Trice has been planning this forever."

Solo nodded again. "Just about on my way, Illya. One more report I have to peruse first. I'll meet you at the restaurant right on time; don't worry."

Illya nodded his wordless acquiescence and made his way out of the office, the pneumatic door sliding shut behind him with a gentle whoosh.

Becoming again absorbed in the file regarding the details of the upcoming Russian Arms Affair, as it was being discreetly referenced in all official documents, the U.N.C.L.E. chief lost all concept of time. This would be a tricky assignment requiring a half-dozen enforcement agents for the main thrust, not to mention dozens of back-up personnel. Already two agents, one in Moscow and one here in New York, were daily risking their lives as infiltrators within the dangerous world of the Russian Mafia. The operation had already taken over five months of groundwork investigation and planning, and the agents involved in the final assault were currently in the midst of receiving a full month of special indoctrination. All this was in preparation to intercept a shipment of high-tech arms from the Russian underbelly group to Thrush. It wouldn't be the first such shipment, but U.N.C.L.E. intended it to be the last. However, something about the whole setup just didn't lay right with Solo. Of course the weaponry involved went far above normal grade armaments, some of it being highly experimental and exceedingly rare, and thus of particular interest to Thrush. Still, a tugging in his gut, a feeling honed from years in the spy business, told Napoleon this was more than it seemed, though thus far there hadn't been anything to confirm that intuition of his.

The luminous dial of his watch captured Solo's attention once more. "Damn!" he exclaimed unhappily. Nearly three-quarters of an hour had passed since Illya had left him. He would indeed be late for his own birthday party.

"Well, at least it's considered more socially acceptable than being late for your own funeral," mused Napoleon aloud with a half-smirk.

Inexplicably, a shiver rustled along his spine at his own cavalier remark. Shrugging off the unexpected sensation of foreboding, Solo tapped the touch screen of the monitor, powering it off, and then brushed one hand quickly over the flat surface. A panel slid out and covered the monitor, hiding it discreetly under wood that identically matched the rest of the desk. The fittings of the integral component into the desk were so expertly concealed that, if one did not know the exact spot where this monitor hid from ready view and prying eyes, one would be hard-pressed to discover it by simple physical examination. And the monitor was not the only such electronic component well masked within the desk's construction.

Rising from his chair and casually knocking the back of one hand against an open panel in the desk that lowered the lighting in the office down to a mere infrared security glow, Napoleon walked to the room's closet and retrieved his overcoat. Tossing the well-tailored garment over one arm, he headed toward the portion of the wall that housed a secret passage leading via a doglegged maze of intricate tunnels from this office both to the underground garage via one route and to a clandestine location via another. He tilted ever so slightly to the right the setting of the star sapphire in his pinky ring, activating the hidden panel. It opened into darkness, but Solo knew his way through the maze intimately and thus required no light to guide him.

Before stepping surely into the blackness, however, Solo sought out the yellow triangle engraved with the number 11 that was pinned in its usual spot on his lapel. He had almost forgotten to remove his access badge, something he wouldn't need to traverse the tunnel maze without any trespass alarm sounding. Retinal scans situated at various intervals within the subterranean proper provided the safety precautions for passage through that private area of HQ. And no badge was actually necessary within the interior confines of the chief's office, rather only in the other rooms and open corridors of U.N.C.L.E. Napoleon and the other denizens of the multinational organization kept their badges in place inside his office as a matter of convenience, since those titanium-alloy IDs would be needed to exit again into the main hub of headquarters. However, when the chief chose his private entry through the tunnel maze as a departure point, his badge was stored in a small, well-hidden, fingerprint-lock enabled drawer under the surface of the so-much-more-than-it-seemed desk. It would be retrieved by Solo upon his return to the office, and his secretary would subsequently refresh the chemical on its yellow surface to ensure its potency for the new day's security access.

Napoleon turned back into the full expanse of the office interior, intending to unlock the drawer in question and properly deposit his badge for the night. He had not yet performed that routine action when he remembered a moment too late that Section V schooled him eternally not to leave the hidden passage accessible for even so much as an extra half-minute. Thus, with his back now to the opening, Napoleon tilted the gem setting in his ring to the left, closing the passage just as a flash of something, he couldn't say what, caught in the periphery of his vision.

He turned fully to thoroughly scan the area behind him. Nothing there. Nothing at all. Cautiously he let his eyes roam the entirety of the red-lit interior space. A shimmer of something, a faint ripple like an undulating wave of dim light, hooked his vision again. He rubbed his eyes; then squinted hard. Still nothing there.

With a shake of his head and mentally cursing the fact he might finally need more than occasional reading glasses after all these years of generally excellent eyesight, Napoleon sought out the desk to pop the lock on the specifically purposed hidden compartment under the wooden surface.

“You will open the wall panel again please, Mr. Solo,” commanded a female voice, silkily smooth and in a tone of perfect control.

Napoleon spun, but saw no one, nothing. He pressed his fingertips over the controls for the lighting, spreading the room in a bright and uncompromising flood of fluorescent illumination. Still he saw no one, nothing. Was the voice being broadcast into the room over some kind of electronic device?

“You will open the wall panel again please,” the voice repeated evenly. And this time Napoleon recognized a faint accent to the perfectly enunciated English words. Swedish? Norwegian? Definitely Scandinavian, his finely tuned ears confirmed.

“Now why would I do that?” questioned Napoleon somewhat wryly.

It was likely, though the partition was actually soundproof, that the voice was being broadcast somehow through the barrier itself. And equally as likely that the unknown entity addressing him so coolly stood just inside that blackness beyond the panel, ready to make a hair-trigger assault once provided proper opportunity.

“Because it is in your nature to take the risk so to satisfy your curiosity,” the female insisted.

Her tone remained so utterly controlled and unharried that Solo had to admit to himself he indeed found the voice unsettling to his nerves despite his own steady self-assurance.

“Have you been studying my personality then?” he queried, using his innate skill at this kind of tête-à-tête to edge cautiously toward the truth, even as the aforementioned risk-taker in him obligingly manipulated the blue stone in the ring on his left little finger once more, allowing the secret passage to slide open.

No one was in that passageway. No force rushed forward to attack him. Only the blackness of the hidden unlit maze greeted Solo’s probing eyes.

“Take the gun from the holster under your jacket and place it on the floor in the passageway please, Mr. Solo,” the voice continued its polite demands, the words lightly caressed by the Scandinavian accent.

Norwegian, Napoleon decided, the accent was Norwegian, yet very subtle, rubbed soft by years of speaking English as a main language.

Dropping his overcoat over the back of a nearby chair, Solo did as he was bid since it seemed to him no great hardship to lose possession of the gun at this precise moment. Though Napoleon prided himself on having retained his deadly accuracy as a sharpshooter, he could hardly hit an opponent he couldn’t see, an opponent who might not be anything more than a presence electronically projected here and thus ensconced safely beyond the potential aim of his Special. In any case, he had other varieties of weapons readily available upon his person and within this room, a fact he was positively sure was not unknown to his unforeseen and unseen guest.

Waves of light... Flickered wasn’t the right word. It was more as if those waves undulated for the briefest of moments, so brief a span of time that it was easy to account such merely a trick played by one’s own eyes. Solo watched in silence, forcing all thoughts to remain unexpressed

on his face, as the semi-automatic he had just placed on the floor of the passage rose up seemingly of its own volition, part of the handle sinking out of sight with the movement. And then his Special hung, muzzle pointing toward the floor, about three or so feet in the air within the expanse of the dark passage. The weapon moved off smoothly from the blackness and out to his right, hanging no more than a couple feet shy of his own grasp, should he fully extend his arm.

“Close the panel,” the voice stated evenly, for the first time not adding the perfunctory please to the order.

Napoleon pressed the gem in his pinky ring to the left once more and the panel slid silently shut. The firearm rose up to aim decidedly in his direction, and Solo heard rather than saw, since the item in question flicked out of sight exactly as the sound registered in his awareness, the safety clicked off.

“Please activate the manual lock on the main corridor door,” the voice made another request.

“There are those with access to a safety override code, you do realize,” Solo unperturbedly advised even as he triggered the locking mechanism with a touch on the open control panel imbedded flat in his desk.

“Now you will sit down please, Mr. Solo.”

The tone wasn't deadpan; it wasn't flat; it wasn't simply unvaried in level or pitch. Neither was it quintessentially emotionless, or any of those all-too-simple descriptions. It was a tone of utter self-control, yet without the unnatural limitations such normally implied. It almost made Napoleon want to physically shudder, but he instantly mastered that impulse courtesy of years of training. Showing weakness of any kind would likely be a mistake he wouldn't be given the chance to regret.

“You will sit down please,” the voice repeated patiently.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” challenged Napoleon in a casually nonchalant tone, his mind convoluting on how best at this particular junction to direct this conversation to his benefit. As he took a seat in his usual chair behind the enormous desk, Solo decided on the tack of stating the obvious. “It seems you can see me, but it's crystal-clear I can't see you.”

There was a heartbeat of silence, and then came the sound of a zipper being released followed hard upon by that of someone pulling off something likely over the head, perhaps a mask or tightly fitted hood. Blinking in disbelief, Solo stared at what appeared to all intents and purposes to be a disembodied head floating less than six feet in the air now approximately five feet or so to his right.

“And now you see as much of me as is necessary... for the moment,” spoke the mouth in that head.

The face revealed in this strange game of cat-and-mouse was that of woman likely in her forties. She had light blond hair that fluctuated between golden and silvery hues in the harsh glare of the office lights. That hair was cut in a short, layered shag that framed her face and caught Napoleon's senses off-guard with its uncanny resemblance, by both color and style, to Illya's hair in his youth. The face itself was not beautiful, far from his memories of gorgeous female

adversaries like Angelique. Still, it was a striking face: high cheekbones, unremarkable lips made more memorable by their skillful smudging with an overly pastel hue of frosted lipstick, exceedingly pale-lashed, large eyes that, Solo realized somewhat uncomfortably, were the exact same shade of hazel-brown as his own.

Napoleon Solo had to admit he had seen a lot of unexpected things in his lifetime, but he had no idea at all what to make of this current strangeness. He stared at the head, assessing what he saw. A rather ostentatious piece of jewelry the woman wore on one ear caught his full attention.

"Your earring..." he initiated.

"My earcuff, yes," corrected the woman as the glittering display of diamonds decorating almost all of her left earlobe and ear ridge momentarily winked out of Solo's sight and then rematerialized within his scan of vision.

Had she reached up to touch the object in question? Is that what caused the strange appear/disappear/reappear phenomenon?

"You find it... informative?" she quizzed evocatively, the voice never varying in its silky tone or measured pace.

"Very," admitted Solo. "It's in the form of a bird, isn't it? A thrush perhaps?" he pressed.

"Very discerning," the woman allowed.

A ripple of light undulated as the position of the "floating" U.N.C.L.E. Special shifted slightly forward, pointedly closer to Solo's face. By the position of the weapon relative to the woman's own face, Napoleon surmised that gun was actually being held in her right hand. How in the hell was she managing to keep her body invisible like that?

The semi-automatic was leveled directly and unwaveringly at the spot of his forehead just between his eyes. This was not an unusual occurrence in Solo's life certainly, but he was at a definite disadvantage here, since he would not be able to track the woman's movements except by extrapolation. He decided to extend the banter between them as he pondered possible ways to extricate himself from this untenable situation. He had several tricks at his disposal, but in all honesty he wasn't sure any of them would be even remotely effective, and more importantly even that he really was in any immediate danger.

"You intend to kill me?" he pressed her.

"I intend to make an end," the woman responded cryptically.

"By ending my life?" he pushed for complete clarification.

The woman's lips curved into a rather self-satisfied little smile.

"Endings sometimes require more than simply a death, Mr. Solo," she furthered unsatisfactorily.

"So if you don't intend on firing that pistol right at this moment," Napoleon hedged his bets on his natural instincts about people, "what do you intend to do? What do you intend I do?"

"Wait," was the only answer she provided.

“Wait for what?” ventured Napoleon.

“For the inevitable,” the woman decreed. “Sit back and relax, Mr. Solo. Your friends should notice you missing soon, yes? Then Mr. Kuryakin will try to contact you. You will not answer your phone or respond to any other form of communication. Finally he will come here to check on what has happened to you.”

“So I’m bait?” surmised Napoleon with a defiant smirk.

“In a manner of speaking,” acknowledged the woman, “but not exactly as you think. I assure you in all honesty that I have no ill designs on Mr. Kuryakin.”

“Yet on U.N.C.L.E. in general surely,” he attempted to guess her motivation by making the question not a question but rather a frank statement.

“Perhaps,” his antagonist deigned to allow some insight. “But then again perhaps not,” though that insight proved exasperatingly little. “One way or another, however, I will bring all proceedings to the anticipated end.”

The woman’s eyes held his. It was really disconcerting seeing your own eyes bore into you like that, Napoleon decided. Even more so when those dark eyes were incongruously surrounded by thick but absolutely white eyelashes (for they were indeed snowy white, he catalogued with full accuracy now) and situated beneath finely arched but equally as white eyebrows.

“So we wait,” pronounced Napoleon coolly, some almost preternatural sense telling him this wait would be well worth his patience and possibly self-endangering lack of aggressive reaction.

A new Thrush plot to ascertain and then foil. Some new battle against Evil. Well, so much for those vague, romantically tinged desires about all such things fading beyond even old memory. Ever the risk-taker, Solo acceded quickly to himself that living on the razor’s edge was in truth the only way of living he even remotely understood.

The woman nodded slowly. “We wait,” she reaffirmed.

Napoleon was late, exasperatingly late. And Illya? He was understandably furious... and just as understandably concerned, since he knew without even a shadow of doubt his partner never made any promise, whether elaborate or simple, that he did not fully intend to keep.

Kuryakin’s wife was putting on her best cool, British aristocratic ploy of not letting on how upset she was at the inconsideration of her husband’s best friend, joking to all the waiting guests about “powerful men and their equally as powerful penchant for saving the world leading them into forgetting all manners.” Inwardly, however, Illya knew Trice was patently hurt. She always tried so hard to make it apparent she did not begrudge Illya his unusually close camaraderie with Napoleon. She always tried so hard to make it apparent to Napoleon she accounted him as much a part of her life as her husband’s. That she accepted Solo occupied a place in her husband’s heart she never could. She wanted it well understood she was satisfied with her own place in Illya’s life and love. That she wasn’t jealous or threatened or resentful or wounded by the more-than-brothers/less-than-lovers relationship that existed between the two men. And then something like this would happen, and Trice would begin to feel somehow that Napoleon did not believe her. That he somehow mistrusted, or worse was offended by, her sincere overtures to him as a friend.

Illya sighed. He would have to deal later with trying to right everything in Trice's mind and heart. Right now there was a non-reachable Napoleon. No response to phone calls, computer messages, or special emergency "contact required now" signals sent via a private U.N.C.L.E. communications channel not only to Solo's cell phone, but also to dedicated receivers in Napoleon's office, apartment and car as well. Not even a response to the insistent trill of the redesigned pen communicator currently being tested before full deployment for general usage.

"I have to check on him, Trice," Illya apologized softly to his wife.

"I know you do," Trice acquiesced just as softly.

Patrice Elsweth Kuryakin held a noble title in her native England. Here in the U.S., however, she much preferred no one reference her as "Lady Patrice". Here she was simply "Trice". Curvaceous figure contrasting sharply with her somewhat elfin features accented by hazel eyes more green than brown, she had something of the look of a paperback-romance-inspired fairy kin, a look further emphasized by her shoulder-length mane of wavy auburn hair. She had met Illya just as her thirties were commencing into their second half. He had been just months shy of turning fifty back then, though he had looked somewhat younger. She remembered that first meeting well.

It had been in London at an exhibit they both were attending on Russian art of the period of Czar Nicholas II. Trice had always adored Faberge eggs. The exquisiteness of the tiny worlds they captured within their precious shells had been a source for her imaginative wanderings as a child and adolescent. As an adult she had learned to appreciate the precise skill needed to create such diminutive wonders.

She had been speaking to a friend, well actually her boyfriend at that time, about a particular egg on display. Explaining every facet of the history she knew about the piece, she had been bluntly interrupted by a man nearby who noted she had one tiny detail wrong in her discourse. That conversational interloper had then proceeded uninvited to expound on the particular detail, citing all the historical sources where such could be checked as to accuracy.

Trice had been somewhat insulted, but also somewhat intrigued. And when the good-looking, blue-eyed man had unknowingly soothed her ruffled ego by complimenting her on how much she knew regarding Russian art of that particular Czarist period, the intrigue had won out. They had chatted some more about the Faberge pieces and about that era of Russian history, with Trice's erstwhile escort trying none too successfully not to look annoyed. The exchange had advanced in a natural progression to a somewhat heated, though not unfriendly, debate on the pros and cons of the Bolshevik Revolution that had unseated the last Czar from power. Yet, even though it was apparent this Illya Kuryakin, as he had ultimately introduced himself, had enjoyed the dialogue between them as much as she, that chat abruptly ended as her date sought to regain her attentions. And the previous conversational interloper made no attempt to ask for her phone number or indeed remarked anything even remotely suggesting he'd like to see her again as much as she found she wanted to see him again.

So Trice had used a very un-British, un-aristocratic ploy and had bluntly called after his retreating figure, "I would like very much to finish this discussion, Mr. Kuryakin. Perhaps tomorrow afternoon over tea?"

Illya had turned back to her, stopped dead in his tracks, but he had answered with a slight smile and in a friendly tone, “I would also like very much to finish this discussion. Tomorrow over tea will work well.”

She had walked over to him, ignoring her date shamelessly, to finalize the place and time for their next meeting. And that, as they say, was that. That moment had bought them to a startlingly intense four-month courtship, marriage, a child, and now this night at the seventy-fifth birthday party for Illya’s closest and dearest friend where that closest and dearest friend had been a no-show.

Picking up his internet-equipped phone, Illya made the necessary secure connection into U.N.C.L.E.’s network and used an Eyes-Only application to check what was known as the bio-drone for Napoleon’s signal. A new technology still in testing stages, the bio-drone only worked within U.N.C.L.E. facilities or within a specified range of the new-style pen communicators as it required fixed magnetic currents to pick up the signature bio-magnetic field generated by a living being. Each frequency was as unique as DNA, and through that frequency any U.N.C.L.E. operative could ostensibly be located anywhere in the world. Of course it was of no help at all if the person being sought was beyond the boundaries of U.N.C.L.E.’s in-house monitoring system, or if that individual was many-hours dead (the freshly dead continued to project a bio-magnetic field that slowly deteriorated over the course of several hours).

Yet, to Illya’s surprise and relief (not to mention irritation), Napoleon’s signal, strong and true, still showed the man ensconced in his office in NY HQ. Though relieved he wouldn’t need to alert Section V to begin an all-out search for the U.N.C.L.E. chief, the Russian was more than annoyed Solo had seemingly allowed the routine obligations of his job (since Illya knew without a doubt the other man would have contacted him immediately had any U.N.C.L.E.-related emergency arisen) to cause him to ignore the perhaps equally as routine yet surely more personal obligations of friendship. That was such an unfair thing for his friend to have done to Trice, no matter how unintentionally Napoleon might have done it. That private thought intercepted Illya’s immediate secondary check of the bio-drone to sense any presence other than that of Napoleon within the chief’s office; particularly any presence unidentified by previous synchronization with U.N.C.L.E. recorded profiles.

“He is still at headquarters,” Illya remarked in a tight monotone to his wife. “I will go get him.”

“If he doesn’t want to be here, Illya,” Trice forwarded in a very tight monotone of her own, “there’s no need to force him to show up. I can make the proper excuses to everyone about his non-appearance.”

“Oh, he is going to show up,” pronounced Kuryakin as evenly as he could considering his teeth had clenched not just in anger but also in frustration at this further evidence of his always-so-charming friend’s oft-time less-than-charming ignorance when it came to Trice’s feelings.

“He is going to show up or he will answer to me,” Illya unspokenly furthered his own reply.

But he certainly had no intention of Trice hearing him say that aloud. So instead he turned on his heel and headed toward the door and the assumed confrontation with the man he still considered his partner.

It wasn’t until Kuryakin was seated behind the wheel of his car that he collected his anger sufficiently to remember to check the bio-drone again for any unidentified presence within the

immediate sphere of Solo's own signal. Nothing registered, so he once more made a mental conclusion regarding the non-necessity of alerting U.N.C.L.E.'s Communications and Security Section. He clenched his teeth in agitation again, put the key in the auto ignition, gunned the gas pedal, and took off at a pace fast enough to keep his fury somewhat under physical control, that pace of course being much too reckless a speed.

Perhaps a quarter hour later, Illya entered unceremoniously into Napoleon's office through the pneumatic door that yielded to his emergency override code. Though Kuryakin had been somewhat surprised to find the door initially locked against normal entrance via appropriate access badge proximity, he knew from experience that Solo sometimes "burrowed" in his office, sealing himself away from distractions as he considered particularly thorny decisions.

"Napoleon," he spoke in a voice unmistakably raised in anger, "Trice is hurting like hell and I am absolutely fuming..."

Kuryakin's tirade stopped short as he took in the strange scene before him. Though he instinctively drew his Special out from its holster, he couldn't help but blink. Then he squinted hard and finally blinked a second time as if to clear his vision.

"Good," remarked Napoleon unflappably, "now at least I can be positive I'm not hallucinating."

"Not unless you are generously sharing your hallucinations," quipped back Illya with dry humor.

"Well, I do have a generous nature," granted Napoleon with remarkable ease considering the semi-automatic pointed at his forehead. "Still, I think a case of the crazies might be too intimate a possession to share even with you, Illya."

Having now received confirmation as to the identity of the second man, the woman-who-was-no-more-than-a-head laughed delightedly.

"You won't need your weapon, Mr. Kuryakin," she subsequently asserted to the blue-eyed man.

The gun floating somewhere below the woman's head changed positions easily, the muzzle fading into partial oblivion as it (and the head) moved toward Solo. Once at an easy distance to do so, the butt of the weapon was offered into Napoleon's grip.

"You may have this back now," the woman presented this reversal of control without hesitation. "I have a generous nature too, you see, and I did tell you all you needed to do was wait. Now I will surrender most willingly." She glanced over at Kuryakin still aiming his Special at her head. "And hopefully uneventfully," she added.

Solo accepted the return of his Special, feeling particularly as he did so for the reality of the hand of his female adversary. And there it was: the press of fingers that were likely gloved, but undeniably warm and very much flesh. Invisible or not, she was not a projection.

"Thank you," he acknowledged her supposed generosity as he clicked back into rest position the safety on his firearm before replacing it, somewhat too casually in Illya's opinion, in the holster under his suit coat. "Now suppose you extend your generosity to telling us what all this is about."

Illya was now eyeing what there was to see of the woman with critical expertise, had been doing so for some moments in fact.

“A trick of light, is it not?” he questioned her. “Refraction, reflection, absorption – light manipulated to make the concrete appear insubstantial.”

The woman turned her gaze toward the blue-eyed man.

“You are as scientifically astute as your reputation amongst Thrush maintains, Mr. Kuryakin,” she complimented him unperturbedly as Napoleon observed that the tone of ultra-control in her voice had relaxed. “Yes, it is a trick of light,” she admitted. “A rather complicated trick requiring a rather extraordinary apparatus, but still, no more than a trick of light. You’ll have a chance to examine the marvelous contrivance fully of course, later when it’s removed in one of your security holding cells. But for the present I hope you will permit me the modesty of continuing to wear it.”

“A garment then?” Illya pressed further.

She nodded slowly.

“Something like a wet suit, only it’s not meant to repel water, but rather luminosity of any and all kinds.”

“And it requires direct contact with skin temperature to remain active,” surmised Solo, some inner intuition causing him to state this assumption as fact.

Again the woman nodded.

“Skin temperature and the chemicals found in human perspiration. Which isn’t a very elegant setup, I do admit, but then science so often does lack grace,” the woman expounded with a bit of a smirk.

“Still doesn’t answer the main question,” Napoleon reminded.

“The main question?” she bantered easily.

“Yes,” seconded Illya, “that being why you are here.”

“Well, I would say I wanted to be taken to your leader,” she quipped, “but I managed quite capably to take myself to him.”

She gave Napoleon an expansive smile. Napoleon smiled back in evident amusement, but Illya was not amused in the least.

“So what do you now want ‘our leader’ to do with you?” Illya prompted brusquely.

“Why, take me to a holding cell and let me get some sleep,” she brazened out. “I’m utterly exhausted from all this waiting to surrender.”

“There will be questions to be answered before you sleep,” Kuryakin pledged her with some vexation.

She laughed.

“Oh no,” she disavowed his certainty. “No questions and no answers until tomorrow. But you will have the suit to analyze in the meanwhile, Mr. Kuryakin. That should provide you with sufficient,” her slight Norwegian accent lent the last word an almost caressing cadence, “food for thought.”

Solo studied her for a long moment, leaning his chin on the hand of his arm that now rested on its elbow upon the surface of his desk. Illya saw the telltale signs of manipulation and scheming displayed, only to one who so well knew him, upon the familiar face of his friend, and he almost audibly sighed in sheer frustration. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. He found this inflexible truth rising unbidden in his mind.

Napoleon finally nodded, physically acceding to the woman’s stated desires as he verbally declared, “I’ll escort you to a cell myself.”

“Napoleon,” began Illya in a cautionary manner. Kuryakin’s gun was still drawn and unwaveringly pointed in the direction of the woman’s head.

“Oh, I have no weapon of any kind on my person, Mr. Kuryakin,” the woman anticipated the other man’s objections to his friend’s decision. “One cannot put them under the suit, or wear them on the suit. One can hold a weapon of course, but then it is easily seen. That was why I needed to... borrow,” she teased, “Mr. Solo’s weapon to keep him waiting here so patiently at bay.”

Napoleon cleared his throat rather loudly.

Illya looked askance at his friend, marveling how Napoleon seemed so willing to take this peculiar “surrender” at face value. Yet his friend’s lack of suspicion on this score did not relax Kuryakin’s own wariness one iota, and certainly he did not alter the aim of his Special.

“You will have to explain to me exactly how she did that, Napoleon, borrowed your gun I mean,” Illya guaranteed Solo in his best acerbic manner that there was no hope of finessing his way out of eventually revealing that particular faux pas.

Flushing hotly, Solo rose and aimed to take the woman by the arm, or rather where he anticipated her arm might be. Luckily he estimated correctly and grasped her rather firmly under the right elbow as he put off Kuryakin’s query with a mumbled, “Later, Illya.”

Kuryakin, however, halted the Number 1 of Section I’s path toward the door by placing the hand not leveling his semi-automatic at the woman’s face flat against his friend’s chest. The Russian shook his head at the American. “Oh no,” he made his point quite bluntly. Then Illya clicked on the message center intercom and matter-of-factly relayed, “Standard security team to Mr. Solo’s office for a hostile transport and incarceration. No immediate threat. Repeat: no immediate threat.”

Napoleon huffed at Kuryakin’s high-handed tactic. “I’m perfectly capable of taking an unarmed Thrushie to a holding cell without calling for backup, Illya,” he petulantly protested his friend’s unnecessary measure of protection.

Illya fixed his blue-eyed gaze directly onto the hazel-brown one of Napoleon. "Protocol," he expounded incisively. "Even Section heads need to follow it, remember?"

Without moving his eyes from those of Napoleon, Illya declared, not at all apologetically of course, to the Thrush agent in their midst, "You'll pardon if I am of the opinion, madam, that you have already monopolized enough of the personal attention of 'our leader'," he again resorted to her playful terminology to himself playfully concede Solo's position, a faint smile twisting just at the corners of his mouth as he spoke the phrase.

The Thrush agent found the whole one-upmanship game going on between the two men definitely amusing and completely fascinating. Thrush did keep most accurate dossiers, and she gave mental tribute to that establishment's meticulous record-keepers.

"Certainly, Mr. Kuryakin," she acquiesced to his conclusion with a radiant smile. "Protocol has its proper place in every organization."

Napoleon released a barely audible grunt of dissatisfaction just as the four-man security detail entered through the now-barred-only-by-badge-access pneumatic door. Unexpectedly for a non-threatening routine security assignment, Jack Valdar, Number 1 in Section II, led the team.

"This woman is Thrush, Mr. Valdar," Illya filled in the younger man as he holstered his own gun now that the woman's head was being targeted by four Specials, one in the hand of each member of the security team. "She has surrendered willingly. Apparently she is outfitted with some new Thrush invention to manipulate light, making her appear largely invisible. Have one of the female agents see to its removal and have it placed in appropriate quarantine for customary transmission, explosive and biohazard checks. Then have it brought to my lab."

"Of course, Mr. Kuryakin," Valdar responded crisply, his tone perfectly business-like. Napoleon unconsciously grimaced at the completely professional voice.

"She is **not** to be questioned until tomorrow," Solo gave his own orders somewhat harshly.

Illya glanced askance at his one-time partner, wondering why in the world he was acceding to this woman's wishes regarding interrogation. Yet verbally he only added, "I will question her myself at that juncture, Mr. Valdar."

Jack Valdar nodded just as crisply as he had formerly spoken. Then he forwarded his left hand, the one not currently brandishing his semi-automatic, displaying a blue-tinted access badge he held in its palm. This temporary badge permitted a prisoner to walk the corridors of U.N.C.L.E. without alarms sounding at every step as long as the wearer remained in predetermined proximity to two full-access security badges. However, it opened none of the doors or elevators. Thus a captive was entirely dependent on his/her guard detail to perform those necessary actions for true movement through headquarters.

"She will require a temporary badge to be escorted to the holding cell area without the klaxons going off," Valdar stated unnecessarily.

"I am well aware of security requirements!" barked out Solo with more churlishness than was surely called for in the situation. Was every employee of U.N.C.L.E. out to call into question his adherence to procedure today?

“Of course, sir,” Jack snapped out of his mental funk concerning how the hell he was supposed to pin a badge on the person of a woman he couldn’t see. Pushing aside that particular awkwardness without so much as a raised eyebrow, the Number 1 of Section II reached out and affixed the blue-tinted titanium-alloy triangle to what he hoped was the woman’s collar (it was in actuality the forward edge of the released hood). He succeeded without a single finger fumble and without any facial expression of relief at his chance accuracy.

The woman’s eyes held his appraisingly for a moment, though Valdar had no clue as to why and frankly didn’t care. He simply took out a blackout hood from one of his pockets and pushed it down easily over her plainly detectable head. Now completely indifferent to the woman’s less-than-usual visibility, Jack accurately gauged the position of her left arm, that is, the one Solo was not already (if unclearly) clasping, and grabbed hold. The U.N.C.L.E. chief released his own grasp as the CEA snagged the woman’s other arm and positioned himself what he assumed was behind her. Sliding his fingers down her arms to find the wrists by touch alone, Valdar finally cuffed those seized wrists behind her back and led the Thrush out of the room with the rest of his team surrounding them as was documented practice: one in front of captor and captive, one to the woman’s free side, one following in the rear of the pair.

“You really should be more circumspect, Napoleon,” chastised Illya once the door had closed behind the prisoner and her escort.

“She posed no threat to me,” insisted Napoleon. “I could sense that.”

Illya meaningfully rolled his eyes.

“I know your instincts about people are generally spot-on, my friend,” he permitted himself to voice the loose compliment, “but it does not do to be so cavalier with your own life. You are not simply an Enforcement Agent now, and you are certainly **not** expendable.”

Expulsing another loud breath, Solo protested, “I still am, Illya! That’s simply how it is with all of us in U.N.C.L.E.”

Yet his dissent sounded lame even to his own ears. He knew all too well what Illya said was perfectly reasonable if gallingly less than exciting.

“Ever wish you were young again, Illya?” Napoleon quizzed his friend in a bemused tone as he retreated to his usual chair while Illya took a seat in one of the others. “No time to ponder what-ifs and should-bes out there in the field as you fight against the challenges to good or right or whatever with only your own wits and your own reflexes and your own...”

“And your own body?” interrupted Kuryakin straightforwardly. “No, Napoleon, I really do not wish that. I do miss the...” he hesitated for a moment, searching for just the right words. “The unchallenged connection that time gave me to the appeal of living. Yet I’m rather content now to limit my participation in the heat and excitement of having death hovering ever near and instead grow old with some semblance of grace.”

Solo smiled indulgently at the partner with whom he had in the past shared so much of that “heat and excitement of having death hovering ever near”.

“Death still hovers ever near, Illya,” he reminded his friend with the merest hint of resignation. “Death never relinquishes that position near the living... until it ultimately makes it full and final

claim. The only difference is whether it bursts in like the most amateurly boorish of party-crashers, or steals in like the professionally hushed thief in the night.”

“Are you turning philosophical in your old age, Napoleon?” Illya inquired with an indulgent smile of his own.

“Perhaps I’m just turning dubious in my old age, Illya,” clarified Solo, “dubious that everything I’ve ever done for what I believe in, everything I still do for those ideals or that cause or whatever you want to call it, has ever been enough to make any kind of real difference at all.”

Kuryakin kept his peace at this unanticipated revelation from his friend. Not for the first time in the last quarter century Illya adamantly wished Napoleon had managed to overcome his personal fear that commitment to something or someone beyond U.N.C.L.E. might hinder his fervent commitment to U.N.C.L.E. itself. A commitment he knew Solo saw as another promise he fully intended to keep, the most important promise of his entire life, the promise that was indeed his life itself. Illya so wished his friend had managed in the latter half of his existence to find, as he himself had, some inner and non-demanding quiet with a wife and maybe children to ease his dogged determination with regard to his ironclad idealism. But Napoleon was Napoleon: the man who, with his inherent charm and natural affability, touched many but held on to none. Only Illya had ever claimed more of his heart and soul than a simple mental and emotional brush of the fingertips. Well, Illya and Clara Valdar.

A change of subject was in order, Illya decided, something to pull Solo away from the precarious brink of outright melancholia. And the Russian knew just the subject that would serve.

“You really should not let your dislike of Jack Valdar color your opinion of him as an operative, Napoleon,” challenged Kuryakin, hitting just the raw nerve he knew would bring his friend’s thoughts back from the edge of philosophical meanderings to current realities.

“I don’t dislike him,” protested Solo, his voice almost unnaturally quiet.

“You just don’t much like him,” Illya batted back his response.

Napoleon narrowed his eyes, the brown-hazel depths suddenly smoldering like heaps of calcining umber.

“I wasn’t aware I was required as Number 1 in Section I to like every operative in U.N.C.L.E.,” Solo quietly hissed through tight lips. “I honestly appreciate the man’s talents as a skilled Enforcement Agent. I believe that is where my responsibility as his superior begins and ends.”

“Appreciate his talents so honestly,” pushed Illya, “that you bypassed him for the position of Chief Enforcement Agent two years ago.”

“He has the job now,” Solo spoke in the soft, slow, controlled tone that always gave evidence of the deepest anger in him.

“Only because Larson had the unfortunate ill-luck to die in a terrorist bombing three months back,” Kuryakin refused to let up on this subject. “But you knew positively at the time you promoted Larson that appointment should have gone to Valdar.”

“I had honest reservations about his style,” challenged Napoleon.

“Oh, I am well aware the man won’t win any personality prizes,” Illya pressed forward. “Indeed, I am distinctly aware of that fact since many years ago the dislike of colleagues in Section II was far from foreign to me personally.”

That frank outburst silenced Napoleon. He took a deep breath to simmer down his tightly leashed fury regarding Illya’s broach of the sore subject of Jack Valdar.

“You were different,” Solo finally hedged unsatisfactorily, his tone now normalized.

Illya shook his head, as always astounded by his friend’s unshakeable and sometimes blind allegiance to him, an allegiance that was just as unshakeable and often just as blind in himself toward Solo.

“Napoleon, you are right in saying that Valdar is different than I was,” Illya conceded softly to his friend. “The circumstances that precipitated each of our associations with U.N.C.L.E. are very different, but the coping techniques are much the same. Valdar has an inordinate need to prove himself. Anyone can see that. And that makes him... well, less than congenial with people. What drives him, I don’t know. Certainly it is not the frank desire for order in life, for the detachment from what can’t be controlled, that drove me. Yet whatever drives him, it has made him unequivocally the best Enforcement Agent currently in U.N.C.L.E., a critical facet of his steely determination to succeed it seems only you refuse to recognize.”

Solo rested his head somewhat wearily against the high leather back of his chair.

“I’m not lying when I said I had... have honest reservations about his style, Illya,” Napoleon thought the time ripe to divulge the fullness of his own reluctance to promote Valdar within the framework of the organization. “The man has... no sense of diplomacy, as well as little feel for initiating creative extrapolations when original plans fail.”

Illya understood Solo’s reservations. What he said was certainly true. Valdar was professional and by-the-book in his approach. But the Number 1 in Section II really needed to be more than that, really needed to have... somewhat the qualities of a chameleon. Still, such a combination of skills and personality was admittedly rare, and few CEAs in the history of U.N.C.L.E. had truthfully ever had it. Thing is though right now Illya was chatting with one past CEA who unquestionably had possessed such a combination of qualities, and so it was certainly possible Napoleon expected more of his new Number 1 in Section II than he realistically had a right to expect of any agent.

“In other words,” Illya could not resist teasing, “Jack Valdar is no Napoleon Solo.”

Napoleon chuckled easily and openly, not minding his friend’s good-humored jab at his ego. That ego had never been obnoxiously strident or overly dramatic. It had just been always there, part of his natural self-confidence, of his inner ease with his own sense of who he was.

“There is only one Napoleon Solo,” Solo boasted with a good-natured wink.

“A gentle forbearance toward the human race for which I constantly thank any power that might be,” Illya parried back before reciprocating with a quick wink of his own.

Then Kuryakin sobered his expression as he gave serious consideration to a particular possibility. “Perhaps all Valdar needs is the right partner,” he ventured to suggest to Napoleon.

Napoleon glanced at Illya for a moment, his expressive dark eyes becoming hooded as he gave the matter full mental evaluation. He tapped the fingers of one hand thoughtfully against his lips. "Perhaps," he at last permitted himself to potentially agree.

After a few minutes of companionable silence, an obviously flustered Illya roused about in the pockets of his dinner jacket searching for his cell phone. A flood of Russian escaped his lips in a quick-paced torrent.

"Whoa, whoa, tovarisch," Napoleon jovially implied his partner slow down the avalanche of foreign words. "Where's the fire?"

"I forgot to call Trice and tell her what was going on!" Illya exclaimed anxiously.

"Just tell her an intangibly fetching Thrushie decided to drop by headquarters for an unscheduled and somewhat theatrical capitulation," Napoleon was the one now providing the clever suggestion, even if he did do it with a bit of a smirk.

"Yes," Illya found himself thinking for the second time in the past hour as he frantically awaited the response to the cell phone's electronic signal that would provide him the needed vocal connection with his wife, *"the more things change, the more they stay the same."*

Act II: 25 Rounds at Midnight...

"25 rounds. Conditions: High Noon, Full Sun," commanded Natasha Kuryakin of the computer that controlled the firing range site.

Virtually instantly the domed room was flooded with intense illumination and electronic target "dots" of both light and dark shading started to appear in rapid succession at random positions throughout the enclosure. Natasha moved lithely in the direction required by each target dot, sometimes crouching low, sometimes doing a full body roll toward the next target, sometimes moving backwards, sometimes leaping forward or running ahead at breakneck speed. Each time she squeezed off a shot from her Special that hit the target dead-on. Sometimes she shot from normal chest-high position, sometimes from the hip, sometimes over her head, sometimes from flat on her stomach or back, and once even partially behind her back. And in seamless timing with this blur of object-oriented motion, she replaced whenever required the clip in her semi-automatic from spares held on a utility belt she wore about her hips.

"25 rounds complete," the computer interjected in an electronic voice. "Accuracy: 25 targets, 25 hits."

"25 rounds. Conditions: Sunrise, No Haze," Natasha quickly moved to another setup. And just as quickly the conditions were met by the computer's program and Natasha was repeating her pursuit of the flashing targets.

From the viewing gallery bathed in only infrared light and protected behind a shield of bulletproof glass Napoleon Solo watched in engrossed admiration. "Best damn marksman I've ever seen," he noted mentally with a swell of pride because, after all, this was Illya's daughter and his own goddaughter.

"25 rounds complete," the computer summarized again. "Accuracy: 25 targets, 25 hits."

“25 rounds. Conditions: Twilight, Heavy Haze,” Natasha chose her next scenario.

Appreciatively, Solo took in Natasha’s easy economy of movement, the way little if anything seemed to catch her off-guard or off-balance when a target flashed on, the confidence with which she switched gun-hands when shooting off-hand would provide better access to the target. Natasha was what was recognized in the field as a natural sharpshooter. Of course she had been meticulously trained as well. Yet all the training in the world couldn’t guarantee peripheral vision swift enough to correctly assess those faint changes of light play within an environment that gave precise advance warning of a target’s position.

“25 rounds complete,” came the computer’s notation again. “Accuracy: 25 targets, 22 hits.”

Napoleon smiled to himself. Though he couldn’t hear her muttered words beyond the glass, more than likely Natasha was cursing in Russian regarding having missed three targets in this scenario. Though all-American to her toes in attitude and upbringing, Natasha of the tri-citizenship (American/Russian/British) had been raised in a multi-lingual household. Thus her Russian was faultless and came quite naturally to her lips.

“25 rounds. Conditions: Midnight, No Moon,” barked out the young woman with a bit of an edge in her voice now.

The room conditions were acclimated to the voice command and Natasha was off once more, honed reflexes on full display.

“25 rounds complete,” the computer announced. “Accuracy: 25 targets, 24 hits.”

Clicking the intercom to active from his side of the glass, Napoleon complimented the rookie agent, “Amazing shooting for 25 rounds at midnight without a moon to visually aid detection.”

Natasha turned to face Solo where he stood behind the glass. “I missed a target,” she voiced somewhat petulantly her own displeasure at her results. “And missed three in hazy twilight.”

“I always find hazy twilight conditions the most frustrating myself,” responded Napoleon with a surreptitious wink. “Don’t pout about it, Natasha,” he ribbed his goddaughter good-naturedly. “Instead come on out in the gallery here, so I can talk to you without bouncing my voice electronically all over this blasted dome. Makes me feel like the Wizard of Oz.”

Natasha laughed. “Your wish is my command, oh great and powerful one,” she acknowledged with a good-humored mock bow.

Grabbing a fresh towel from a stocked shelf, Natasha tossed the terrycloth item around her neck, casually flipping her waist-length braid of silver blond hair over the soft material. She then manually opened the pneumatic door leading out to the gallery by activating a small touch control, the lighting in the gallery shifting to full incandescent illumination with that same action. In the firing range, doors that opened automatically were not a wise idea, thus dictating the regular usage of a manual override control. Wiping her face with one end of the towel as she walked through the gallery to the spot where Napoleon stood waiting, Natasha rotated her shoulders briefly, easing from them any tension resulting from her grueling early-morning exercise in marksmanship.

“Morning, Dyadya,” she greeted Solo as she usually did, addressing him with the Russian word for uncle. It held a duality of meaning regarding her personal closeness to him as an ersatz relative and her new professional relationship with him as the head of the U-N-C-L-E that she enjoyed exploiting in her completely irrepressible way. For his part, Napoleon was not yet sure he should continue to let her address him by that term within his professional capacity as her superior. Granted, he was much more relaxed in his manner with underlings than had been Alexander Waverly, addressing his field agents by their first names on a regular basis. Yet still by those underlings he was himself generally addressed as “sir”, just as Waverly had been, so the whole Dyadya thing might just be pushing informality a bit too far.

Natasha leaned in to place a casual kiss on Napoleon’s cheek. She had known him since she was an infant, he was part of her family without there being any actual blood ties involved, and she was not going to pretend he suddenly had turned into someone other than the man she knew as her well-loved Dyadya. New status as her top-level superior in her own new status as Enforcement Agent in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement or not, this man was as much a part of her prior childhood as of her current adulthood.

“You do realize you have a ton of making up to do to Mom, don’t you?” Natasha broached this touchy subject with a twinkle in her eye.

Napoleon gave a melodramatic groan.

“I know. For missing the big party last night,” he conceded defeat with regard to future apologies he would need to make to Trice.

“Not only for missing the big party yourself,” corrected Natasha, amusedly enjoying Solo’s current uncomfortable spot in her mother’s graces, “but for pulling Dad away from it as well. He didn’t return home until after 4:00 a.m. I stayed with Mom so she had company, but you know somehow I don’t think I salvaged any pique on her part toward either Dad or you.”

“You wouldn’t,” accused Napoleon in a dark tone and with a hooding of his eyes meant to appear calculatedly censorious. The trick didn’t work at all on Natasha.

“Dyadya,” she assured Solo as she lightly tapped a finger on the cleft in his chin, “you can effectively charm the world, but you can’t effectively scold me. Never could.”

She smiled brightly and Napoleon couldn’t help but return that smile with equal brightness, even as he remarked in an offhand manner, “That could prove a problem at some point.”

Natasha shrugged. “You can just have Dad administer the scolding for you,” she forwarded an alternative. Adding with a somewhat rueful smile triggered no doubt by memories of past reprimands delivered her by her father during her lifetime, “He can manage the task quite admirably... if you should ever find it necessary.”

Napoleon laughed lightly. “Though, according to your personal estimation, I will never find it necessary,” he foresaw her train of thought.

“Never,” she agreed. “Though Dad might see fit to irrationally argue that I am far from the perfect daughter, I am unquestionably the perfect goddaughter, and I will be just as unquestionably the perfect spy.”

Napoleon laughed again. Natasha's wickedly teasing sense of humor was something he appreciated as much as he did her spot-on marksmanship.

Solo chuckled the young woman playfully under the chin as he remarked, "All right, Ms. Perfect, get yourself cleaned up and meet me in my office in forty-five minutes. I have an assignment for you, but first I have to advise Jack."

Natasha gave a little shudder.

"Ah, the ever efficient Mr. Valdar," she continued as she made an obsequious show of straightening the knot in Napoleon's already impeccably knotted and arranged tie. "Mustn't have a hair wrong for that meeting, Dyadya."

"You just get yourself out of that outfit," Napoleon indicated Natasha's practice gear of black sweatpants, a black tank top and soft, black leather tennis shoes, "and into something with some professional flair. Unless you want Jack to sit there twitching his thumbs in exasperated disapproval the entire time you are in the room."

"Aha," Natasha, with raised forefinger, snagged the implication in those words, "now I am actually to be present in the room for this meeting between Section Chiefs."

"The meeting is a briefing regarding your assignment, perfect spy," taunted Solo nonchalantly. "So of course you will be present in the room... once I've prepared Jack so he doesn't ram his head into the nearest wall at my announcement."

"Has my assignment anything to do with the female Thrush agent who surrendered last night?" wheedled Natasha.

Napoleon shook his head.

"No," he negated simply. "We don't even know much about all of that as yet. Your father is going to question the woman in a few hours."

"What's the matter? She didn't like the idea of being up-and-about here at headquarters at 6:30 in the morning like the rest of us?" baited Natasha. She already knew from the grapevine that Napoleon had decreed the woman was not to be questioned overnight. And now, it seemed, the Thrushie was being given the respite of not having to submit to any interrogation at too ungodly early an hour either.

Napoleon squinted into Natasha's ice-blue eyes, replicas of her father's.

"Have you been listening to office gossip?" he questioned bluntly.

"Rumor has it she is quite passably attractive, more than passably intriguing," Natasha mischievously repeated the coffee room tittle-tattle as she defiantly kept her gaze level with Solo's, "and that **you**," she emphasized the word by jabbing a finger against his chest, "stayed in HQ all night."

Napoleon rolled his eyes.

“Even in my saintly old age, I can’t live down my lothario reputation,” he sniffed, though truthfully not at all with any real upset.

That did it. Natasha just threw back her head and laughed uncontrollably.

“And you love it!” she commented when she had regained enough breath to speak. “Yet Dyadya, let me issue you the warning Dad likely will later this morning.” With that Natasha beckoned Solo closer. Obliging, Napoleon drew his head nearer hers in order to share this supposed confidence. “Do not brush too close to a thrushbird or you may just wind up with stinking droppings on your best suit,” she then admonished, mimicking her father’s well-known deadpan voice with admirable accuracy.

“Oh that was bad, Natasha,” Napoleon criticized her little analogy as he shook his head and let a somewhat pained, though irrefutably amused, smirk twist his lips.

Natasha shrugged once more. “Perhaps I can come up with something better in forty-five minutes,” she challenged boldly.

“Honey, please,” pursued Solo with completely charming nonchalance, “I don’t want to have to make a concerned attempt to pick up a shocked-into-unconsciousness Jack Valdar from my office floor. He’s too big a boy for a frail old man like me to lift.”

And that set Natasha off in another irrepressible gale of laughter as Napoleon coolly made his way out of the range gallery and into the main corridor, throwing a brusque “Forty-five minutes. Be on time.” over his shoulder.

Jacques, called Jack, Valdar walked the corridor from his office and entered the elevator that would lead him to the lower level labs housed within U.N.C.L.E.’s NY headquarters, all the while trying not to dwell on whatever the Number 1 of Section I intended to spring on him at their scheduled meeting in less than a half-hour. Jack was patently certain his superior would be “lowering the boom” with some startling twist of fate or other. He and Solo were like oil and water, and Jack never bothered to lose sleep debating which of the two of them would have his persona rise to the top of jar.

The current Number 1 of Section II was a study in contrasts. He wasn’t liked and he didn’t care, but he desperately wanted to be respected by everyone. He was European in upbringing, his family being a prominent and wealthy one within the little country of Terbuf, but he had spent most of his childhood and adolescence in Italy. Stefan Valdar, Jack’s father, had been a traitor to his own country that had succeeded in having his wrongdoing glossed over because of certain testimony he had given authorities regarding the misappropriation of aid funds, that testimony only wrested from him as a last resort when the side of his initial choice had imprisoned and mistreated him. Clara Richards Valdar, Jack’s American mother, had been before her marriage the one-time fiancée of Napoleon Solo. And maybe it was the cowardice of his father that made Jack so much desire respect. Or maybe it was the fact he knew it had been Napoleon Solo who his own mother had contacted for help when the whole trouble with the fund misappropriations in Terbuf had come to a head. In other words, the fact that Solo was more than casually aware of Stefan’s spineless nature, a personality fault Jack had striven all his life to demonstrate was not some inherited weakness in the blood that he himself shared with his begetter, surely played a part in his relentless striving to achieve in U.N.C.L.E. at least as much as, if not more than, Napoleon Solo himself.

As to exactly why Jack had chosen U.N.C.L.E. as the “field of battle” upon which to wage psychological warfare against his own deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and shame stemming from his father’s failings, he couldn’t honestly say. Certainly such was not an obvious career path for him to have taken. Valdar held undergraduate and graduate degrees in archeology, and had served as an integral part of several field dig teams for prestigious museums and universities throughout Europe. Though never naturally gifted intellectually, Jack had always prided and did still pride himself on his determination never to fail at anything he started. And that determination had taken him scholastically wherever he had wanted to go. If he needed to study like a madman to succeed, study like a madman he did.

Similarly had Jack taken it upon himself to train his body just as relentlessly as his mind. He never wanted to appear weak in any phase of self. He never wanted to be relegated to the encompassing umbrella of his father’s limitations as a human being. Thus had Jack exercised as ceaselessly as any professional bodybuilder to tone his musculature into masculine perfection, a state of physical prowess the tough archeological digs in which he participated under often unbearable conditions had further enhanced. Attractive in a stark and stern way, Jack’s dark auburn hair was the only physical trait he had inherited from his gorgeous mother; while his unexpressive gray eyes and somewhat sharp Romanesque facial features came courtesy of his father. The plain truth was, no matter how you worded it, that there was nothing in any way “soft” about Jack Valdar, not in his face, not in his body, not in his mind, and certainly not in his heart.

Jack had been some months into his twenty-eighth year when he had applied and been accepted to U.N.C.L.E.’s elite Survival School. Why he had submitted that application when he already had a burgeoning career that promised a lifetime of achievement was a question to which he had no firm answer. It was just something deep inside him that had cried out to prove he understood the concept of pursuing a goal beyond that of normal personal success. A goal of seeking something better for the world at large, the type of goal that he knew had been entirely foreign to his father’s personality. Jack had wanted then and wanted now, though he never bothered to think it all through to this final truth, to redeem the name of Valdar within the eyes of all humanity.

He had started upon this task at a definite disadvantage. The twenty-two to twenty-five year-olds who were the general graduates of Survival School were looking at field careers in U.N.C.L.E. longer than his was likely destined to be. Recommended retirement age for active field agents had been revised upward to forty-five some decades ago, with even that being not necessarily compulsory as exceptions were sometimes made (as had been in the case of Jack’s own previous partner). Still, Jack had finally been promoted to Chief Enforcement Agent just three months ago at the “ripe old age” of thirty-six. Nor was Jack viewed as likely fodder for a Section I position at the end of his Section II tenure, as Solo had been during his own elevation to CEA at a younger age to boot. So the prospect of somehow checkmating Napoleon Solo in this chess match of becoming of ultimate importance to the continuance of U.N.C.L.E. was one game upon which Valdar felt the need to concentrate with all his formidable resources of self-resolution. And in the constant move-by-move decision-making of the match, Jack had long ago abandoned any hint at subtlety.

Such tactics surely gained him no friends, as even those who surmised there might be more to Jack Valdar than what he allowed to rise to the surface found themselves put off by his continual lack of social tact. Jack, it must be said, had eschewed long ago the idea of wearing his heart on his sleeve, so he never let any would-be friend probe too deeply into his hidden emotions. He kept his demeanor decidedly cool toward other human beings, though he

displayed a great deal of affection for animals of all kinds as he found their nonjudgmental company somehow more appealing than that of people. However, the career-necessitated unsettled state of his home life prevented him from keeping more than several tanks of tropical fish and one very playful Maltese as household pets, a reality he much regretted as he would have dearly enjoyed having a veritable menagerie underfoot.

Fellow employees at U.N.C.L.E., in particular the agents of his own Section II, referred to him as “The Granite Slab”, a nickname indicating not only his characteristic lack of emotion, but also the honed hardness of his muscular body, and as well the impenetrable depths of his “soulless” gray eyes. Oh, there was no doubt he was an excellent spy. He knew the rules and he followed them all. He was efficient to his core. His skills were impeccable. He also made a good appearance, dressing well and always being groomed immaculately. Though English was not his native tongue and he still spoke it with a pronounced Italianesque accent, he pointedly strove to never get a colloquial idiom wrong. He was fearless, devoted to U.N.C.L.E.’s cause with an almost manic tenacity, and an expert organizer with a detail-oriented mindset. But he lacked creativity, spontaneity, human passion, and the willingness to excuse even the most mundane of mistakes in himself or in others. In short, while Jack Valdar may well have had the will and wit to make a strong individual statement within U.N.C.L.E., he had none of the qualifying heart or soul ...or at least none he had ever made in any way visible to anyone at all.

Having made the required elevator descent and strode toward his ultimate destination, Jack walked perfunctorily through the pneumatic door as it automatically opened, nothing out-of-place in his carriage, person or countenance.

“Ah, Mr. Valdar,” Illya Kuryakin, the head of Section III, addressed him. “You have the new safe code at the ready?”

Jack nodded shortly by way of non-verbal answer.

“Good, good,” the older man complimented absently, his attention completely returning to the mass of semi-transparent plastic-like material laid out upon his lab table. “This light manipulation suit is not something I want to leave accessible to any but those with top-level security clearance.”

“Understood, sir,” Jack responded automatically. He respected Kuryakin and probably came as close to liking the Russian as he came to actually liking anyone.

“It is a veritable marvel of technology,” remarked Illya with noticeable awe as he fingered a portion of the suit, his blue eyes behind thick glasses glowing with scientific admiration for the object under discussion.

Jack permitted himself a bit of scientific curiosity as well and lifted one corner of the lightweight plastic, rubbing it assessingly between his thumb and forefinger.

“It seems to be made of nothing more than slightly opaque saran wrap,” the CEA noted in a tone of mild surprise.

“I will grant you it does not offer much in the way of substance,” Illya forwarded with a small smirk, “but it has incredible tensile strength and stretch, among its other remarkable properties.”

“Though it surely affords nothing in the way of modesty,” commented Valdar with distaste as he dropped the material from between his fingertips.

“I will grant you that as well,” the Number 1 of Section III verbally agreed, mentally chuckling at Valdar’s old-fashioned tenets of proper attire for a good field agent. The older man removed his glasses, folded them flat, and stuffed them into his lab coat pocket in a bit of physical business carried out solely to keep his amusement from openly registering on his face. “Yet such is not an issue since, once wearing it, one does become invisible to the general public.”

“I suppose,” conceded Jack. Nonetheless, he was definitely grateful such a garment was not something his profession required him to wear as a matter of course.

The light manipulation suit was a head-to-toe garment. It covered even the feet and hands in its basic one-piece construction with a zipper closure, made entirely of the same material as the rest of the outfit, running up the length from the left ankle to the neck. A hood was attached at the back of neckline, intended to slip over the head and utilize another zipper around the collarbone to secure it to the suit without any gaps in coverage. That hood concealed the face, though a fully transparent mesh of the plastic protected the areas where the eyes, nose and mouth were located, thus permitting easy sight, breathing and talking. The mesh was likely what accounted for the ever-so-slight shift in sight planes resulting in the brief undulations of light occasionally visible upon one wearing the suit. It was a minor flaw in an otherwise faultless design: a true masterpiece of covert-inspired genius.

“Truly something for the spy who has everything and does not mind possibly putting it all on display,” observed Kuryakin with his usual brand of sardonic humor. “Shall we secure it from prying eyes, Mr. Valdar?”

Without the benefit of being able to look at any visual readout, Jack pressed a code into a control unit located under the lab table, finalizing by means of his right thumb the release of what was known as the “safety box” from its hidden location. An area in one side wall, an area that previously had offered no clue as to its secret purpose, slid open revealing a series of drawers, some large and some small. Illya walked to those waiting drawers, light manipulation suit in hand, and folded the garment carefully into the space of a large, though shallow, drawer near the bottom of the array. Then he nodded to Valdar, who performed the necessary closure procedure through the under-the-table control unit for the safe.

Valdar then came up beside Kuryakin and pressed the edge of his right thumbnail into that of the older man, transferring in that movement from under his own fingernail into the underside of Kuryakin’s fingernail a silicate sliver imbedded with the new code for the safety box.

“I will convey the other copy of the code on to Mr. Solo at my meeting with him in his office this morning,” Jack informed Illya according to accepted U.N.C.L.E. procedure for this particular undertaking.

Illya nodded and then asked with seeming casualness, “You will be present at my interrogation of the self-surrendered Thrush agent later this morning, Mr. Valdar?”

“Of course, Mr. Kuryakin,” Valdar’s voice came bluntly. But then he pursued the subject with some agitation and just a hint of censure, “Mr. Solo may have seen fit to dispense with some points of protocol in this particular case; nonetheless there are still standards that cannot and should not be so nonchalantly dismissed.”

Illya rubbed a finger across his forehead as he determined how best to keep the discussion from deteriorating into an argumentative confrontation between them regarding Valdar's implied criticism of Napoleon's "non-procedural" treatment of the captured Thrush. Illya, however, did need to get Valdar to speak his piece in this regard so to move the CEA fully on his own side with regard to protecting U.N.C.L.E. and thus Napoleon (or perhaps, from his own personal perspective, the other way round) from machinations Kuryakin conjectured involved far more than the blatantly obvious.

"I take it you think Mr. Solo was too liberal in his dealings with the lady?" Illya questioned in just the right tone to avoid getting Jack's back up.

"It is not my place to question the tactics of the Number 1 in Section I," Jack responded as by the book as you please. "But sir," the CEA then added a more personal aside since he suspected Kuryakin thought the same in this instance as he did himself, "the woman entered his private office, effectively breaking through without a hitch every single security check in place in HQ. She got him to surrender his firearm and then proceeded to hold him at gunpoint for over two hours. She somehow even bypassed the detection of the experimental bio-drone. Finally she succeeded in getting you, his second in command, into the same room as well."

Jack shook his head in obvious frustration at what had occurred in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters the night before. "Mr. Solo is the Continental Chief for the North American division of the Command, the foremost of the five top policymakers in this organization. She wanted to get to him directly and she did so with no interference and seemingly little trouble. Marvelous new Thrush gizmo she willingly dropped into U.N.C.L.E.'s lap or not, supposedly unreserved surrender or not, under these particular circumstances, would it not be judicious for the Command to treat her as more than a routine threat?"

Illya smiled inwardly as he ran a hand through his gray-blond hair. Valdar had provided exactly the attitude he needed to keep the younger man focused on the menace at hand for U.N.C.L.E. and not on his constant personality conflicts with Solo.

With that settled to his satisfaction, Illya let Napoleon's words of the night before echo in his head: "*She posed no threat to me. I could sense that.*" Sense that? When this Thrush agent had locked in close gun-sight range for more than two full hours the most important man in U.N.C.L.E.? She could have killed him in a single breath and escaped likely without a trace the same way she had entered headquarters. Since she hadn't done so, it had to be concluded that such was not her calculated aim, a conclusion Napoleon had instinctively come to last night. Thus did it likewise have to be assumed that such wasn't Thrush's current aim either. So what was that aim? An aim so imperative it trumped getting rid of U.N.C.L.E.'s greatest human asset once and for all?

"I suspect Mr. Solo has his reasons for doing what he did," Illya steadfastly refused to condemn out-of-hand the over-confident actions of his very people-attuned friend. "I have never known him not to have reasons for his actions, and I have known him for many years. Yet we, Mr. Valdar," he got to the heart of the matter, "will make it our particular business, as indeed it is our duty in U.N.C.L.E.'s behalf, to discover why **she** did as she did. Thrush plots seldom run in a straight and narrow path, and I suspect this one might have more crooked angles than most."

Jack nodded slightly, giving no more indication of an agreement between them than that, for no more than that was surely required.

The U.N.C.L.E. guards eyed the monitor with unhidden curiosity as the woman ensconced within the safety of the secure holding cell paced in a constant pattern back-and-forth across the entire width of the small room. Barefoot and clad in a standard-issue black jumpsuit the Command supplied to prisoners when necessary, the Thrush agent looked as restless as any caged animal. She had a tendency to raise herself up high on the balls of her feet every so often to fully stretch her thin body, like a dancer preparing for a performance.

The guards were well aware she could not hear anything they might say. The strange earcuff she had worn the night before had been taken from her along with the light manipulation suit in which she had been clothed. U.N.C.L.E. lab technicians had revealed the ostentatious and rather damning piece of jewelry as a hearing aid of unique design. Still, when within auditory range of her cell, the guards were circumspect enough to say nothing that might possibly prove to an enemy's advantage. Yet when they only watched her on the monitor, that circumspection was all but utterly abandoned as they found themselves almost hypnotically drawn to her movements, intrigued by her very presence.

The Thrushie stopped her measured pacing momentarily as she bit at the knuckle of her right forefinger, holding it trapped within the sphere of her straight, white teeth. Her U.N.C.L.E. captors had allowed her to sleep through the night, as she had needed to do. The fatigue engendered by the tight control she had been required to maintain throughout the long encounter in Solo's office had all but left her fighting not to physically collapse in front of the security task force who had brought her here afterwards. But she simply had not permitted herself that childish indulgence. She had been trained more painstakingly than that. She had kept herself alert and on her feet until at last, after being methodically stripped and searched and deprived of her capacity to hear, she had fallen into an almost coma-like sleep upon the cell's small but comfortable cot.

She was refreshed now. She was ready. She knew what needed to be done and, when Kuryakin came to question her, she would be able to do it with no twinges of emotional doubt and no great physical hardship. She had planned this, and her plan was running true to form. There would be the anticipated end with which she had taunted Solo the night before. Oh, not that such an end would be swift. All steps had to be measured. All thoughts centered. She had been laboriously preparing for this for years, for decades. She would not fail, not in this. She had promised long ago.

Stretching upward on the balls of her feet once more, the woman arched her slender, long column of neck, finally throwing back her head while biting down harder upon the knuckle she yet held captive between her teeth.

"Papa, I swear it will be as you wanted," she mentally chanted toward the heavens, eyes closing for a long moment. "I will use what you gave me to gain what you most desired. I do not forget!"

"She's a rookie agent," stated Jack, his tone deliberately flat.

"As concise a statement of fact as ever I've heard," retorted Solo in just as deliberately flat a tone.

The CEA sat in the office of the Continental Chief here in NY headquarters as the oil and water of their personalities were being shaken once more into opposition.

“All agents start out as rookies,” forwarded Napoleon, his eyes telegraphing to Valdar that he would brook no objections on this particular score. “Your wealth of experience should aid in cultivating her from green to seasoned sooner rather than later.”

Jack Valdar bit his lip and held his tongue. He considered Solo’s high-handed tactic of pairing him with U.N.C.L.E.’s new wunderkind as deliberately unfair, but he knew he couldn’t give voice to that highly emotional feeling. In his private thoughts Jack couldn’t help but morosely note, “*The man is always gunning for me somehow or other.*” However, a perfunctory “Yes sir” was the only verbal response he permitted himself.

Napoleon let his dark eyes sweep over Jack’s stiff carriage. The CEA’s hands, where they rested on the revolving desk, formed half-fists, the thumbs twitching involuntarily as the man mentally fought from fully clenching those fists.

Despite what others thought, even what Valdar himself thought, Napoleon did not dislike the man. He just didn’t really understand him. And that admittedly was an odd position for Solo in which to find himself, a position that sometimes made him react with less than his usual responsive warmth.

“Questo è solo un temporaneo partenariato¹, Jack,” Solo sought to soothe the other man’s well-controlled but definitely-present ire by speaking the line in Italian, since he knew that language was Jack’s natural one.

The attempted salve only served to make Jack further stiffen his already ramrod straight back. He hated it when Solo condescended in that supposedly charming manner of his to converse with him in his native tongue as if he was a child to be pacified with familiar sounds.

“Of course, sir,” Jack acknowledged pointedly in English. “Is she to be indoctrinated with regards to the Russian Arms Affair?”

For the moment Solo gave up his futile attempts to come to some sort of accord with this difficult man. “Yes, she is,” he therefore simply informed the younger male.

“She has little more than a week to make up what she has already missed of the indoctrination, as well as keep current pace in that regard with the rest of the team,” Jack tried the reasonable approach.

“She won’t need the intense training regarding arms design as such is one of her specialties as an operative,” Napoleon bounced back that approach with equal reason. “And I assume, Jack, as CEA you are fully capable of bringing her up to speed on the rest.”

Jack bristled, yet managed to keep his visage unrevealing of his inner turmoil.

“May I suggest, sir,” Valdar next spoke in a perfectly respectful if less than pleasant tone, “that she is hardly ready to handle so complicated a mission.”

“She has the right qualifications,” supplied Napoleon in complete Number 1 of Section I not-to-be-second-guessed mode. “Her Russian is fluent, she has a thorough working knowledge of

¹ This is only a temporary partnership

arms of every type, and her marksmanship is the best of all U.N.C.L.E. personnel, even those with years of experience in the field.”

The last remark stung Valdar just as Solo knew it would when he had chosen to word it the way he had. He knew Jack spent at the firing range whatever time he could spare between missions and the administrative headaches that were part and parcel of the CEA position. His striving to beat or at least match the target results of one Natasha Kuryakin was fodder for gossip throughout NY HQ. Though Jack had come close, he hadn't yet been able to accomplish this feat. Still, he kept trying. Jack Valdar was nothing if not tenacious.

“There is no doubt of her talent as a sharpshooter,” Valdar conceded as he kept his voice level and controlled.

“I'm glad you willingly recognize her expertise in that area,” snapped out Napoleon perhaps a bit callously, but Jack's personality rubbed his nerves raw. He hated getting into these ever-so-polite confrontations with the younger man. Once, just once, he wished Jack would release his tightly reined temper when in his presence, and thus clear the air between them once and for all. But Solo was the Number 1 of Section I, and thus for him to initiate the open venting of any antagonism between himself and his Chief Enforcement Agent was not diplomatically prudent.

Fortunately just then Solo's intercom buzzed. Responding to the insistent sound, the Continental Chief was informed by his secretary that Enforcement Agent Kuryakin was waiting outside in time for the meeting he had previously requested with her.

“Send her in,” Napoleon advised his assistant, watching as Jack's severe face became even more guarded, if that was at all possible.

“Morning,” Natasha sensibly left the affectionate Dyadya off her address to her superior.

Jack politely rose from his seat at the young woman's entrance, but he offered no verbal greeting.

“Good morning, Natasha,” Solo smoothly transitioned past the awkward moment. “Have a seat, won't you?”

Obligingly Natasha took a chair to the right of Valdar as the CEA regained his own seat. Napoleon was pleased to see that Natasha had heeded his advice and dressed professionally for this meeting. In a cowl-neck white cashmere sweater and black-and-white hound's-tooth wool skirt appropriately fitted to facilitate concealment of the thigh-holster storing her U.N.C.L.E. Special, with a finishing touch of half-calf low-heeled black leather boots, Natasha looked older and thus more accomplished in her chosen occupation than her barely twenty-three years and limited field experience could boast.

“As you likely are aware,” Solo easily went into the next phase of this meeting, “it is preferred practice here at U.N.C.L.E. to team Enforcement Agents into two-person partnerships. We have found over the years that such provides the most efficient working relationships in the field. Having someone who is familiar with how you work, with how you think, with how you will react in threatening situations, results in fewer dead operatives and more successfully completed missions.

“The ingredients of a good partnership are more esoteric than would be supposed,” furthered Napoleon without pause for thought. He had given this speech over the years more times than he cared to recall to more agents than he honestly could count. “So hitting upon the right blend of personalities and abilities is often a matter of experimentation. Thus trial partnerships are a necessary step in determining who matches best with whom in the long term.”

Solo did pause for emphasis now, allowing his gaze to center first on the gray-eyed one of Jack Valdar and then on the blue-eyed one of Natasha Kuryakin. Though no hint of his innermost thoughts showed on his face, Napoleon mentally chided himself, “*You better have gotten this one right, Solo.*” Then he relaxed his mind back into the unfettered confines of what his instincts regarding people had always exposed to him without undue pondering.

“You, Mr. Valdar, because of some unfortunate recent circumstances, currently have no partner,” Solo directed his remark to Jack. “You, Ms. Kuryakin,” he veered his vocal attention toward Natasha, “are a new agent who has never yet had any partner. So I have decided,” Napoleon now encompassed both agents within his directive, “that a trial partnership between the two of you could prove of great benefit to U.N.C.L.E.”

Natasha was floored, though she kept her surprise to herself. To pair a rookie agent with the Number 1 of Section II was virtually unheard of. She glanced askance at Valdar where he sat so straight and unyielding in his chair. She knew the current CEA had lost his partner of four years, the previous CEA Chris Larson, some three months ago in an unexpected terrorist bombing in France. Valdar had been working missions on his own since that time. Though U.N.C.L.E. tittle-tattle had never painted a picture of Valdar and his ex-partner as particularly close, she knew they had respected one another and worked rather well together. Thus Natasha had some compassion for Jack being too-soon after the loss of an established partner settled even temporarily with a woman he didn’t know from Adam (or rather Eve), except that she was Illya Kuryakin’s daughter and thus part of a “distinguished bloodline” within the annals of the history of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

“I am honored to have the chance to work so closely with you, Mr. Valdar,” Natasha turned her attention to the CEA and extended him her hand by way of bridging the uncomfortable professional and social gap that existed between them.

Jack stared at her for a long moment, a clumsily long moment. Finally he extended his own hand and grasped hers lightly, shaking that hand with nothing more than mechanical courtesy.

Napoleon watched it all through hooded eyes. He was proud of Natasha’s tactful handling of the situation, but Jack... This certainly wasn’t going to be easy. Well, Rome wasn’t built in a day, as the old saying went.

“That being said,” Solo picked up the conversational ball as he rose from his own chair in favor of casually perching on his desk just to the right of where Natasha sat beside Jack, “I think it well for you to understand, Natasha, that you are being given a chance not generally made available to rookie agents. Learn all you can from Mr. Valdar and always remember he is your superior not only in rank but also in experience. Do not hesitate to give your input where warranted, but ultimately his decisions are to be obeyed.”

“Of course,” Natasha acquiesced without so much as a blink. Yet how the hell she was going to work side-by-side with ‘The Granite Slab’ she honestly had no clue. She was sure he would

treat her like nothing more than a go-fer and that she would chafe, her skills virtually unused, under his heavy-handed wielding of authority.

“Jack,” Napoleon now directed his remarks to the other half of the new partnership, “remember that Ms. Kuryakin is a trained operative, even if her experience is far less vast than your own. Her opinions are always to be considered. All final decisions on any mission are yours, but never forget that two heads are often better than one. And make particular note of her especial talents and utilize those accordingly. Never assume that simply being a veteran of the field will always make you the best one of the pair to shoulder responsibility for a particular facet of any operation.”

Jack nodded shortly, his mind already translating his superior’s admonition as “*Don’t make this a one-man show*”, something he had already been well aware he wouldn’t be licensed to do since his rookie partner was Natasha Kuryakin. She had heritage on her side, after all.

“I assume an additional briefing regarding the Russian Arms Affair will take place later today with all agents involved, so that Ms. Kuryakin can be properly acclimated into the group. Therefore, if that is all for the present, sir,” Valdar interjected into the brief pause that had ensued, “I need to certify the security setup of the interrogation room for Mr. Kuryakin’s questioning of the female Thrush agent in less than an hour.”

Solo nodded his dismissal of his Number 1 in Section II, and the other man rose from his chair and headed (more than willingly, it must be noted) toward the door. However, before he could reach the portal without interference, Napoleon, who had also risen from his perch on the desk, waylaid the younger man by pressing a hand in honest kindness upon his shoulder.

“Non lotta su questo², Jack,” he counseled the CEA in Italian, knowing Natasha did not speak that language and thus that their exchange was private. “Alla fine i risultati potrebbero sorprendervi.³”

Jack said nothing, merely straightened his shoulders. Napoleon heeded the bodily signal and removed his hand, freeing Valdar to stride purposefully out through the pneumatic door as it automatically opened in response to the nearness of his badge. The Number 1 in Section I stood for a second in silence after the exit of the Number 1 in Section II, his back to the young agent yet seated before the revolving desk.

“You’ve thrown me head-first right into the soup, haven’t you, Dyadya?” Natasha’s words finally brought Napoleon’s attention back to the young woman.

Solo turned to face his goddaughter once more, noting the little frown that pulled at the corners of her mouth.

“Time to sink or swim, Natasha,” he advised her succinctly as he rotated the desk so the monitor, currently displaying a copy of the file for the Russian Arms Affair, lay directly before her.

² Don't fight me on this

³ In the end the results might surprise you.

Natasha glanced down briefly at the monitor display as Napoleon continued, "This mission fits your skill set, Natasha. Yet you surely understand, if I pegged you for this important an early assignment without putting a qualifier of sorts on things, there would be those within this organization who would assume you are getting special treatment because of who is your father."

"And pairing me with the CEA for the North American division of U.N.C.L.E. defuses that speculation exactly how?" demanded the young woman with unmistakable curtness.

"Honey, if you can set up a successful working relationship with Jack Valdar by gaining his respect," stated Napoleon in a mollifying tone, "you will definitely obtain the good opinion of just about everyone in U.N.C.L.E. regarding your abilities as a field operative. Definitely it will grant you a 'first-class working partner' status with all of the Section II agents. So you see I'm not indulging in any form of backhand nepotism by partnering you with Jack. I'm submitting you to a real test by fire, and it's one you better pass if you want to have a successful career here."

Blue eyes stared into brown for a long moment, the challenge raised in the brown eyes fully and finally accepted by the blue. Those blue eyes then focused downward on the inlaid monitor screen once more as Natasha took several minutes to peruse the basic details of the Russian Arms Affair.

"All right, Dyadya," Natasha finally acceded gamely though perhaps less than optimistically. "But I would consider myself remiss in my duty not to tell my ultimate superior how discontented I am not with the assignment but with the administrative decision made regarding my partner pairing."

"Duly noted," confirmed Napoleon. "I will see to it the necessary notation of protest is made in the personnel files."

The young woman nodded and then commented with all expected professionalism, "Since I now have security access to this file," she waved a hand toward what was displayed on the monitor in front of her, "I will study it fully at my own desk."

With that, Natasha rose, but she still planted a quick kiss on Solo's cheek before departing the office of the Number 1 in Section I. She let that brief token of affection serve to reassure Napoleon she did not hold his official actions as her superior against him as her beloved Dyadya.

After her departure, Napoleon rubbed the fingers of one hand absently across his forehead. He had set himself up for one whale of a headache, both literally and figuratively.

"Definitely a shot in the dark," he mused to no one in particular. And then his intuition corrected that admission, "*More like 25 rounds at midnight,*" though his lips left the correction unspoken.

Act III: Procedure 1:

The interrogation room was basically the same as rooms used for this purpose in various security-minded establishments all over the world. Gray unadorned walls. A plain table bolted to the floor and flanked by two less-than-comfortable chairs, one for interrogator and one for interrogated, situated on opposing long sides of that table. An elongated steel loop on the table surface meant to secure handcuffs should such be deemed necessary for safety purposes when

confronting the interrogated. Gray concrete floor sporting another elongated steel loop under the interrogated's side of the table, just in case ankle restraints were called for as well. A plastic pitcher of ice water and several likewise plastic glasses. A one-way glass viewing station. An intercom system. A locked door. Nothing fancy other than the video/audio monitoring/recording center built into a projecting stand on one wall and slanted in such a way as to visually allow the video to capture a full facial angle on the interrogated and a side profile of the interrogator. Just an interrogation room. As serviceable a stage for the presentation of an espionage drama as any other.

The female Thrush agent took in her surroundings as she waited patiently for the arrival of her interrogator. Discreetly standing behind her where she sat was the man she recognized as the head of the security detail from last night: the tall, muscular agent with the sharp features and even sharper manner. She knew more agents assigned to keep her from escape stood at the ready beyond the barrier of the door. She was unbound however. U.N.C.L.E., unlike Thrush, was basically a benevolent captor, though the woman found her bare feet were cold where they rested flat against the concrete floor.

The door slid open via means of the release of an electronic locking mechanism on the outside of the room as the interrogator, Illya Kuryakin, entered.

"Good morning," he addressed the Thrushie.

"If you wish me to hear your questions," the woman informed him without any obligatory civil prologue, "you will need to return my earcuff."

"Ah yes, the earcuff," commented Illya as he made sure not to move his face from her ready line of sight, thus allowing her to read his lips. "A thing of genius to be sure. We did test it thoroughly and found no transmission devices or other oddities in its basic design, so of course I can return it to you. Or..." he began and then formulated the remainder of his remark in the accepted sign language internationally used by the deaf, "I can sign the questions to you."

She just stared at him, refusing to even acknowledge his latter suggestion. Correctly ascertaining her answer from that lack of response, Illya walked toward the woman, removed the thrush-designed diamond earcuff from his shirt pocket, and simply handed it to her. The Thrushie accepted the item from his hand and set it properly on and within her left ear.

"You are completely deaf without the aid of that device?" came Illya's accompanying question.

"I am profoundly nerve deaf," she returned evenly. "This device was designed especially to compensate for my particular condition, which is decidedly rare."

Illya nodded shortly and then went over to the recording station and set a special form of compact disk within not just one but two drives that served the equipment. The two drives operated completely independent of one another, thus all but eliminating the chance of accidental or purposeful tampering with the recording, as there was always an immediate reliable backup available.

"Date: December 22nd, 2007. Time: 0900 hours by the Eastern Standard. Location: New York Headquarters for the North American division of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. In accordance with standard interrogation procedures published within the public charter, established 1946, last revised 2005, of the United Network Command for Law and

Enforcement, I hereby make it known to all parties that the entirety of this interrogation session will be both video and audio recorded with all thus documented testimony entered permanently into the files of the Command," Illya made the necessary initial statement for the record while directly facing the video eye of the machine.

The woman smirked. "All very upfront and legal," she noted.

Illya ignored her as he further stated for the record, "Interrogator for this session: Illya Nickovech Kuryakin, currently Number 1 in Section III, Enforcement and Intelligence, North American division of U.N.C.L.E. Present in security capacity: Jacques Valdar, currently Number 1 in Section II, Operations and Enforcement, North American division of U.N.C.L.E."

Then Kuryakin's attention returned to the woman as he crossed to the center of the room and seated himself within the chair located on the opposite side of the table from her own.

"Please state your name and pertinent organizational information for the official record," he launched the usual first volley into a captive's questioning.

"Delphina Reikedahl, attached to the organization known as Thrush," she responded without hesitation.

From the privacy of his office where he was actively monitoring the interrogation, Napoleon Solo pricked up his ears. Reikedahl? Surely it wasn't possible... No, of course not, he schooled himself into composure. Reikedahl was not an uncommon Norwegian name. Likely there was no connection. Still, something in the pit of his stomach was churning and threatening to bring bile up into his throat.

Within the interrogation room, Illya eyed the woman for a moment in silence. The name had registered with him as well.

"State your rank within the organization known as Thrush," the Russian nevertheless proceeded straightforwardly.

"I have no rank within said organization," the woman called Delphina responded slowly and certainly. "I merely exist within said organization."

A heartbeat of silence and then Illya's next request, "Please expound upon that statement."

"Certainly," Delphina agreed as a wry and very disconcerting smile curved her lips. "I am what is casually referenced, within the organization known as Thrush, as a technological residual."

"Meaning you were used as a guinea pig in scientific experimentation?" probed Illya, though his throat felt parched suddenly.

"I was a research subject for scientific experimentation, yes," acknowledged the woman. "But I was never used. I agreed to everything that was done to me."

Her hazel-brown eyes, so like Napoleon's and yet to Illya so vastly different, held his gaze steadily. Illya reserved his caustic retort as he took the time to pour himself a glass of water and sip briefly of the cool liquid before continuing.

“Recount the basic premise of such experimentation,” Kuryakin demanded in a controlled voice.

“Human bio-chemical, bio-electrical and bio-magnetic manipulation,” Delphina kept up her part in the game.

“And the initiator of this research?” the necessary dreaded question dropped from Kuryakin’s lips as he refused through sheer force of will to let his gaze leave that of the woman.

“My father, Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl,” came the dreaded answer.

“Steady on, Illya,” remarked Solo softly, knowing his always partner could not hear him in the interrogation room, but still wanting somehow to provide moral support in this prickly confrontation. “It was more than forty years ago and I survived intact, remember. We both lived to fight another day. Hell, lots more days! We’re both old men now and my health never suffered.”

Though Jack did not understand the cause of the tension that had invaded the interrogation room, he did understand the sheer potency and possible hazard of it. Accordingly he increased his already very tight vigilance over the Thrush, and it was then he saw it. She held something in the palm of her hand, a hand she kept on the seat of her chair and thus below the table and out of ready sight lines. All but completely hidden by the long sleeve of her jumpsuit, the something looked to be a portable music-player, a tiny iPod. She was cleverly manipulating the dial on the unit as well as popping off exposed bits and then easily replacing them using only a thumb and forefinger in movements too slight to be detected through her shoulders or arms. He had never seen anyone so skilled at sleight of hand.

Breaking through the strain of the moment, Valdar came forward and took the object from the woman’s grasp, placing it flat on the table before Kuryakin without uttering a single word. Then he removed a set of handcuffs from his belt, passed the chain through the elongated steel loop on the table and affixed the bracelets to the woman’s wrists. Just as he performed this last action and was checking the surety and fit of the bracelets, Delphina gazed up pointedly at him. Her less-than-fleeting glance caused Jack to momentarily furrow his brow as he could not help but wonder exactly what she was thinking.

“Very good, stern one,” Delphina mentally commended the unaware Chief Enforcement Agent. “You indeed have all the potential I suspected last night.”

Kuryakin lifted the iPod, fingering it casually. “You thought a musical interlude might prove soothing?” he exacted with considered aloofness.

The Thrushie shrugged.

“I am easily bored,” was all she provided by way of explanation.

“Where did you get this?” pressed Illya.

Delphina shrugged yet again.

“Your guards, when in close physical proximity, apparently only worry about a prisoner’s capacity to successfully escape and not whether such has the capacity to successfully pickpocket,” she censured easily.

"I will see that Section V provides the cell guards involved a refresher course in proper prisoner surveillance techniques, sir," the Number 1 in Section II assured the Number 1 in Section III.

"Indeed, Mr. Valdar," approved Illya as he casually pocketed the portable music-player.

"Shall we continue with the interrogation, Mr. Kuryakin?" supplied Delphina with perfect aplomb before that interrogator could himself even venture to resume the session. "We were speaking of my father, I believe," she purposefully taunted as Illya fixed his eyes back upon her.

"I was about to mention I read his obituary in U.N.C.L.E.'s files about a decade ago," deadpanned Kuryakin in an attempt to crack through the woman's poised veneer. "One of those rare Thrush scientists who died peacefully in his bed."

Though Illya's face revealed nothing, Delphina unerringly gauged the slight uneasiness of his body language. "Just so, but his memory does, not so peacefully, live on, no?" she therefore pricked with barbed accuracy.

Illya would not allow himself to be pulled unresisting into this woman's sleek trap. Yes, the memory of Reikedahl did not live "peacefully" in his mind, but he was not going to go down that thorny garden path. He did have a trump card up his mental sleeve. His own recollections had brought back in his mind's eye a certain child, an exceptionally distinctive child, as the fates would have it, whose adoration for her father had been apparent even to the casual observer. And Illya, especially in his field agent days, had never been but a casual observer. His powers of observation had been sharp, clear and unfettered by politeness back then. And he fell back upon the full insolence of such unfettered powers now.

"Ms. Reikedahl," he posed his query, eyes hard and face emotionless, "were you born with oculocutaneous albinism?"

For the first time Delphina's composed mask seemed to slip a little, but she recovered in less than a heartbeat.

"So you do remember me, Mr. Kuryakin," she stated flatly. "Though I suppose an albino child happened upon during a raid of a Thrush medical lab would stand out in memory even after the passage of more than four decades."

Now Jack Valdar was no medical expert or anything, but heck the woman he was looking at here in this room was surely no albino. She had those white lashes and brows, true; yet her skin tone and her eyes – especially her undeniably dark eyes – were not the characteristic traits of an albino.

Behind his great desk Solo pointedly swallowed. Bad times had a way of catching up with you, didn't they? Even bad times so far in the past.

"I must, therefore, assume you most vitally remember my father as well, yes, Mr. Kuryakin?" Delphina completely regained her equilibrium and charged relentlessly forward on her own steady path. "He had a unique scientific fascination with your Mr. Solo to which you took rather nasty exception, if my memory serves. Surely you recall this singular interest and thus him?"

Illya didn't respond.

“Shall I tell you then what I remember? So to refresh your mind?” Delphina ground through the shattered glass of old memories. “Mr. Solo had been captured and made the guest of Thrush. However, his... welcoming committee,” she worded with a wicked grin, “had seen fit to drug him liberally with hallucinogens in order to keep him disoriented and uncoordinated. Papa was livid at that. A hallucinating subject could cause a myriad of issues with regard to proper scientific investigation.”

Napoleon pressed a hand upon the flat surface of his desk, his knuckles turning white from the sheer force with which he made contact with that surface. His mind, meanwhile, churned out useless reassurances all in the vein of “It’s been over for years, Illya. I survived. Don’t let her lead you back there.”

“So, before proceeding with the necessities required by his research, Papa insisted on waiting out the two days it took for the complete flushing of the drugs from Mr. Solo’s system. A delay about which the representative from Thrush Central was none too happy,” Delphina’s words continued to weave their spell, “and which unfortunately turned out to provide you, Mr. Kuryakin, with all the time needed to ascertain Mr. Solo’s general whereabouts.”

Jack took note that the woman’s “my father” had fallen into the more familiar “Papa”. She was herself being drawn into the web of the past she was so expertly spinning.

“Still, the man from Central acceded to his insistence because Papa righteously refused to carry on otherwise,” the Thrush agent continued. “Papa did, however, compromise to some extent by agreeing to administer a specific form of paralyzing agent to Mr. Solo, a type which affected only voluntary muscles while allowing all involuntary ones to function normally. Thus was U.N.C.L.E.’s top enforcement agent kept awake, but completely unable to move or speak. In fact, he could do nothing but lie still, aware of everything and yet firmly chained by the induced unresponsiveness of his own body.”

Illya stared straight ahead, the steady surveillance of his blue eyes surely capable of boring clean through the skull and reminiscing brain of the woman before him.

“The technicians put in intravenous lines to keep him hydrated, and more tubes to perform other necessary tasks,” Delphina painted the picture with vague yet still incisive phrases, so much so that even Jack squirmed a bit under the disturbing hex of them.

In his office, Napoleon paled noticeably, only there was no one to see.

“Enough,” commanded Illya with a store of ingrained reserve that surprised even himself.

“Then you arrived on the scene,” Delphina ignored his order as she raised the volume of her voice, “heroically hell-bent on a rescue of your partner, though you had no idea what exactly had happened to him or where exactly he might be secreted in that lab. Instead of him you found me... or rather I found you. Papa had sent me to look for you especially, you see. And when I found you, I told you I knew where the ‘dark-haired man with the warm brown eyes’ was ‘resting’ and that I would take you to him. You trusted me because who would not trust an innocent child?”

It all came back so vividly to Illya. That lab, the almost ghostly child who was so small and yet seemingly so confident in her ability to bring him to Solo... The guileless way she had taken hold of his hand to guide him to the place where his partner, she assured him, was “resting”...

“I was five years old,” Delphina played out the scene in words, “well almost six, and I was extremely proud Papa had entrusted me with a ‘big-girl’ task. I took you up to the observers’ gallery of the operating theatre and, as had been prearranged, they ambushed you there, several big, burly Thrush guards with their automatic rifles. They knocked you unconscious and then strapped you into a chair in the gallery where you had a bird’s-eye view to all the proceedings going on in the operating theatre below.”

And Illya was there again, there more surely than he was here in a generic interrogation room at U.N.C.L.E. HQ. There in the specially-equipped observers’ gallery of an operating theatre in a Thrush medical lab, strapped firmly in a chair, waking up to...

“When you woke up, Papa was there in the operating theatre,” Delphina’s voice droned on, insidiously worming its way into Illya’s own memories, “with your Mr. Solo secured to a gurney by means of straps across his forehead, shoulders, elbows, wrists, calves and ankles. Even though the man was thoroughly helpless from having already been administered a somewhat riskily large dose of the paralyzing drug, nothing was left to chance. Several cameras had also been set up in the theatre to provide close-up video feed to various monitors situated about the gallery. One of these focused solely on the face of your partner, providing continual evidence of his completely conscious and alert state. From that gallery, we watched everything unfold below: you, me, two strong guards brandishing automatic rifles at the back of your head, and the man from Thrush Central who sat leisurely sipping a drink the entire time. Papa would announce a procedure number and he and his team would perform all such entailed as I informed you, with the knowledge I had so painstakingly learned by rote, exactly what was being done to Mr. Solo.”

Helpless, totally useless... Bound and gagged and compelled to watch... Struggling ineffectually against the circulation-interfering straps that held his body tightly in place... Struggling at least more effectually against the nausea that swept over him in waves... Not wanting to see the combination of grit and panic reflected equally in his partner’s eyes... Not wanting to look away and thus leave that partner isolated within the horror...

Sweat broke out on Illya’s brow.

“Procedure 1: skin scraping; nail clipping; hair clipping; eyelash sample; tongue scraping; epiglottal scraping; gum scraping; tooth extraction,” Delphina listed off as if she had memorized it all but yesterday instead of forty long years ago.

Napoleon gagged reflexively. He certainly remembered.

“Procedure 2: tear swab; saliva swab; nasal swab; perspiration swab; tonsil swab; vocal cord scraping; fingerprinting; blood draw; semen sample; urine sample.”

Jack felt his stomach growing queasy at this revelation of the extreme invasion of bodily privacy done to an U.N.C.L.E. agent under the sadistic auspices of Thrush. While there were surely more physically debilitating torture methods, this had to be the most mentally vicious measure of which he had ever heard tell. He thanked the powers of fate that he had never needed to endure anything in this vein during his own career as a field agent. Oh, he had been drugged, shot, knifed, battered with two-by-fours and baseball bats, subjected to the sting of whips and the bite of burning implements, but he had never had to sit by powerless yet fully aware while he was probed, pulled, plucked and plundered by supposed scientists like an animal that was part of a lab dissection.

Delphina continued her narration in a voice almost hypnotic in quality.

“Procedure 3: hearing decibel test; vocal cord vibration test; lung capacity test; heart rhythm scan; brain wave scan; retinal scan; electro-magnetic nerve reflection; bio-magnetic chemical refraction; pituitary incision; spinal tap.”

“I remember,” Illya at last interrupted her as he regained mental association with the present, though his again dry throat made his voice sound roughly hoarse.

“Yes, I suspect you do, Mr. Kuryakin,” conceded Delphina, unfazed by the disruption in her dramatic description of the past. “Surely it would be a difficult thing to forget, and you did have such a perfect vantage point to survey it all. I remember, as you surely must, that there was then some talk in the theatre of putting Mr. Solo under general anesthesia for the next procedures, but it was decided against. After all, he was so effectively paralyzed, he couldn’t bother the operating team with extraneous movements and he wasn’t even able to scream. Even a local anesthetic was deemed an unwarranted indulgence since the man from Thrush Central was adamant U.N.C.L.E.’s top enforcement agent be ‘obliged to exploit his impeccable training’ by experiencing the pain unmitigated.”

Napoleon’s shoulders shook momentarily, but he quickly controlled his body’s involuntary response to the imposed mental images. “It’s not happening now!” he reminded himself sternly. “It’s just words!” But it is undeniable truth that words do have power.

“Procedure 4:” announced Delphina in a strong voice, “cartilage scraping; tendon scraping; muscle scraping; nerve ganglia scraping; bone scraping; spinal disk vibration; spinal disk scraping; bone marrow draw.”

“I said I remember,” Illya spat out through clenched teeth.

“Procedure 5:” Delphina recited, ignoring the rising sense of revulsion that had quietly invaded the room, “spleen biopsy; stomach biopsy; intestinal biopsy; liver biopsy; heart muscle biopsy; lung biopsy.

“Procedure 6: appendectomy,” she emphasized this last with terse efficiency.

There was dead silence in the interrogation room for at least a full count of twenty seconds.

Ensnared within the seclusion of his office, Napoleon strode toward the standing bar and poured himself a stiff drink. Scotch neat: no soda; no water; no ice. He threw it back into his throat in one huge gulp and then refilled his glass. At least he had this form of Dutch courage to steady his nerves. In the interrogation room several floors below Illya had no means of such even temporary respite to warm the shocking plunge into the icy waters of merciless memories.

“Mr. Solo did finally pass out somewhere during the course of that last procedure,” Delphina unperturbedly tied up her performance. “Papa used some experimental methods, including several needle aspiration techniques, and thus performed an amazingly minimal amount of scalpel work for the required internal organ scrapings and biopsies. The appendectomy, however, was a completely standard surgery requiring all usual cutting. Following so hard upon the ordeal of the other far from hurt-free procedures, I imagine the pain of that last was quite excruciating and beyond the limits of conscious endurance even for a man of Mr. Solo’s impeccable training.”

Illya locked his ice-blue eyes on the hazel-brown ones of Delphina, flints of fire reflecting in the depths of those pale sapphire orbs.

“Yes, I remember. I even remember the narration your father chattily supplied to the gallery during that final operation, a recounting of the discussion that had gone on previously regarding which of Mr. Solo’s organs to remove for further systemic analysis,” supplied Kuryakin in a voice that should have blistered the very metal of the walls. “Spleen? Tonsils? Ah yes, the appendix. That one will do nicely since it serves no irreplaceable need in the body.”

A thin, arctic smile stretched the lips of the Thrush technological residual.

“You do indeed have an impeccable memory, Mr. Kuryakin,” she complimented with just the slightest undercurrent of scorn in her tone. “So I assume you also remember that, even as my father,” she returned to a less personal address of her male parent now that the main brunt of the tale had been unfolded to her satisfaction, “was in the midst of that appendectomy, the Thrush Central representative was continually urging he remove Mr. Solo’s heart instead. Being a humane man with no desire to murder his test subject, he categorically refused.”

“Humane?” repeated Illya in a voice straight from the icy wastes of Siberia. “Your father was a madman who thought he could pilfer through a human body as if seeking for a prize in a cracker-jack box, and all under the supposedly edifying guise of scientific research.”

Delphina stiffened noticeably.

“The final truth remains,” she succinctly summarized, “nothing my father did permanently damaged Mr. Solo. He could easily have killed him. That was not his goal and not his wish.”

“No, his goal was to methodically loot Mr. Solo’s person and then use those medically ill-gotten gains for his personal brand of technological lunacy,” Kuryakin gave his own succinct summary. “What his wish may have been, I don’t know and can’t pretend to care.”

Jack loudly cleared his throat, loud enough to bring Illya’s chilly but unmistakably incensed tirade into check.

“While the reliving of ancient history might seem a worthwhile pastime to you, Ms. Reikedahl,” Illya now tethered the focus of the interrogation back into more current themes, “it avails nothing with regard to explaining your voluntary surrender to U.N.C.L.E. last night.”

“Doesn’t it?” disputed Delphina languidly.

“No,” the Russian pronounced in a tone that left no room for discussion. “So let me redirect our conversation to more pertinent matters. What can you tell me about the light manipulation suit you utilized to breach U.N.C.L.E. security?”

“It worked,” responded Delphina with irritating pithiness.

“How?” pushed back Illya even more monosyllabically.

The Thrush technological residual raised one fine, pure white eyebrow at her interrogator. Then she shrugged.

"I'm no engineer or scientist," she batted back coolly. "You will have to figure out how the suit works for yourself, Mr. Kuryakin."

"That is not what I mean and well you know it," countered Illya.

"Perhaps," conceded Delphina, "but then again perhaps not. Either way you are not yet ready to hear all I have to say."

Now it was Illya who raised an eyebrow at her.

"Oh? And why is that?" he demanded to be told.

"Because you have not yet broken through all the walls of memory," she stated matter-of-factly. "And until you are willing to do so, I will have nothing more to say."

Illya set his lips in a straight and uncompromising line, more than ready and far from reluctant to turn this into a battle of wills between himself and this woman.

"End the session now, Illya," Solo's voice over the room's intercom quickly forestalled any such attempt on Kuryakin's part.

"Interrogation of the prisoner is not yet complete," protested Illya in a tight tone.

"End the session now, Illya," repeated Solo's voice over the intercom. "That's an order."

"Yes... sir," acquiesced Kuryakin sulkily.

Though he had addressed his closest friend with the perfunctory "sir" title that was generally intended to give deference to the other man's position, it was certainly not deference that was seething within Illya's heart and mind at this precise moment. Nonetheless he obeyed his superior's order and wrapped up the session with the request for Valdar to validate on the official record that questioning of the prisoner was ended at that juncture upon the directive of Napoleon Solo, Number 1 of Section I, Policy and Operations, North American division of U.N.C.L.E.

"Why did you do that?" the fiercely angry words were already spewing out of Illya's mouth even before the pneumatic door to Solo's office had automatically shut behind his entrance.

Seated behind his revolving desk, Solo looked up into his friend's face and found that familiar visage uncharacteristically flushed crimson with fury.

"You know exactly why," Napoleon responded pointedly.

"Humor me," spat back Kuryakin, refusing to accept such an unsatisfying answer.

"Because she had gotten the upper hand in the interrogation," Napoleon spelled it out bluntly, though he was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that Illya already knew this irrefutable truth.

"And I was about to take it back!" protested Illya, his temper still flaring. "Did you not trust me to do that?" he demanded as he frustratedly flopped into a nearby chair.

Solo rose from his own seat and crossed to the bar as he assured his friend, “After all that has passed between us over the years, Illya, don’t you think that a rather unmerited question?”

Napoleon removed a bottle of vodka from the small refrigeration unit under the bar, poured a hefty measure of the clear fluid into a crystal tumbler, crossed to where Kuryakin sat, and finally extended the glass of chilled liquor to his friend.

“I am well aware of your abilities as an interrogator,” Napoleon stated by way of unnecessary conciliation. “My decision had nothing whatever to do with a lack of trust in those or in you. What it did have to do with was breaking her stride, having her lose the momentum she gained with her oh-so-spellbinding weaving of that tale, making it incumbent upon her to regain every bit of conquered ground by starting out with a fresh trip down memory lane, if that is where she insists on going.”

Illya studied his friend’s dark eyes for a long moment. Then he sighed in agreement with the still personally distasteful strategy and accepted the glass from Napoleon’s hand.

“I did so want to hang her up by her toenails,” Illya came clean. Then he slammed back the drink, letting the fire of the vodka splash down his throat in one long swallow.

A little smirk lifted just the corners of Solo’s mouth. “I was only too aware of that, tovarisch,” conceded Napoleon as he perched on his desk near to the chair where Illya sat.

He let his brown eyes sweep again over the countenance of his definitely rattled (even if such was well concealed to less familiar eyes) friend. “She really got to you, didn’t she?” Solo broached with genuine concern.

Kuryakin gazed levelly at his friend, capturing and holding those brown eyes with his own blue. “And she did not get to you?” he shrewdly inquired.

Napoleon shifted his body a bit uncomfortably and then resettled himself by crossing one leg over the other. “Touché,” he acknowledged his partner’s dead-on hit.

Illya’s eyes took on a faraway haze as he remarked flatly, “I so remember that little ghoul.”

“Illya,” Napoleon shook his head slowly. “She was five years old.”

Illya shrugged. “Thrush bled her young,” he countered grimly. Then he extended his glass back toward Napoleon, wordlessly asking for a refill on the vodka. The interrogation session, much as he was loath to admit it, had indeed been unnerving.

Solo accepted the glass from his partner’s hand, rose from his perch on the desk, and crossed back to the bar. In the wordless vacuum that ensued as he went about the business of fixing his friend another drink, Napoleon’s mind wandered backwards. He had his own memories of “that little ghoul”...

When he first saw her standing outside the door that likely would grant access into the heart of the Thrush medical complex, he couldn’t be sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. She looked like a ghost: so pale, so white, eyes with a pinkish glow that could have come straight from Hades... or a Thrush chemical vial. God, were they using kids as lab rats now? “Little

girl,” he softly called to her, trying to ascertain her reality. She smiled, then pulled open and ran straight through the door into the lab. Well, if she could get in that easily, so could he.

He followed through that now wide-open entrance just as a hidden Thrush sniper shot at him, striking successfully home with some kind of dart. It hit him high in the left thigh. A trap. He should have realized it from the start. He felt disoriented, dizzy as he fired several blind shots from his Special in the general direction of the sniper’s assault. He pulled the offending barb from his flesh, but knew instinctively it had penetrated deep enough to do its full work. His vision was blurring and misting. And then the child was there again, beckoning before she set off at another sprint. “Honey,” he shouted as he chased after her, knowing it a likely foolish move. But she was just a kid and in more danger than she could possibly comprehend.

“Get out of here! It’s not safe!” He followed blindly, his head spinning wildly now and his feet losing coordination, as she careened around corners and down corridors within the building. Every time he was sure he had lost her, she would reappear and beckon, and the chase would begin anew. “Honey, please listen to me! There are terrible people here! Get out! Run away!” His tongue was too large in his mouth and his words slurred, but he had to make her understand. He finally managed to catch her, or so he thought, as he entered an inner portal through which she had vanished.

Another dart hit him, right in neck this time. And then a third pierced the elbow of his right arm, causing his gun to drop from his hand. His legs turned to jelly and his fingers lacked the dexterity to retrieve his Special. He was on his knees, panting as his lungs gasped for the needed oxygen that seemed to elude them, and the child was standing before him, pink eyes large and very round.

“Pappa kommer⁴,” she assured him in Norwegian. “Papa?” he questioned through lips that could barely form coherent words any longer. His body started convulsing wildly and colors blossomed like fireworks all around him. “Ikke vær redd, du er trygg hos pappa. Du kan hvile nå.⁵”

He felt hands on him, dragging him, pulling him up onto a gurney, using a surgical blade to cut away his clothes, strapping him down. The world turned all lopsided and cartoon bright, sensations of cold and heat became throbbing aches in and of themselves, sounds magnified until everything thundered around him, and then he could no longer focus on anything at all...

“Napoleon?”

His friend’s questioning voice summoned Solo back from the precipice of his reveries.

“So where do we start to unravel this, Illya?” he queried somewhat shakily as he returned to the other man with the fresh drink in hand.

“I hear at the very beginning is the very best place to start,” Illya playfully paraphrased the words of an old Broadway show tune, thus relieving much of the anxiety in the room.

⁴ Papa is coming

⁵ Do not worry, you’ll be safe with Papa. You can rest now.

Napoleon grinned broadly at his friend's silly joke related in that wry, distinctly Kuryakinesque manner.

"I've heard that too," Solo joined in the easy moment as he handed off the refilled vodka tumbler to Illya. "And to that end I've been reviewing the official report from that old affair."

Napoleon spun the revolving desk around so that the computer monitor, with its formulaic display of text set under the bolded title "The Specimen Pool Affair – July 1966", rested in front of Kuryakin's current chair.

Illya stared down at the uncompromising words on the screen as he noted, "Even the name is the stuff of nightmares."

"You can read there my notation that, what little she spoke to me, the albino child spoke in Norwegian," Napoleon made his first sally into unsealing the tape on this particular closed case.

Illya nodded. "While most of what she spoke to me was in English. Very precise English. Studied."

"Learned by rote," Napoleon summarized. "She said that exact thing today during the interrogation, that it was knowledge she had painstakingly learned by rote." Solo then inquired pointedly of his friend, "What did she say in Norwegian to you exactly?"

"Only the phrase 'den mørkhårede mannen med de varme, brune øynene', the dark-haired man with the warm brown eyes, and the insistence that you were 'resting'," recalled Illya without needing to refresh his memory from the file before him on the monitor. "And then later in the observers' gallery, she asked if the bonds of the chair in which I was strapped hurt."

"So, if it was from script, she spoke in English. Off the script, she reverted to her native Norwegian," Napoleon spoke out the logical conclusion as he idly tapped his fingers against his lips.

"We realized back then she had been purposely used as bait to lure us where Thrush wanted us to be," Illya reminded his partner. "So no surprise about the scripting."

"No, no surprise," agreed Napoleon, "but it doesn't hurt to be thorough when laying this all out again." Solo raised one index finger as if attempting to pinpoint the facts. "Bait provided with a script of only actions for me, but of both words and actions for you. Yet in the end she was the one who loosened the straps on the chair for you."

"I had been pulling against the bonds and the blood on my wrists disturbed her," Illya expounded.

"Though she willingly watched from the gallery all the blood being let in the operating theatre without so much as a queasy look, right?" probed Napoleon.

"Without so much as the extra blink of an eye," Kuryakin stated matter-of-factly. "But the blood in that operating room was under the control of 'Papa'."

“Hmmm, yes,” Solo ruminated thoughtfully as his mind connected the dots to what the child had said to him in Norwegian by way of reassurance. “And Papa made it safe,” he paraphrased what he recalled.

After a few moments, Solo punched his intercom open to his secretary and summarily ordered, “Jenny, have Section IV pull together every scrap of information available on deceased Thrush scientist Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl. And I mean everything, even mentions in newspaper society pages or gossip columns. Have them check as well if there are any specifics about his daughter, name of Delphina. I want it all transferred to my secure computer reference library before the end of the day.”

“Right away, Mr. Solo,” Jenny responded with all her usual efficiency.

Napoleon closed off the intercom connection as he ventured, “Do you think her performance today was scripted?”

“Certainly not by Papa,” Illya declared, perhaps too readily.

“But perhaps still by Thrush,” Napoleon contemplated.

“And perhaps any such script included the scene last night in your office,” Kuryakin continued the train of thought.

“Possibly,” Solo considered all they knew thus far. Exasperatingly, it was much too little. “I wonder exactly what kind of technology Ms. Reikedahl is the residual of,” he put the most precarious speculation into words.

“I shudder to think,” commented Illya. “But Napoleon,” he forwarded warily, “her eyes...”

Napoleon uneasily shifted his shoulders.

“Yeah, her eyes...” he repeated the ominous words of his Russian partner. “My eyes,” he verbally articulated what they both were thinking.

“She’s going to have to be interrogated again,” the Russian advised his American friend in no uncertain terms, though he was somewhat uncertain Napoleon would agree to let him finish the interrogation himself.

“Think you’re up to that, Illya?” Napoleon asked after a heartbeat of speculative silence had ensued.

A little half-smile crept up the corners of Kuryakin’s mouth as he registered Solo’s assent to letting him continue as interrogator in this case, assent that reaffirmed the other man’s sustained trust in him.

“Forewarned is forearmed,” Illya willingly accepted the challenge.

“He’ll be as suspicious of you as a canary of a cat if you engage him in conversation like that, greenstick,” Jack Valdar criticized Natasha Kuryakin after having watched and listened to her during this latest improvisation session. “Yunusov can be a talkative little bastard, if you don’t

get his hackles up. His loose tongue could drop a ton of valuable information right into our listening ears. But we have to be vigilant about keeping on the good side of his chaotic nature.”

Natasha was tired and cranky, as were the other four members, one other woman and three more men, of the Russian Arms Affair final strike team. They had been simulating these informal chat approach strategies for hours, and at this precise moment she just didn't want to think any more about how to sidle up to Yunusov. She wanted a hot meal and an equally hot bath, and perhaps a round of hot sex with her current boyfriend of six months. Like as not this last thought lay behind her next flippant outburst.

“Why don't I just seduce the bastard and get on his good side the quick way?” she quipped sarcastically.

Her careless comment opened her right up for Jack's next round of disapproval.

“Haven't you read any of the files on the man, greenstick?” Valdar demanded with icy sangfroid. “His sexual inclinations do not run toward females.”

Damn Jack Valdar to hell! She wasn't incompetent! She had read the files! She just was completely at her wits' end and had thus foolishly given into the temptation to verbally push back against his outspoken criticism. Didn't he understand natural frustration? Superior or not, she had just about had it with his inflexible and heavy-handed training tactics. And as well his continual referral to herself as “greenstick” was adding exponentially to her irritation.

“So why don't **you** just seduce him then?” Natasha threw back at the CEA about as graciously as a spitting cat.

The room went eerily quiet. The other female agent in the group, named Laura Beckstein, caught Natasha's eye and mouthed silently, “Backup plan,” making the younger woman wish she could somehow sink right through the floor. Yes, of course something like that was the logical backup plan. She had studied all the files and knew the slightly built Yunusov's preference in lovers ran to men with bodybuilder-type physiques, and that made Valdar an obvious choice for any such snare should it be deemed the best means of instigation into the Russian's confidence. Where the heck was her head? She was behaving like a petulant child inclined to all the sensitivity of an unspeakably spoiled brat. She was better than this, possessed of not only better agent skills but also more empathetic gifts as a human being. Yet somehow Jack only brought out the worst in her and turned her into the epitome of the callow ‘greenstick’ his constant address insisted she was.

“Don't concern yourself with my part in this operation,” Valdar broke through the awkward silence, each and every syllable of his decree fired like a bullet in Natasha's direction. “Concern yourself with yours. I will admit your aptitude with arms makes you ideal for the role of independent assessor sent to make a full report to Thrush on the specifics of the weapons shipment. But in every other aspect of this mission, greenstick, you seem far too willing to take chances and not plan ahead.”

Pedro Arquas, another male of the team, tried to abate the brewing storm by interjecting easily, “Cut her a break, Jack. It's been a long day. We're none of us at peak performance at the moment.”

“Cutting her a break might mean she dies,” Jack made his blanket determination. “Or you die, or Laura, or either or both of our deep-cover agents, or any one and perhaps everyone on this team. It means likely failure in our mission, and thus that thousands of innocents perish at some point in the future when Thrush aims these blood-bartered weapons at them. Thus I can’t afford to cut her any break whatsoever, and I won’t.”

“And I’m not asking for any!” retorted Natasha in her turn, her blue eyes as hot as twin flames of some lit combustible gas.

“Good. Then repeat the improvisation scenario again,” Jack directed stonily. “Pedro, you stand in for Yunusov this time. And remember, greenstick, endeavor to make...”

“Gabby girlfriend talk,” blurted out Natasha with the frigid tones of Siberia in her voice. “I get it.”

Jack stared at her, his gray eyes impenetrable and unyielding, his very silence as commanding as any bellowed words and even more meticulously uncompromising.

“Partner indeed,” Natasha indignantly huffed under her breath as the team uneasily resumed the exercise.

Some two hours later as the members of the team were gathering up coats and other personal paraphernalia in preparation for heading to their various homes, Natasha found her mind returning to her earlier verbal gaffe. Had she unwittingly insulted Jack? She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t want to have put herself in an even worst position in her new and difficult partner’s regard. Accordingly she sought out Laura Beckstein in an attempt to ascertain if an apology in a particular vein might be in order so to keep her relationship with Jack at least within the boundaries of the bearable for them both.

“Is he comfortable with that backup plan?” Natasha insinuated the question in a quiet aside.

“Jack?” Laura, a woman in her mid-thirties with an impressive array of both field missions and field successes emphasizing her top-notch skills as a security system detection/deactivation expert, was for a moment nonplussed. Then she shrugged. “Jack tenaciously guards his privacy, but I rather doubt what you’re implying simply because he is very much a conservative traditionalist.”

Natasha considered that answer for a long moment and then decided to dive headlong into deep waters.

“Would he be able to pull it off then? I mean, if push came to shove and the backup plan was the best alternative, could he really do it? He is just so rigid a personality,” Natasha qualified her query, “I can’t see him bending against his own natural inclinations.”

Laura smirked and leisurely scratched one eyebrow to cover that reaction.

“Natasha, I can absolutely fill you in on one very pertinent certainty about Jack Valdar,” confided Laura matter-of-factly. “He, plain and simple, does not permit himself to fail. So you should never doubt his ability to pull off anything required by his job, whether against his ‘personal inclinations’ or anything else. Watch him closely as he works; his technique is well worth the scrutiny.”

“Now,” the older woman finalized the summary, “as to whether any mission tasks ever cause him in private to hit the bottle, or sweat through nightmares, or vomit like someone in the midst of a bad bout of food poisoning, I don’t have a clue. And the truly significant point is, neither does anyone else, including Thrush.”

Now it was Natasha who smirked as she challenged, “Are you implying he has no faults?”

Laura laughed lightly.

“As a human being,” Beckstein forwarded, “he surely has plenty. But as a field agent, none I’ve ever noticed. He’s an enigma Thrush would dearly love to solve, but even U.N.C.L.E. itself hasn’t yet managed that Gordian feat.

“I’m not sure I envy you the personal headaches that go along with being assigned as his partner,” divulged Laura bluntly. “Yet strictly from a business angle, you’ve got the very best guarding your back, greenstick,” she let Jack’s nickname for the younger woman escape her lips, though she gave Natasha a quick wink that verified she meant the moniker in nothing but good humor.

Natasha carefully considered Laura’s assessment of Valdar before she murmured yet again under her breath, “Partner indeed.” Though the tenor of that quiet remark, even though still underscored by exasperation, was now more speculative than indignant.

“Gjør det vondt?⁶” a child’s voice broke through his emotional torment as he sat, bound and gagged, watching his partner being sliced open in the operating theatre below this observers’ gallery.

He turned his eyes to the little albino girl standing beside his chair as she fingered the blood staining his wrist where he had struggled, kept struggling, to free himself from the tight leather strap.

“Gjør det vondt?” she repeated.

“Yes, it hurts,” he thought angrily in answer to her question, the gag in his mouth preventing him from actually saying anything. “All of this hurts,” his mental discourse played out.

Something in his eyes must have given her the answer she sought for incredibly she began loosening that strap on his right wrist.

He glanced warily at the guards behind him, but they weren’t paying any attention. Instead they were bantering with the Thrush Central mucky-muck concerning what particular organ of his partner’s should be permanently removed. Their crude vulgarity left him certain they were paying the child in that gallery no heed whatsoever. She was part of the furniture to them, and he did not believe any of the others there could speak or understand the girl’s native language. Why should they? This wasn’t Norway; this was the United States, Connecticut to be exact, and the Norwegian scientist and his daughter were just imported commodities for Thrush’s activities here.

⁶ Does it hurt?

He watched the girl's small fingers as she undid the strap a bit clumsily. This was going to be tricky. His Special and communicator had been confiscated of course, but he did have a homing device in the buckle of his boot that had been overlooked in the quick search the Thrush goons had done on him before strapping him into this chair. If he could manage to get it activated and if he then could likewise manage to get a rifle from one of the thugs; he might be able to make some kind of stand until U.N.C.L.E. reinforcements arrived to attack the lab complex.

He struck just as the child had completely unfastened the strap, robbing her of the opportunity to reaffix it more loosely. He pulled his wrist free and used the momentum of punching the flat of that hand against the backrest, as well as pushing with the full weight of his body, to knock the heavy chair backwards into the two guards. One of the rifles expelled an automatic round that sprayed the room, hitting the Thrush Central man several times square in the chest (surely a bit of Solo luck extended vicariously to him in that moment), as both guards were hammered to the floor. The one whose rifle had discharged was knocked completely unconscious. The other guard's rifle skittered across the floor to the opposite side of the room. The former captive's free hand closed upon the throat of this guard, squeezing and squeezing. The Thrush's face turned red-purple as he pulled frantically at the hand closing over his throat, but the assailant refused to loosen his grip. The guard's face went bluish as he fought for breath and finally sank into unconsciousness as well.

He quickly undid the strap on his right ankle, activating the homing beacon in the buckle of his boot even before releasing the straps on his other wrist and ankle, as well as the one secured across his chest. Lastly he tore the gag from his mouth. He grabbed the first guard's abandoned rifle from where it lay very close to the unconscious form, pulled himself completely free from the upended chair, and then without a moment of hesitation whacked each of the guards savagely in the head with the butt of the weapon, sending streams of blood cascading down their faces. There was no time for niceties. If they awakened, it would be too simple for them to overpower him, and he knew he likely didn't have much time before the inevitable Thrush backup muscle made an entrance and likely made quick work of dispatching the helpless Napoleon.

Below in the theatre the doctor and his several surgical assistants were obviously in shock at the sudden turn in events. He knew he had to stop them from doing anything to alert the complex of his attack, as well as from simply killing off Napoleon with a scalpel or an injection of some deadly drug. Standing almost exactly where she had before was the little albino girl. He grabbed the child easily in one arm and lifted her off the floor, pointedly showing his prize to those in the theatre, particularly to one man in that theatre.

"Do anything stupid and she dies," he announced in a deadly tone, though whether in honesty he could ever kill a child in cold blood, he had no clue. But there wasn't time to think about ethics now. His partner was bleeding out on the operating gurney below him, and this child was the only insurance he had to guarantee his friend's life.

"Remain still!" Reikedahl ordered his three assistants.

None of the surgical team had guns on their persons. They weren't muscle; they were scientific personnel. Thus they were at a disadvantage here and the doctor was wise enough to realize that.

"I have a way to provide us security from trigger-happy intrusion, Mr. Kuryakin," Reikedahl bartered. "Can we come to an agreement?"

"That depends," he responded warily. "What is the way?"

"I can put the operating theatre and observers' gallery under quarantine shutdown," came the doctor's proposition as he indicated with his head a lever on one wall of the operating theatre stuck beneath a yellow sign clearly labeled 'Quarantine Lockout' in large black letters.

"Do it!" he commanded in a harsh voice he barely recognized as his own as he pressed the rifle close to the side of the little girl he yet held in his other arm.

"Doctor, you can't be serious!" exclaimed a male surgical assistant as he rushed forward toward Reikedahl. Reikedahl simply reached out with the scalpel he yet held in one hand and stuck it unhesitantly into the man's gut. The assistant slid lifelessly to the floor at the scientist's feet.

"I am deadly serious," Reikedahl spoke in warning to the remaining two surgical assistants. Then the scientist moved off to the lockout lever and pulled it steadily downward. The sound of doors automatically sealing within the immediate corridor was accompanied by the wail of sirens signaling a biohazard alert through the remainder of the complex.

He glanced down at the gurney on which his partner lay still bleeding profusely from the open incision of the otherwise completed appendectomy. "Stitch up my partner," he demanded of Reikedahl.

"Ah, for that we will need to make another bargain," Reikedahl pushed his own position.

"I'm warning you," he bluffed, for surely he had no intention of killing this child (did he?), as he roughly shook the little girl held within the curve of his arm.

"Let me further demonstrate my good faith, Mr. Kuryakin," Reikedahl put up a hand. Then the scientist went to a tray on the surgical table and selected a syringe from its surface. He took the syringe over to where his two remaining assistants stood cowering. "Lie down," he told them. "This will only make you immobile for a time," he assured them. "You'll recover in full health."

The techs, looking very uncomfortable, nodded their acquiescence. They had been the ones to fill that syringe earlier for use in Solo's IV 'in case' and knew the dose it contained wasn't enough to kill, at least not them since they didn't have any of the paralysis drug already in their systems. The addition of it to Solo's already saturated system though would definitely have killed him; thus the 'in case' designation. They voluntarily lay down on the floor and Reikedahl emptied half of the syringe in the arm of each.

Then the scientist got to his feet and looked back up at Illya, where he stood in the observers' gallery, and held up the empty needle. "There, you see," the doctor remarked easily. "Now it is only you and I and our bargaining chips, my daughter and your Mr. Solo. So let us negotiate like gentlemen, face to face."

He snickered, but Reikedahl only continued, "My daughter can show you the hidden stairs from the gallery to this theatre. And I am quite aware you have her under your control even as you are aware I have Mr. Solo under mine. We meet on an even playing field."

He nodded shortly, keenly aware of the blood running out of Napoleon's body on that operating gurney. He needed to keep his partner alive or having the assault team arrive to take out this lab would prove a very hollow victory to him indeed.

"Bring mannen til meg⁷, Delphie," Reikedahl subsequently instructed his daughter. She nodded and then turned her face up to her captor, wordlessly asking to be set down. He stood her back on her feet and she, still wordlessly, took his hand and led him toward the back wall of the gallery. There she pressed something, he never saw what, and the wall slid open to reveal a narrow spiral staircase. Just before the two of them began to descend the stairs, a voice spoke from behind them.

"You are the devil, Kuryakin," the man from Thrush Central wheezed out, blood spurting from his mouth and all but choking off his words, "but one day Central will find a way to give you your due, never fear."

He made no gesture to indicate he had heard the man's threat, simply followed the little girl down the winding staircase into the operating theatre.

Once they stood face-to-face, Reikedahl put forth bluntly, "You have somehow managed to notify U.N.C.L.E. of this location, yes?" His silence again seemed all the answer required of him by a Reikedahl. "In the intervening meanwhile before your cohorts arrive," went on the scientist, "you want me to sew up Mr. Solo all neat and tidy, and I want my daughter's freedom."

"What makes you think she wouldn't be better off in the custody of U.N.C.L.E.?" he insinuated.

"I don't want her in the custody of U.N.C.L.E.; I want her free," persisted Reikedahl. "And I want her free to take that," he indicated with his head the small refrigeration unit packed neatly with the glass slides, vials and jars holding the 'samples' taken during the medical procedures performed during the past hours on Napoleon.

"No," he negated in a hard tone, ominously brandishing the Thrush rifle in his hand.

"Come now, Mr. Kuryakin," inveigled Reikedahl, "Mr. Solo is slowly dying on this table, and your cavalry might not get here in time to save him. As soon as that last unit of blood," the doctor emphasized by pointing to the more than half-drained plastic bag hanging on the medical stand and connected by IV into Napoleon, "which is replacing what he is losing, is depleted, he doesn't stand a chance. Not to mention whatever infection might be incubating in that open incision even as we speak, since this operating room is now far from properly sterile."

Reikedahl was right. He had come into this room without so much as a surgical mask and so had the little girl, bringing with them untold germs that had ever more chance to fester in Napoleon's wound the longer it remained open. How foolish of him not to recognize sooner that asking him to deal face-to-face had been but a means for Reikedahl to gain an extra bit of leverage in this negotiation.

"How can she get out without alerting the whole complex to the falsehood of the quarantine?" he asked suspiciously.

⁷ Bring the man to me

“Vis ham sjakten⁸, Delphie,” Reikedahl directed his daughter. Obediently the little girl went over to a portion of the wall in the operating room and pushed a button that opened into a small horizontal though slightly downward-pitched chute. “We send specimens out to an isolation area that way. Delphie is small enough to ride the pneumatic railway transport along with the cooler. That is how she can get out.”

He hesitated, but then considered the fact that, once the U.N.C.L.E. assault team got into this complex, they should be able to find that isolation area and the telltale cooler quickly enough.

“All right, send her out with it,” he conceded reluctantly.

“A gracious bargain, Mr. Kuryakin,” allowed Reikedahl as he lifted the cooler and set it on the rails within the channel.

Just then Napoleon’s eyes shot open. The state of blessed unconsciousness had fled from him, leaving behind the fullness of the pain and the reality of the paralysis. How the little girl had registered this fact, he couldn’t say. He only knew she was beside the gurney in an instant, her hand touching his partner’s as she softly said, “Pappa vil gjøre alt bedre.”

Papa will make it all better? Even as young as she was, how could she not understand that it was “Papa” who had caused Napoleon so much hurt?

And then she turned to him and stared at him defiantly, her pink eyes holding his blue. “Du vil aldri gjøre meg redd,” she uttered certainly. “You will never make me afraid,” he mentally translated as she scurried back to the chute and crawled up behind the cooler on the rails, Reikedahl shutting the door after her and activating the moving transport to send her and her ‘treasure chest’ somewhere into the bowels of the complex...

Illya awoke with a physical and vocal start. Beside him in bed Trice stirred.

“Darling?” she questioned in a half-dazed tone.

“It’s nothing,” he assured her. “Go back to sleep. I’m just going to get a cup of tea.”

“Remember to shut the kettle off when you’re done,” his wife admonished before settling back into slumber.

Illya pushed his feet into his slippers and wrapped a robe over his pajamas, belting it securely. It was winter and the house was rather cold at night, since neither he nor Trice had been raised in the American mode of overheating a building, especially not when one slept.

He wandered down into the kitchen of the brownstone and plugged in the electric tea kettle. He set about spooning loose tea leaves from a canister into a metal infuser that he then placed in a china teapot he had removed from an open shelf nearby. He took a cup from a cupboard and the cherry jam from the refrigerator. He spooned a heaping helping of the jam into the cup, leaving the spoon in it as well in readiness to stir the sweet stuff into the tea once it was brewed. Finally he sat at the kitchen table, waiting for the water to boil in the kettle and for the images boiling in his brain to subside back into cool memory.

⁸ Show him the chute

He hadn't had a single nightmare in years, not that he had ever had them all that frequently at any time in his life. But sometimes harrowing bits from old missions would haunt his sleeping moments. Still, tonight it had been more than bits. It had been like reliving it all again. And that mission was something he definitely did not want to relive.

To this day he couldn't say for certain if he would have killed that little girl if her father hadn't chosen to trade her life for Napoleon's. To this day he couldn't say why he had purposely excluded her final words to him spoken in Norwegian – *You will never make me afraid* – in the written report he had submitted on the affair. And to this day he could never forgive himself for letting Reikedahl talk him into permitting the child to take with her on her escape those specimens gleaned from Napoleon's body. For the U.N.C.L.E. assault force had never found either the cooler or the little girl, and Reikedahl, though taken into custody, had been sprung free by Thrush not more than a month later to be safely ensconced in some other lab to continue whatever work he had started in that complex in rural Connecticut.

"You are the devil, Kuryakin," the man from Thrush Central had in his dying moments taunted, *"but one day Central will find a way to give you your due, never fear."* And maybe, just maybe, they had after all.

The kettle whistled insistently and Illya set about making and then drinking his tea, hoping to somehow ease his mind fully back into the surety of the present. That present where he was no longer a dedicated enforcement agent in the prime of life and purpose, but rather a world-weary man in his seventies attempting to grow old with some semblance of grace.

"Scream!" he tried to get his mind to force his body into action. *"Dammit, Solo, can't you even do that?"*

But it was useless. His body would not obey him: not his throat nor any other part of him. He had wakened from the blackness of unconsciousness back into the agony of unremitting pain and he could do nothing, not even cause discomfort to the ears of his tormentors with shrieks announcing the depth of his physical suffering.

He felt a small warmth on his hand and then a child's voice said something in a foreign language. "Pappa vil gjøre alt bedre."⁹ But his dazed mind was too alive with the reality of excruciating pain his senses were shocking through him to even attempt to translate the words. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the constant stabs and aches and throbbings assaulting him.

He had borne torture before, and knew he'd always borne it well too, no matter how conceited that personal view might be accounted. Yet somehow this was different, perhaps because he could not move at all, nor even taunt with words. And words had always been so much his weapons. More than anything else, they sustained him in times of trial. Yet now he could do nothing but attempt to endure in total silence and thus complete isolation the fullness of his physical anguish.

And then the child's voice was saying something else in that foreign tongue to someone else in the room. But what she said and to whom she said it didn't register with him. The next thing his

⁹ Papa will make it all better.

mind could comprehend was a familiar voice, though it currently sounded rather strained and definitely angry.

“Give him something for the pain,” that accented male voice was commanding.

“Too late for that,” another male voice with an entirely different accent responded. “No time to wait for it to take effect. Mr. Solo will just have to endure on his own reserves a bit longer. I have always heard U.N.C.L.E. agents are remarkably stoic when it comes to putting up with physical distress, so it shouldn’t prove a problem for their top agent, should it?”

A hand reached out to press warm fingers against his and he was at last able to at least focus his vision on the owner of that hand.

“Hang on, Napoleon,” Illya bolstered him surely. “Help is on the way. Just a little longer.”

And though he couldn’t squeeze those fingers pressing his, he found himself relaxing into the surety of his partner’s presence. Letting the pervasive pain drift over him in waves that he now counted off calmly in his head as they rhythmically crested and receded even as something pulled steadily at his abdomen.

“There. Basted up pretty as a prize turkey on Thanksgiving morning,” the other voice announced somewhat flippantly, “to interject an entirely American bit of imagery.”

“Shut up, doctor,” Illya advised the other man in a dangerous tone. “Remember I’m still holding the gun.”

And then to his ears came sounds he was only much later to realize were the whirr of helicopter blades as they landed outside. Following hard upon came gunfire and shouting as an U.N.C.L.E. assault force fought its way into the Thrush lab complex. Finally a team of agents in biohazard gear used a magnesium incendiary to blast the lock from the door of the operating theatre and entered en masse.

“Jesus Christ!” exclaimed one of the agents at the sight of him strapped down to that operating gurney, bloody sheets offering stark evidence of something less than salubrious having been done to him.

“Get a medical evac team in here,” instructed Illya in a clipped tone. “The quarantine was a ruse; there is no biohazard. But Mr. Solo needs medical attention immediately.”

“Nonsense,” broached the other man, the one Illya had addressed as ‘doctor’. “No one has ever impugned my medical technique.”

“And get him out of here,” Illya announced in an icy tone in reference to the Thrush scientist. “Before I personally tear him limb from limb and save U.N.C.L.E. the expense of incarcerating him.”

Everywhere there was flurried activity. Yet he was only vaguely aware of any of it as he was wheeled quickly outside by U.N.C.L.E. medical personnel, and finally lifted into a medical helicopter, Illya sliding in beside his gurney at the last moment before take-off.

“The complex is secured, Napoleon,” Illya advised the CEA matter-of-factly.

But his friend must have read the panic in his eyes, the panic caused by the fact he still couldn't move a muscle, hadn't been able to do so for hours upon hours. Was this paralysis permanent?

"We will have you wiggling your toes again, and waggling your eyebrows at all the ladies as well, in no time," Illya sought to calm his fears as the Russian spoke the acerbic reassurance with one of his teasing half-smirks.

He had no way to know that his friend was far from sure of that at this precise moment, but he himself was completely sure of his friend. So he trusted unconditionally in Illya's spoken comfort and let his restless mind still into quiet as he was injected with pain medication. Yet as he drifted close to sleep he heard Illya say something that made absolutely no sense to him at that moment.

"And we will get back that bunch of cracker-jack prizes the good doctor stole out of you too..."

Napoleon awoke with a physical and vocal start. He attempted to slowly regulate his breathing back to normalcy as his eyes focused on the familiar surroundings of his penthouse bedroom.

A nightmare, just a nightmare. Nothing to get panicky about. The nightmare was part of the past, and he was safe and sound in the present.

Rising from his bed, Solo shrugged on his robe, leaving it to hang open unbelted, and thrust his feet into the slippers that rested on the floor nearby. He padded into his living room and for a moment or two considered moving on to the kitchen and brewing a pot of coffee. Then he decided against it; coffee would only keep him awake. Instead he moved to the bar in the living room and poured a measure of good brandy into a crystal snifter.

He settled himself into an easy chair and sipped slowly at the fiery liquor. It warmed his insides in the chill of the winter night. And in the after-chill of the nightmare as well.

He suffered nightmares stemming from the trauma of old missions now and again. But truthfully not very often. He usually had a way of tucking bad things beyond even the reach of his subconscious. Yet tonight that facility had failed him utterly with the result this nightmare had been more detailed than any he had ever experienced.

What had so disturbed him about that affair at the time and what still disturbed him about it now was how... vulnerable he had felt. Customary forms of torture frayed his weapons of wit and charm, yet always left them undeniably intact, a secret means of endurance that buoyed his spirit even in the worse of situations. This time, however, those weapons had been effectively stolen from him along with the control of his body. Hell, he hadn't even been able to scream. And if he had come up in his head with a dozen perfectly brilliant plans to effect his escape, none of them would have mattered so much as a speck of dust floating in the breeze since he hadn't been able to force even a pinky to move a mere quarter inch.

He had been helpless as an infant, and in his own helplessness somehow he had felt a... What could he call it? Empathy he guessed was the best way to describe it. Yes, he had felt an empathy with the strange little albino girl, she who obeyed without question because she didn't yet understand what the questions should be. Vulnerable in the extreme just as he had been.

He knew Illya did not feel that way. That for some reason Illya felt, as he had stated shortly after the affair to Napoleon, that the child was centered with a core of steel. "Whether it was just

natural to her,” Illya had expounded, “or something Thrush instilled in her, I can’t say. But I can say it existed in the child with whom I interacted.”

Napoleon sighed as he allowed another swallow of the brandy to ease down his throat and send its pleasant burn into his stomach, lulling him away from old memories and into current realities. For the child, with or without that core of steel, was now a woman and she had instigated herself back into their lives. Whether for good or ill, Solo could not be certain. But the empathy he had felt for the child had come back to him for the woman. He couldn’t explain why even to himself. He just felt it; that plain and that simple. Nothing intellectual about it; just something rising from the always tangled mass of human emotions.

The last remark Solo recalled Illya speaking on the medical copter before he himself had passed into the oblivion of drug-induced sleep came back to him with a vengeance.

“And we will get back that bunch of cracker-jack prizes the good doctor stole out of you too.”

Illya had said something similar today during the interrogation session, hadn’t he? Yes, something about Reikedahl being “a madman who thought he could pilfer through a human body as if seeking for a prize in a cracker-jack box”.

“And I am the cracker-jack box,” decreed Solo in a quiet voice.

Instinctively Napoleon shivered. The reaction had nothing at all to do with any environmental chill inherent in the current December night, though it did undoubtedly have much to do with the mental chill inherent in another night long past.

Act IV: Perhaps...

Illya Kuryakin looked up from the electron microscope into which he had been peering.

“Final check for lucisorqe in coating of light manipulation suit:” he spoke aloud so the audio monitor in his lab would record his vocal analysis, “positive.”

So there it was: the ultimate basis for the astounding properties of the suit. Lucisorqe was a new mineral compound, its form very mercurial and its existence decidedly rare. The coating on the suit used it in a chemical cocktail, and under those conditions it had been very difficult to detect. The crystalline structure of the liquid-like mineral had been documented for only a short period of time, and access to the mineral itself was so scarce that few scientists were able to immediately identify that structure. Illya had needed to consult with experts on the subject before allowing this final determination of lucisorqe as an integral part of the suit coating to pass into the record as firm and absolute.

“Mr. Solo should be very pleased to have this finally verified,” stated one of the lab technicians who had been working with Illya this day.

“Perhaps,” Kuryakin demurred in his best ‘don’t assume anything’ voice, causing the tech to lose his small smile of research triumph.

Truth be told, Illya really did have no idea how Napoleon would react to this bit of news. His friend had seemed off the past couple of days, not himself. And all of the uncharacteristic behavior seemed to center on the Reikedahl woman.

Just this morning Illya had been blindsided when Napoleon's secretary had asked what he thought about the picture Section IV had added into Solo's computer reference library materials on the Reikedahls, both father and daughter. He hadn't known about any such picture. Napoleon hadn't told him about it and certainly hadn't shown it to him. Illya had pretended to know all about it of course, and had thus gotten Jenny to print him out a copy "for research purposes".

It had been from a newspaper clipping, a society page. It showed Niles Ospreye, that Thrush council member who presented himself to the public as a philanthropist for scientific research causes, with his arm possessively draped about the waist of a woman who was listed as being his "unidentified date". Though the angle was bad and the photo had been taken from a good range off, there was no doubt in Illya's mind the woman in that picture was none other than Delphina Reikedahl.

Illya immediately confronted Napoleon about that photo, slamming his wheedled copy on the revolving desk and spinning it quickly in front of Solo.

"It doesn't prove anything," was his friend's response.

"It proves she has intimate dealings with Thrush Central," retorted Illya with more than a bit of exasperation at Napoleon's attitude. "That she's not the ignored bit of leftover technology she tried to make us believe."

Solo remained silent.

"Napoleon," queried Illya in a tight-lipped tone, "what is going on with you? Ospreye is one of the most powerful members on the Thrush Council. We've been trying to bring him down for years. You don't think that him sending his erstwhile date," Illya settled for the polite term, "right into U.N.C.L.E. headquarters might not be part of some well-laid plot? Come on, my friend; start thinking straight about all this."

"What proves he sent her?" was Napoleon's only counter.

"What proves he didn't?" countered Illya in turn.

"You're basing your assumptions on one questionable photo taken five years ago that Section IV came across by happenstance," Napoleon furthered his own viewpoint.

"Happenstance?" Illya all but croaked out the word. "Will you listen to yourself, Napoleon? I don't know what is going on in your head, but whatever it is I do not much like it."

Solo leaned against the high back of his leather chair, closing his eyes with a weary sigh.

"I just don't think it's that simple," he forwarded in a tired voice.

"Did I say it was simple?" demanded Illya. "Nothing with Thrush is ever simple. Sending this woman, who has such an unpleasant connection with both our pasts, right into the lap of U.N.C.L.E., body conveniently cloaked in an exotic new Thrush device, is far from a basic ruse and does smack suspiciously of a convoluted setup. It is more than a perhaps to surmise that Thrush could conjecture how this all might affect you and be very intent on using those feelings."

Hazel-brown eyes snapped open to stare into ice-blue ones.

“Stop, Illya,” warned Napoleon in that slow and soft voice that threatened an underlying blast of fury. “I’m not that vulnerable.”

“Sometimes you are, my friend,” came Illya’s final word on the subject just before he stormed out of the office of the Continental Chief.

Now, as his lab assistants cleaned up the slides and set everything in order for proper recordkeeping, Illya considered his next step.

He was to again interrogate the “Thrush technological residual” in a few hours, and he fully intended to retain the upper hand during this session.

The century-and-a-half-old brownstone in the Murray Hill district of Manhattan that served as residence to Illya and Trice Kuryakin never ceased to grant Napoleon Solo a feeling of snug coziness and understated refinement whenever he gazed upon its muted golden-beige façade. It had become his second home, a place where he felt equally as comfortable as he did in his own toney Upper East Side digs. In fact, there was an element here his own lodgings couldn’t match despite the more chic address, that being a feeling of familial warmth.

Many were the lazy Sunday afternoons or laugh-filled Christmas mornings Napoleon had spent within these familiar walls, especially when Natasha was a youngster. Though Illya had never been and certainly was not now a believer in any religion, Trice, who was very Church of England in spiritual viewpoint, had wheedled him into accepting a typical Episcopalian baptism for his daughter by using as bait the idea of such giving his dearest friend an easily referenced association with Natasha through the position of godfather. That idea had very much appealed to Illya as he had very much wanted for Napoleon to be a recognizable part of his child’s life, while to Napoleon it had presented the possibility of a blessing beyond reckoning. And so it had been decided and so it had been done. And so had Solo’s relationship with Natasha given him something he never thought to have, since he had no children of his own; that relationship proving both loving and giving, full of mischief and merriment, and bounded by protective care and future hope. It was true to say Natasha simply adored her one and only Dyadya, and that Napoleon absolutely cherished his one and only goddaughter.

Natasha lived on her own now in a trendy loft apartment in the Chelsea district. Yet the brownstone in Murray Hill was still the family gathering spot, and Napoleon was very much part of the family. His acceptance as such was something for which Solo was eternally grateful to Trice. She could have resented his closeness with Illya when she had married the Russian; she could later have been frustrated by Natasha’s childhood worship after having permitted him entry into the girl’s daily life as godfather. Yet neither negative emotion had ever inserted itself into her dealings with Napoleon. In fact, Trice had always been more than willing to “take him into the bosom of her family”, as the saying went.

“Shall we go in, sir?” Ed Lein, Napoleon’s bodyguard, asked a bit anxiously. He had returned to Solo’s side, after providing the limo driver with his final instructions, somewhat dismayed to find his chief in the middle of the sidewalk, having eschewed the more guarded position near the bulk of the heavily armored car. Ed did not relish the idea of the Number 1 in Section I standing unprotected out in the open on the street in the bright afternoon sunlight. The North American division head was simply too visible a target under these particular circumstances.

The constant necessity for a bodyguard had come with the territory of promotion into a lead policy position within U.N.C.L.E. Still, as a former Section II operative who had been trained and expected to look after himself, Napoleon absolutely hated that necessity. He had borne the annoyance for twenty-two long years, yet it still chafed at his ego. Though the younger man could be something of a bulldog when it came to his duties, Solo had to admit that Ed Lein was at least someone who he found tolerable of personality. Not so many of the bodyguards that had protected him over the years. And at least private forays like this didn't require the four man team that usually surrounded him during diplomatic missions entered into in the name of U.N.C.L.E.

Nodding shortly, Solo headed up the stairs and pushed the buzzer near the front door of the brownstone. Trice Kuryakin opened the portal from within after but a few short minutes, minutes during which Lein kept his eyes darting everywhere, his hand resting upon his Special in its holster under his partially unbuttoned topcoat, and his body at an angle to shield the older man from any possible stray bullets.

"Napoleon," spoke Trice easily as she leaned in to accept the greeting kiss Solo deposited on her cheek, "this is a pleasant surprise."

She was barefoot as she almost always was when ensconced at home. Despite her upper-crust upbringing, there was much of the bohemian in Trice, an attitude that had not altered despite her sixty years. Wavy auburn hair carelessly pulled back in a scrunchie served to emphasize the telltale golden streak age had shot through her tresses at one particular spot from hairline to the very ends of the strands. Looking slapdashly attractive, as well as far younger than her years, Illya's wife had an open and paint-smudged smock draped over jeans and a pullover, indicating she had more than likely been working in her studio. Trice was quite an accomplished artist and her paintings sold for thousands of dollars in galleries throughout New York.

"I hate to disturb you when you're working, Trice, but might you have a moment to talk with me?" queried Solo a bit uncertainly.

"Always for you, sweeting," Trice assured him with a smile and her own personal form of endearment as she guided Solo in through the door by placing a hand on his arm.

Ed followed close behind, shutting the door decisively after him. Trice threw over her shoulder, knowing well as she did Solo's current bodyguard from Napoleon's previous visits to her home, "Reset the security locks for me, will you, Ed? And then roust up Mrs. Sedowsky," she referenced the Kuryakins' longtime housekeeper. "Have her brew you a cup of fresh coffee and fix you a sandwich too, if you haven't had lunch yet," Trice finalized her instructions to Lein. "Napoleon and I will be in my studio."

Napoleon chuckled softly as Trice, never once breaking her stride, led him by the arm up the several flights of stairs from the main level of the brownstone to her attic studio.

"You always do so effectively cow my bodyguards into obedience," he teased appreciatively.

Trice shrugged, but there was a mischievous twinkle in her hazel-green eyes.

"Comes with the territory of being your partner's wife," she assured him. "All of U.N.C.L.E. knows better than to stand in the draft of a possible Siberian blast emanating from that quarter."

The pair had reached the level of Trice's studio and Napoleon entered the organized chaos of that space with the same awe he always did. Canvases everywhere in various stages of completion; long tables with tubes of oil paint laid out in rows; brushes of every size, shape and texture bunched alongside; diluted turpentine used to clean those brushes sending a sharp tang into the air; easels and palettes; rough cotton cover cloths: everywhere the clutter of creativity. Napoleon was drawn to an enormous canvas on an easel standing very near one of the overly large windows that, along with a huge skylight above, guaranteed Trice plenty of natural light when the day was fine.

"This new?" he questioned absently.

Trice came up to stand beside him.

"Yes," she responded readily. "I call it 'Through Life's Long Corridor'."

Napoleon quietly studied the oil-color before him. Trice always painted in tones of gray, and this work was no exception. Yet somehow looking at her art always brought to mind just how many shades of gray there were in the world. Ones with blue undertones, with green, with brown, with pink, with purple, with yellow, with gold, with orange, with red. There was nothing really monochromatic about her work; no matter that gray was her tint of choice. Somehow she found every nuance that color could offer and used them all perfectly. This particular painting showed the perspective of a long corridor, the forefront images tight and narrow with the background ones fanning outward. The outward cone of the depicted tunnel was lined on both sides with likenesses of mirrors, dozens of them, with those in the forefront being bathed in grays accented beneath with pink and white hues, their surfaces flat and smooth. Each subsequent set of opposing mirrors reflected a different undertone in its gray coloration and a different texture, until the final set showed very wavy images undercast with yellows and golds. Somehow the effect of the inverted perspective of the piece was particularly eye-catching and touched something in Napoleon he couldn't have put into words if he tried.

"Do you like it?" Trice asked softly, staring intently at Solo's strong profile as he took in the picture with rapt admiration.

"Very much," Napoleon answered just as softly.

"It's yours," Illya's wife declared without hesitation.

Napoleon turned a startled face to her. "That's far too generous an offer," he demurred.

"Nonsense," Trice disagreed. "I owe you a birthday gift anyway," she reminded him with a ready wink.

Solo flushed hotly at this casual mention of the disappointment he had caused her by not making an appearance at the birthday party she had so lovingly planned for him. Trice only laughed lightly at his obvious discomfort.

"Sweeting," she took especial care to use her distinctive endearment for him, "Illya told me all about the Thrush agent who showed up in your office and proceeded to hold you at gunpoint. You don't owe me any apologies.

"I admit to being initially hurt by your no-show," Trice continued truthfully. "Yet once the circumstances were made clear, that faded into the mental background as relief you hadn't been harmed pushed into the foreground, I do swear to you. Though it was rather inconvenient your enemies chose to make a statement on that particular night. No social grace has Thrush," she added with another wink.

Solo laughed in honest amusement, relieved Trice's upset was obviously assuaged.

"Thrush operatives have never been known for being creatures of tact," he agreed.

"From the tales Illya has now and again revealed to me," Trice frowned a bit now, "I should say not."

Napoleon's expression sobered once more.

"Has he told you much about all that, Trice?" he now inquired somewhat apprehensively of his partner's wife. With the end of their field careers, neither he nor Illya had ever felt any compunction to share past torments with loved ones. Oh, they both had told Natasha about some of their ordeals when she had decided to pursue a career of her own as an enforcement agent, just so she went forward with that decision without delusions. But regaling others of their close acquaintance with tales of torture and near-death escapes was never a form of mental or emotional catharsis of which either of them had ever availed themselves.

"Not very much," confessed Trice. "Only now and again when he would have nightmares..." Her eyes took on a hazy and aggrieved appearance. "Sometimes then he would tell me, if I asked gently enough."

"Has he had any nightmares the last few nights?" Napoleon asked reluctantly in a very quiet tone.

Now it was Trice's turn to look startled.

"Have you, Napoleon?" she demanded bluntly. "Tell me what all this is about."

Solo fiddled with his tie; then pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing to keep his eyes out of the direct line of Trice's gaze.

"Maybe we better sit," he suggested as he guided Trice by the arm over to a small divan in one corner of the studio.

Once they both were seated, Napoleon struggled to find a way to begin. He cleared his throat more than once. Finally Trice laid a hand over his.

"Please just tell me," she pleaded in no more than a whisper.

And so he did. Told her the whole story as cleanly as he could. Watched her eyes register understanding as they clouded with unshed tears. Glanced helplessly at her hands as they clenched and unclenched in her lap.

"They forced him to watch as they cherry-picked pieces off you to preserve in their personal set of jam-jelly jars," she remarked in a hoarsened voice at the end of his discourse.

“Yes,” acknowledged Napoleon, though her comment had not been a question and her unvarnished way of stating the facts made both his throat and stomach tighten.

“And you, Napoleon?” she did query now as she turned her eyes back on his. “What that must have been like,” Trice murmured compassionately, her distress evident in every line of her body as she gently took hold of Solo’s face in her hands.

“It was a long time ago,” Napoleon hedged as he carefully removed her hands with his own, made somewhat self-conscious by the idea that full acceptance of her sympathy might reveal uncharacteristic weakness in him, “and I survived.”

“I have heard of those on whom general anesthesia accidentally wore off during surgical procedures,” she informed him with a noticeable hitch in her voice as she turned purposely away from him. “Heard how it haunted them for years afterward: the memory of the pain, the inability to move or cry out. Isolated in their own helplessness and agony and terror. And now to hear this done to someone on purpose. This cruelty inflicted as a means of torture...” Trice shook her head slowly, in total disbelief at the extent of inhumanity one being could callously inflict on another. “Thrush is made up of monsters in truth. And this woman to bring it all deliberately back to mind, this pitiless...” She floundered for an adequate description.

Napoleon let out a short breath. That sound called Trice’s attention back to his face. She scanned his hazel-brown eyes, amazed at what she saw there.

“You don’t see her that way, do you?” she questioned pointedly. “As a pitiless monster, I mean.”...

He didn’t know how long he had been strapped there on that gurney. He only knew each time he had managed to pull himself beyond the haze of his hallucinations, she had been there. The little girl with the glowing eyes.

She never said anything. She would just look at him and sometimes soothingly touch his hand, as if to reassure, though he couldn’t be certain. He had been so strung out, he couldn’t even be certain which way was up.

Now his mind was clear but he was completely paralyzed, physically helpless and bordering on mental hysteria. And still she was there. That strange little girl. Only this time she dragged a chair up to the side of his gurney and knelt up on the seat of that chair.

She gazed down at him, gazed tenderly into his eyes. And then she bent forward and kissed him with innocent sweetness on the outside corner of each of his eyes, scooting down and quickly away as the sound of heavy footfalls came from outside the room just before several Thrush thugs entered through the doorway...

See Delphina as a heartless fiend? How could he? She had been no more than a child, and one seemingly as isolated in all of her young life as he had been during the days of that ordeal.

Napoleon ran a hand through his hair.

“She was just a child,” he summed up straightforwardly. “She was used.”

“She’s not a child now,” pronounced Trice matter-of-factly. Then she took Solo’s face once more between her palms, her eyes scouring his. “Do you think she is still being used?” she required an answer of him.

Napoleon let his eyes remain steady on those of Trice. “I don’t know,” he responded candidly.

“But Illya doesn’t think so,” Illya’s wife guessed perceptively.

“Illya has more reason to distrust her than I do,” conceded Napoleon.

“And you came to me because?” she forwarded the final query.

“Because I just want to make sure Illya is…” Napoleon mentally grappled to find the right words. “That he’s grounded in the present and not blinded by the past. I’m not in a position to confirm that in this case.”

“No, you’re not,” settled Trice as she released her hold on his face even as her mind and heart leapt at this undeniable proof of how this man, her husband’s dearest friend, did not in the least mistrust her, of how much faith he had in her and how he valued not only her insight but her rapport with Illya, almost as if he understood that connection as an indispensable offshoot of his own. “But realize, Napoleon, that it may be **you** who isn’t grounded in the present, **you** who is being blinded by the past,” she felt compelled by some inner disquiet to warn him. “I’m not sure why you believe you can trust this woman, but it may be no more than blurred emotions playing tricks on you.”

“I didn’t say I trust her!” protested Napoleon.

“Sweeting,” concluded Trice as she intertwined the fingers of one of her hands with the fingers of one of his, “you didn’t have to.”

“You are the agents sent by U.N.C.L.E.?” the pleasant-looking middle-aged woman sought confirmation as she entered this well-appointed room of the Consulate General of Finland located in the United Nations Plaza in New York City.

“Yes, Madam Consul,” Jack responded with polite deference. “Jack Valdar,” he introduced himself to the diplomat as he produced his U.N.C.L.E. credentials, “Chief Enforcement Agent for the North American division of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.”

“Natasha Kuryakin, Enforcement Agent,” his partner introduced herself in turn as she subsequently exhibited her own U.N.C.L.E. identification for the Finn’s inspection.

Formalities satisfied, the Finnish Consul General got right to the heart of the matter.

“The sterling reputation of your organization precedes you,” affirmed the diplomat easily, “and the international influence of your Mr. Solo is well known not only to me but to my entire government. Even so, I do not think it misplaced to reveal to you how dismayed I was to learn of your agency’s request through official channels for a sample of pure lucisorqe.”

Of all places on earth, natural deposits of lucisorqe had thus far only been discovered in the country of Finland. It was mined from within sedimentary layers beneath the depths of Fronborg

Fjord, Finland's one icy vuone, a hazardous procedure that had to be undertaken with great care and was under strict government control.

"I understand the mineral is exceedingly rare, distinctly so in pure form," commented Natasha.

"You do not understand even half of the prickly situation with regard to my government's reluctance to make the mineral available for research at the current time," expounded the Consul. "Please, be seated and I will attempt to make all clear, particularly as it is likely U.N.C.L.E. will shortly be called in to aid in this matter. The problem is growing somewhat out-of-hand and the trail to its resolution much too internationally convoluted for our own law enforcement agencies to effectively pursue."

"Indeed?" questioned Jack, his CEA-attuned senses alerted, as he and Natasha took the offered seats on an elegant silk-covered sofa and the Consul settled in a wingchair facing them.

"For some months, perhaps as long as a year," the Finnish woman began her revelation, "stores of lucisorqe have been secretly plundered. The culprit or, more likely, culprits have proven elusive to identify, let alone apprehend. To make matters more complicated, these robberies have not come solely from any one store, but rather from many."

"Thus eliminating a single, independent suspect," concluded Jack.

"There exists more than one reserve of such a rare governmentally regulated mineral?" Natasha inquired in some amazement.

"Though existing quantities of lucisorqe are indeed quite minimal," acknowledged the Consul, "initially it was considered prudent to distribute these albeit small amounts amongst a goodly number of prestigious research facilities within my country, thus providing more avenues for experimentation and many means of duplicate testing."

"Though I can appreciate the intention of such wide range distribution," allowed Jack, his usual bluntness only thinly veneered with diplomatic tact, "surely the result of such in the end could only be a breakdown in the synchronized tracking of the entirety of your country's pure lucisorqe stockpile."

The Consul smiled wryly. This man from U.N.C.L.E. certainly didn't mince words. Sitting at her partner's side, Natasha had to tenaciously resist the urge to nudge Jack as a means of physical reminder that political niceties really should be considered before criticizing a government's program of dealing with its own natural resources.

"Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened," the Finn noted without any sign of pique at Jack's directness. "Thus it was some time before it could be verified actual quantities of lucisorqe had gone permanently missing. The individual amounts lost from each facility were so miniscule; it was originally thought improper containment of the mineral resulted in a form of degeneration or evaporation that decreased any particular reserve over time. But, as more was learned of lucisorqe's specific properties, this was discredited as a misguided idea."

"More like a sloppy rationalization," Jack mentally charged, though he was at least circumspect enough not to voice this particular censure.

The Consul sighed. "And as well it did have to be recognized at last that, when added together, the losses of the mineral were not truthfully quite so miniscule."

"Rather enough to raise alarm," advanced Natasha certainly.

The Consul General nodded. "Still, as no especial use had yet been discovered for lucisorqe," she noted by way of clarification, "that it would be accounted a commodity worth the trouble of stealing was an option not given much consideration. The mineral seemed no more than a scientific curiosity; so simple human error in measuring and recording procedures was presumed the culprit for the discrepancies."

"But that presumption was stood on its ear, so to speak, when U.N.C.L.E. informed your government that lucisorqe was likely the key ingredient in a coating used for a Thrush-created light manipulation suit," Jack coolly stated the obvious facts.

"That usage was verified by your labs this morning, as I understand," ventured the Consul.

"Yes," declared the CEA straightforwardly.

The Finn sighed once more.

"So it must now be fully credited by my government that lucisorqe has become valuable within the framework of the black market," the middle-aged woman pronounced solemnly, "with all the ramifications regarding the lost stores that such entails. All experimentation on the mineral has already been halted, and the remaining stockpiles are to be gathered in a protected central location. We don't yet know how any of the mineral was furtively taken across Finnish borders in past months, but somehow it was. Yet we do know we have no intention of losing more of this extraordinary resource in such a slipshod way. Therefore, I'm sure you can appreciate my government's present disinclination to provide any samples in pure form."

"Understandable of course," agreed Natasha. "However, the U.N.C.L.E. labs urgently require a sample of the pure mineral for testing," she succinctly put forth her organization's viewpoint. "Though we know the coating uses lucisorqe in a complex chemical combination, what we can't determine without a pure sample is whether the mineral might be useable in other compounds to produce other effects regarding light."

"Not just light," supplied the Finnish woman. "Other unique properties exist in the mineral of which your scientists have already been made aware."

"And Thrush is always seeking to create new technology to utilize in its pursuit of power," supplemented Jack. "The light manipulation suit is ingenious in and of itself, but the coating presents the possibility of other concoctions using any of these unique properties of lucisorqe in ways perhaps essentially less benign."

The Consul laughed somewhat nervously. "Benign is not a term I would use to describe the particular invention in question, considering the clever cover it could provide for terrorist attacks."

Natasha nodded. "U.N.C.L.E. is very much aware of this dangerous prospect, Madam Consul, be assured."

The Finn nodded in turn.

“And that is why in the end your agency’s request has been granted,” the Consul finalized, “because there is immediate danger in this current usage of lucisorqe and because it portends the opportunity of engendering great tragedies. Perhaps a way can be found to make the lucisorqe in the chemical compound of the coating react in some way to reverse its very effectiveness. Yet the time for discovery in this vein could be preciously short.”

With that she rose from her chair, went to a nearby small desk and activated an intercom. “Have the item brought in,” she requested via this means of internal communication.

Within minutes a muscular fellow, likely from some Finnish security group, entered carrying a small strongbox. The Consul took the box from his hand and then nodded for him to take his leave. Alone once more with the two U.N.C.L.E. agents, she sat down again in the chair she had previously vacated. Pushing the buttons of the electronic lock in a specific sequence, she opened the strongbox she had set in her lap and removed from its depths a small, sealed metal tube much the size and shape of a lipstick case.

“The tube itself is titanium,” she informed Jack and Natasha. “It has been found that lucisorqe exhibits odd magnetic properties when it comes in contact with certain types of metals, particularly steel. Such magnetic currents substantially heighten corrosion of those metals when the mineral is in its pure form. With titanium, however, these properties are not activated, or at least not enough to result in such rapid corrosion.”

The Finn then passed the small tube over to Jack Valdar as senior agent in attendance.

“I don’t wish to sound melodramatic,” the Consul avowed with a somewhat lopsided and hesitant smile, “but I’m certain you both realize exactly what is at stake here. The likelihood my government would provide another pure sample of lucisorqe even to U.N.C.L.E., should this one be compromised while in your hands, is frankly nonexistent. Therefore, I must insist that in providing the means of delivery for this unexpected treasure you, as the old saying goes, guard it with your lives.”

Jack smirked.

“We are well aware not only of the saying, but the reality of the sentiment behind it,” he guaranteed the Finnish diplomat as he accepted the prized vial.

Back outside in the bright sunlight of the crisp winter’s day, Valdar and Kuryakin ambled, with a particularly nonchalant air, through the U.N. Plaza, purposely taking in the busy surroundings.

Del Floria’s with its hidden entrance to NY HQ was only a few short blocks away. Back in the mid-1990s, after a suspicious fire had destroyed the U.N.C.L.E. offices behind the novelty store, Solo had moved headquarters back to the accommodations behind the Del Floria tailor shop. It had been the most logical arrangement, as the Command still owned that property which had been in the interim used for records storage. Thus some of the building’s security systems had already been upgraded to newer technology and U.N.C.L.E.’s policymakers recognized improving those further as a cheaper alternative than properly outfitting an entirely new location. Also the old offices already were installed with air and water filtration systems separate from those of the city’s services, and the entire structure had the capacity to function on backup in-house electrical generators when necessary. Solo had also expressed a decided preference for

the metal interior of the former headquarters, especially after that devastating fire which had wreaked so much havoc with the new. And automatic doors had advantages, even if they came with their own share of problems. So the past headquarters had been refitted to suit the present age and what was old had become new again. The unexpected side benefit of this had been that it had taken Thrush several years before that shadow organization had figured out U.N.C.L.E. was once more ensconced in its former digs.

At this precise moment, however, Jack and Natasha didn't want to be careless about making a beeline right to Del Floria's. They practiced the caution ingrained in all trained field agents regarding the possibility of leading anyone directly to their home base. Accordingly they stopped at a newsstand, picked up a sightseer's guidebook, and casually flipped through its pages, heads close together with Jack bending to Natasha's lesser height as they ostensibly pointed out various notations in the book to one another. Just like a couple of tourists selecting which sites they had an interest in visiting.

"The fellow there with the camera at about three o'clock seems a bit too interested in us," commented Natasha in a quiet voice.

"Yes," agreed Jack in an equally quiet tone without so much as peeking toward the man in question. "Looks like a bird of prey. But I don't detect any trailing flock."

"I'm sure even Thrush would not risk a confrontation in this crowded plaza," the junior partner of the team noted by way of reasonable explanation for the one-man show.

"And Thrush couldn't be sure we'd even get a sample of lucisorqe," decided the senior partner. "In fact, I'd venture to say our observing bird still isn't sure of that."

"So simple pickpocket attempt?" Natasha voiced the most likely scenario.

Jack nodded. "But let's ensure he pickpockets only what we want him to," he added.

The younger agent quizzically raised an eyebrow at the CEA.

Stabbing a finger at a page in the guidebook as public answer to Natasha's questioning look (the sharpness of that gesture alerting the junior agent the look had definitely been a blunder on her part), Jack brusquely inquired of her; "You have a lipstick in your purse?"

"Yes," acknowledged Natasha, already seeing where this was heading. "Plain silver case too."

"Then we're going to do a little false exchange right under our bird's beady eye," he informed her easily. "You understand?"

Natasha did. She nodded.

With that she stretched up slightly to deposit a kiss on Jack's cheek, as if they were friends about to go their separate ways. Subsequently Jack dipped a hand into his inner topcoat pocket and retrieved a handkerchief, wiping idly at the lipstick spot on his cheek before depositing the linen square back in that pocket. Natasha then opened her purse and removed her tube of lipstick and a compact. Opening the compact to expose the mirror, she uncapped the lipstick and applied a fresh coat to her mouth. Then she closed the compact, dropping it back into her handbag, and capped the lipstick.

That lipstick was still in her hand, however, as Jack reached out, wrapping one of his hands around that one of hers, and leaned in to give her a departing hug. In that surrounding hand of his was the tube of lucisorqe he had likewise retrieved from his inner topcoat pocket. With purposeful dexterity, Jack rotated the tubes once between their clasped hands, such movement intended for the Thrush to visually register. Then more stealthily (and Natasha had to admit she was amazed at Jack's talent for performing sleight of hand), Jack rotated the tubes a second time so that both of them came away holding the original tubes with which they had started out.

"Be sure and convince him you have the real one, greenstick," Jack whispered in her ear.

"You mean look like a rookie agent?" she countered somewhat flippantly.

"Yes, but don't **act** like a rookie agent," admonished Jack in a final murmur against her ear before they broke their seemingly friendly embrace.

With those final instructions Natasha plopped the supposed lucisorqe tube back in her purse as indifferently as a mere lipstick (which it was) and walked off through the plaza, giving Jack a farewell wave. The Thrush hesitated for a moment on pursuing her as Jack offhandedly tucked the guidebook (lucisorqe vial safely out of view inside) into a side pocket of his coat and sauntered off in the opposite direction.

Something about the way the young woman held the purse clutched tight against her body convinced the enemy operative that the scene he had witnessed had indeed been a true exchange with the seemingly green female agent receiving in the end the item he himself had been told to obtain. His suspicion was this was done because Jack Valdar was a known U.N.C.L.E. agent, while this other one was not someone the Thrush could readily identify from dossier photos. Since it was after all but a courier mission, entrusting someone less generally recognized than Valdar with the ultimate prize seemed a logical tack to his mind. Thus the Thrush chose to trail Natasha as she wove her way through the crowd in the plaza, falling back into hiding as she pointedly scanned the area on several occasions.

The Thrush followed as she walked into a souvenir shop and shadowed her out through the shop's opposite door, watching as her eyes darted about. He successfully and he believed undetectably unlatched and reached into her purse, extracting the lipstick, as she was jostled by a passerby who sought to claim a curbside cab before she did.

Natasha climbed into the next cab as it slid almost immediately up to the curb, summoned by the female agent with a deft activation of a button on the cell phone in her coat pocket the instant the enemy agent had made the grab. In this vehicle driven by a fellow U.N.C.L.E. employee she settled back for a ride to one of the alternate entrances to NY HQ, her Cheshire cat grin something the at least temporarily self-satisfied Thrush never saw.

When she finally arrived at headquarters she encountered Jack in the elevator on his way back from delivering the real vial of lucisorqe safely to U.N.C.L.E. lab personnel. Mutely, she opened her purse with a ready wink. Jack understood that the Thrush had fully bought into the ruse.

"Good work, greenstick," was the only comment he made before exiting the elevator on the floor of the enforcement offices.

Natasha, walking slightly behind him, secretly glowed under the effect of the unfussy compliment bestowed by her uncompromising partner.

“Ty khochesh' proverit' etot material¹⁰, Gena?” questioned the man he had put in charge of securing the ‘special cargo’ here in Moscow for the trip onto its ultimate destination in New York.

“Ty yevo uzhe proveril, da? Ya polagayus' na tvoj vklad v etom voprosye¹¹,” Gennadiy Yunusov kept his tone as neutral as possible. Truth was he had no intention whatsoever of handling even a sealed tube of that gun oil. The mineral immersed in the compound was something he knew next to nothing about, and he didn’t want to discover any unpleasant details through up-close and personal inspection.

The other man chuckled before noting wryly in English, “It won’t sap away your manhood you know.”

“Says you,” thought Yunusov tersely to himself, though the only verbal response he gave was “I left off screwing around with greasy potions once I became a man of means.”

“That so?” the other man challenged with an amused grin. That wasn’t exactly what he’d heard; though he had to admit what he’d heard had been mentioned in an entirely different context.

“My part in all this is making sure that stuff gets to Thrush in conjunction with the weapons shipment,” Yunusov stated frankly. “They very much want it and are willing to pay top price for it, so I’ve no qualms about getting the crap into the States through our general channels for transporting armaments. But frankly I don’t know what all the fuss is about, and just as frankly I don’t care to know.”

Getting the pure lucisorqe out of Finland had been an easy task for the criminal group of which he was an integral part. The Finns had been “asleep at the wheel”, as the saying went, and transporting the semi-liquid state mineral across into Russia had been amazingly simple. Having it mixed into the gun oil concoction, recipe provided directly by Thrush, had been more difficult and taken many months to his understanding. He had not been directly involved in either the initial stealing or the subsequent smuggling or the final “revamping” of the lucisorqe, and he considered his personal lot in this regard a fortunate one. Yet he did appreciate that in the end it all had been achieved faultlessly by those of his ilk. And now Thrush was about to get its coveted mineral mixed in that gun oil as part of the third and final weapons allotment Yunusov had been handling with them for half-a-year.

Thrush would be sending an independent mercenary type to assess the actual weapons, as they had on both previous occasions before accepting final delivery (and forking over the cash). Yet as to who-in-the-heck would be checking out the chemical part of this last distribution, he didn’t know and didn’t care. That wasn’t his problem. And honestly if the lucisorqe in the gun oil wound up being impossible to extract again in anything approaching pure form, that wasn’t his headache either. Those higher in his organization than himself held tight the reins on that particular responsibility.

His personal responsibility was the weaponry, and that’s all that really concerned him. That the “final say” men in his own group had wanted to piggyback the mineral drop onto his operation, an operation that had run smooth as silk the past two times out, actually did somewhat annoy

¹⁰ You want to check out this stuff

¹¹ You have already checked it, yes? I trust you to have efficiently done your part in this

him for all his claims otherwise. This put a variable into the final equation over which he had little actual control.

Yet he well understood the riches to be made from all this, and knew he would get his share. And he did so enjoy wealth, did so enjoy the lifestyle it granted him in the U.S. With the intense appetite of a true sybarite, he reveled in his cars and his penthouses and his rare wines and the selection of muscle-bound Hercules types his affluent lifestyle afforded him in willing lovers.

So he would sensibly keep his eyes on the prize... and just as sensibly keep his hands (and every other part of him) away from that goddamn gun oil.

Jack Valdar stood guard over the female Thrush agent here in one of the standard interrogation rooms at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York just as he had the day before. Nothing unusual in this. Only tonight they had been waiting on the arrival of the official interrogator for at least a half-hour. And this was indeed unusual.

The only information Jack had regarding the current situation was that the Number 1 of Section III had been urgently called into the office of the Number 1 of Section I just before the second interrogation session of the Thrushie was scheduled to begin. The timing of that session had already been set back almost four hours at the order of Napoleon Solo, an order relayed through his secretary. It seemed the Continental Chief was out of HQ that afternoon and wished the questioning postponed until his return. That seemed a reasonable enough command decision in the eyes of the Number 1 of Section II, but the subsequent additional delay, once the prisoner had already been led into the interrogation room, did not. It just was not standard procedure to keep a potentially dangerous captive sitting idly in an interrogation room rather than locked securely in a holding cell, and Valdar detested and distrusted any break with standard procedure.

“You always get so peeved by the unanticipated, Mr. Valdar?” Delphina Reikedahl turned her face to him and addressed Jack, accurately recalling his name from its mention during yesterday’s standard recording procedure.

He stared into her eyes, into those hazel-brown eyes of hers so uncomfortably like Solo’s.

“The unanticipated usually results in trouble,” stated Jack tersely in response.

The Thrush laughed lightly.

“And what trouble could I be surrounded by so many capable U.N.C.L.E. agents in your HQ?” she questioned in an amused tone. “And with only this?” she tapped the pale blue prisoner badge she wore on her standard issue jumpsuit. “I wouldn’t get ten feet out of this room before setting off every damnable alarm in this place.”

“Don’t try that ‘one helpless detainee all alone against the system’ routine with me,” warned Jack in a hard voice. “I haven’t forgotten that you managed somehow to steal into the Continental Chief’s office without setting off a single damnable alarm in this place.”

Delphina shrugged delicately.

“Perhaps it was the suit,” she uttered noncommittally.

Valdar let his gray eyes hold hers in a relentless glare.

“And perhaps it was not the suit,” he uttered almost as ambiguously as she. But not quite...
“The bio-drone should still have picked up your bio-magnetic field as foreign.”

Delphina let on nothing about the import of the information she had just so casually received as she merely shrugged once more.

“It’s only experimental, isn’t it?” she probed just a little. “Perhaps it has a fatal flaw in its design.”

“Perhaps,” allowed Jack, backing off from his vocal blunder. He was perfectly aware of what she was doing. Did she really believe him so dull-witted or so naive as not to be? “But even such would not explain how you gained entrance into that particular office in the first place, now would it? Are you going to try and persuade me you snuck in behind some unsuspecting employee and navigated your way into Solo’s office from any entrance floors and elevators below?”

“I **was** wearing the light manipulation suit,” she reminded him, a playful smile pulling at her lips because she understood quite well he was not going to buy into that easy explanation.

“And so you waited with the patience of a saint at every elevator and door until you could successfully piggyback your own entry onto someone else’s?” challenged Jack gamely. “The suit only makes the wearer invisible to the eye, Ms. Reikedahl, not completely immaterial of body. We both know there is only one way you got into that office, and that is through the private portal for the Number 1 of Section I. The security through there is based largely on retinal scanning techniques and,” he finalized with a studied look fixed straight on her eyes, “I suspect you can trick those, can’t you?”

“Perhaps,” suggested Delphina as she gave him an equally studied look. She did like this one. He had all the sharp prickles of a huddled porcupine combined with all the predatory instincts of a hunting wolf. “But you forget, Mr. Valdar, Thrush has never yet discovered the location of that secret entrance. Though I do admit not for any lack of trying.”

“Thrush as a group may not have, but **you** as an individual have,” declared Jack without a shadow of doubt.

“I suppose it will do no good to absolutely assure you that I have personally no knowledge of that entrance’s location,” she ventured almost tauntingly, as if baiting him to come up with another solution to the puzzle of her undetected access into the office of Napoleon Solo.

“No good whatsoever,” stated Jack flatly, absolutely refusing to rise to the bait.

“Time alone will tell then,” Delphina settled in an oddly quiet voice as she turned her countenance away from Jack.

Time alone would indeed tell. Already modifications were being made to the existing security for “the fifth entrance”, as it was still called. Perhaps in the end the location itself would need to be altered, but that would be a larger undertaking Solo had instructed should wait until more was certain and not just surmised. Valdar personally did not agree with the wait, but he was not the Number 1 of Section I. His opinion had been sought along with that of each North American division Section Chief, duly noted by Napoleon Solo, and then promptly ignored. So for his own

part, the Number 1 of Section II hoped the Number 1 of Section III would wring the full truth right from the lips of this woman during today's interrogation session and thus force Solo's hand. Though Jack Valdar disliked Napoleon Solo, he still – albeit sometimes grudgingly – respected him both as his superior and as a man who had personally done much for U.N.C.L.E. as an organization. And Jack Valdar was doggedly dedicated to the Command. Thus he ultimately wanted no preventable ill to befall its foremost policymaker.

Jack decided he had finished talking with this woman, as undoubtedly his discourse had been a bit unguarded. Such suspicion of rashness in himself caused him to concentrate his attention more intently upon his captive and it was then he caught her again at her tricks of sleight of hand. This time she was slyly pulling threads from the elasticized hem of one sleeve of her black jumpsuit and twining them around her fingers, passing them all but unnoticeably between one hand and the other as if playing a private game of cat's cradle.

"Must I handcuff you again?" he alerted her that her covert actions had been espied.

"I am just passing the time," she teased. "I did tell Mr. Kuryakin that I bore easily; yet he has kept me waiting here unengaged for an unconscionably long time. However, by all means," she furthered as she theatrically extended her hands outward over the table, "do your duty as you see fit, Mr. Valdar."

Jack did exactly that, pulling a set of handcuffs from the back of his belt, stepping forward, looping the chain of the shackles securely through the steel ring on the tabletop and then snapping the bracelets to her wrists. As he bent his head to perform the final portion of this action, Delphina whispered pointedly in his ear, "If you wish to learn how to perform such stealthy feats of dexterity as you have seen me exercise, I would be only too happy to teach you."

Jack's gray eyes shot to the hazel-brown ones of the forward Thrush. She smiled unselfconsciously.

"I appreciate someone whose concentration is fine-tuned enough to catch me out in the act of my much practiced skills," Delphina expounded in a normal level of voice. Then she commented very authoritatively, "Do not let anyone ever tell you such tenacious and single-minded focus is less than an asset, Mr. Valdar. I guarantee you it is a tool with many unexpected uses."

Jack had no idea what to say in return to such a statement, so he wisely said nothing at all.

Perhaps it was indeed fortuitous the Section III head made his very belated entrance at that precise moment. To Valdar the older Section Chief looked irritated and somewhat putout, not an expression the younger man was accustomed to seeing revealed so unshielded on Kuryakin's face. Jack's nerves tensed to full vigilance.

Illya felt backed into a tight corner by Napoleon's guidelines for the upcoming interrogation and he didn't much like it. The Continental Chief had pointedly refused him the go-ahead to use the newspaper photo in any way during his questioning of Delphina. Even more inexplicably, the Section I head had adamantly instructed his friend he was not to bring up the topic of Niles Ospreye unless the woman first broached that subject herself, not a very likely scenario. Illya had no clue why Napoleon was purposely tying his hands in this regard, but he had already determined that – restricted by his superior's atypical orders or not – he was going to break the

Thrush during this session. Crack open her mind like an egg and professionally scoop out all the revealed data. Only then would he have the evidence needed to prove to his suddenly too empathetic partner that Delphina Reikedahl was not someone to be trusted even in the most nebulous of fashions.

The Number 1 of Section III glanced over at the Thrushie with her hands firmly cuffed to the table and spoke in a tone of crystal-clear command to the Number 1 of Section II, "The ankles secured as well this time, Mr. Valdar."

Jack competently hid his surprise at the other man's order but efficiently did as he was bid, sliding another set of cuffs off the back of his belt and then through the steel loop on the floor under the table, finally snapping one bracelet of the pair snugly around each of Delphina's ankles.

"Do you consider me so egregious a threat then, Mr. Kuryakin?" queried the doubly manacled captive in a somewhat bemused tone.

"I consider you a Thrush agent with an agenda yet unknown," replied Illya evenly. "And I believe the time to treat such stark facts carelessly has passed."

The Russian's ice-blue eyes met and held the hazel-brown ones of the Norwegian for an intentionally long moment, that steady gaze communicating in no uncertain terms the steel of the interrogator's resolve in this matter.

"I see," was the only response from the technological residual, a response uttered in a very quiet and perhaps more apprehensive vocal timbre than was her general wont.

Valdar wanted to vociferously cheer Kuryakin's decision. At last someone was taking a firm hand with this woman. The CEA bit his tongue lightly in an attempt to keep the pleased smirk off his face. It was an attempt that didn't fully succeed.

Thoughtfully Illya slipped one hand into his jacket pocket and curled ready fingers around the capped syringe filled with a sodium thiopental solution resting there. At least Napoleon had given his permission, albeit reluctantly, for injection of the veridical. Though both former field agents were all too familiar with the unpleasant after-effects of such drugs and thus had a natural distaste for employing them when grilling an enemy, such was surely the gentlest means of physical coercion available for said purposes. A headache and nausea were mild stuff in comparison to the cornucopia of residual ills resulting from administrations of the far more powerful and dangerous pharmaceuticals that served as Thrush's stock-in-trade in similar situations. And that was not even mentioning the cruder tools all too often utilized by those of fewer scruples than the denizens of U.N.C.L.E.

The last part of his most recent conversation with Solo came back uncompromisingly into Kuryakin's mind...

"It's skirting the edge, Illya," Napoleon sternly and somewhat insultingly admonished his friend. "We don't torture prisoners."

"It is a method we have used successfully before," Illya reminded him.

"I know that," granted the other man. "But I still don't like it, and technically the organization could be called to task for it."

"By who?" Illya fairly bristled with indignation now. "As if Thrush is going to make a case to any world court about our lack of strict adherence to the tenets of the Geneva Convention."

"Illya, I just don't like the message it sends," Napoleon cautioned the other man. "Our methods, not just our ideologies, aren't those of Thrush."

"No, they are not," agreed Illya. "However, you are fully aware I have the expertise to administer a safe though effective dose and that I will undertake no more than that. She won't be physically harmed, Napoleon, a nicety Thrush doesn't care two pins about guaranteeing."

After a rather uncomfortably long silence, Solo sighed in both reticence and resignation.

"All right, Illya, I'll allow it," he conceded without enthusiasm, "but be scrupulously certain to keep it all in close check. You understand me?" Napoleon finalized in that voice with its undercurrent of plain intimidation he reserved for unmistakable and not-to-be-disregarded command.

"Perfectly," Illya noted in a very dry and cool tone. He was not accustomed to Napoleon adopting such an attitude with him...

Kuryakin strode to the recording station and began the standard preliminaries of the interrogation session.

"Date: December 23rd, 2007. Time: 1815 hours by the Eastern Standard. Location: New York Headquarters for the North American division of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. In accordance with standard interrogation procedures published within the public charter, established 1946, last revised 2005, of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, I hereby make it known to all parties that the entirety of this interrogation session will be both video and audio recorded with all thus documented testimony entered permanently into the files of the Command.

"Second session for Interrogation Subject: Delphina Reikedahl, self-admittedly attached to the organization known as Thrush. Interrogator for this session: Illya Nickovech Kuryakin, currently Number 1 in Section III, Enforcement and Intelligence, North American division of U.N.C.L.E. Present in security capacity: Jacques Valdar, currently Number 1 in Section II, Operations and Enforcement, North American division of U.N.C.L.E."

Technicalities properly satisfied, Illya walked back toward the table, only he did not take his seat. Instead he stood to one side, his attitude subtly intimidating.

The interrogator set his eyes once more upon the face of the interrogation subject. That this woman had some sort of odd emotional hold, vague though it might be, over his one-time partner was not lost on Illya. Yet he was completely puzzled as to the actual nature of that hold or even why it existed at all. Neither of their dealings with her in the past could be described as pleasant. She had served as a lure to catch each of them in turn within a horrific Thrush trap, the stuff of nightmares literally. Some instinctual knot in the very pit of his gut warned Illya she was again serving in that role. Yet he was positively resolute she would not successfully

manage that feat this time. He would use that resolution to protect Napoleon, who seemed in the main oblivious to any such possible attempt on Delphina's part.

Intrinsically Illya Kuryakin could not do otherwise. The survival of Napoleon Solo formed an ingrained piece of his own soul, had done so for longer than he cared to remember. So this time the Russian had absolutely no intention of winding up even for a moment bound and gagged and utterly helpless to aid the American, even if such an unenviable position now would likely be only metaphorical rather than physical.

Wrapping his fingers more tightly around the unseen syringe in his pocket, Illya informed Jack impassively, "Procedure 5X1, Mr. Valdar."

Jack nodded crisply and headed to the intercom.

"Aren't you going to tell me what that entails?" queried Delphina, maintaining all her usual controlled calm. "After all, I did considerably perform that service for you all those years ago with regard to the procedures being performed on Mr. Solo."

"You will know soon enough," was all the answer the interrogator deigned to give the soon-to-be interrogated.

"Agents Walters and Kuryakin: report to Interrogation Room 4. Procedure 5X1 protocol," Valdar spoke briskly into the intercom.

Within minutes, perhaps it was no more than mere seconds, the two summoned agents – one male and one female – made their way through the pneumatic door into the interrogation room.

Natasha inconspicuously studied the person of the Thrush technological residual as she waited silently for her superior's signal for the procedure to begin. Truth be told, she had been dying to come face-to-face with the woman. Assessing the prisoner quickly but thoroughly, Natasha thought her physical appearance definitely striking with that long, slender column of throat – a swan neck she had once heard such a feature favorably described – and those startling white eyelashes and eyebrows. Neither had the Section V guards, with whom she had idly spoken over coffee of the Thrush, been exaggerating when they insisted she appeared to have stolen the eyes of Natasha's own beloved Dyadya right out of his face.

Mentally Delphina registered the resemblance between the female U.N.C.L.E. agent and her interrogator. Valdar had indeed requested the presence of an "Agent Kuryakin", so apparently this young woman was Illya Kuryakin's daughter. That this scion existed and now was herself part of the Command was no secret to Thrush and their meticulous record-keepers. Delphina experienced an odd disquiet that this current encounter, whatever it turned out to be, should be facilitated by the Kuryakin father/daughter duo. The sudden realization that, if this was Kuryakin's daughter, then the two support agents were lethally trained Section II operatives rather than more simply situationally trained Section V security personnel only partially accounted for that disquiet.

The CEA indicated through a subtle movement of his head toward each of his people what was to be each individual's station. Valdar himself moved to the right side of the seated Thrush, Walters to the left, and Natasha took up Jack's former position behind the prisoner.

For her own part, Natasha had never before assisted in a real-time Procedure 5X1, but from simulations in which she had participated during her time at Survival School she knew the routine as one would the memorized steps of a choreographed dance. Thus, at the interrogator's wordless downward drop of his hand, she took a blackout hood from a pocket in her skirt and, from behind and thus out of the subject's immediate line of sight, pulled it down over the head of the prisoner. And then she wrapped her arms around the shoulders of the Thrush and locked them in front of the older woman's body, keeping her secured against the back of the chair. Meanwhile, by pressing her elbows with undersides exposed tight to the front edges of the chair's armrests, Valdar and Walters in perfect synchronization each pinned one of the captive's arms, turning to advantage the looped chain limiting the movement of her hands from the tabletop.

In the back of her mind Delphina registered a frisson of shock. She hadn't expected U.N.C.L.E. to employ any methods of torture, but that had probably been misplaced arrogance on her own part. Thrush wasn't exactly an entity within the normal boundaries of accepted world tenets. It had thus perhaps been irrational to expect even U.N.C.L.E. to treat such a shadowy enemy with pristine white kid gloves.

Her thoughts crystallized back fully on the moment as she felt her right sleeve pushed up and a rubber cord being fastened around her thusly uncovered bicep. "No," her mind sparked in desperation, "*not drugs! Let them beat me to a bloody pulp if they choose, but no drugs!*"

An almost inhuman growl escaped her lips and she began to struggle wildly. Yet she was helpless against the combined strength and practiced grips of her captors. "Nei! Nei! Nei!"¹² she screamed out over and over again, her voice guttural as her verbal command of English escaped beyond her immediate memory. She wrenched her body hard as she felt the needle pinch into a vein where the interrogator pricked it sharply through the flesh near the underside of the elbow of her pinioned right arm. Yet she couldn't wrest free of the hands that held her upper body virtually immobile, nor could she prevent the liquid in that needle from subsequently sliding into her pierced blood vessel. Soundless sobs shook through her as she felt the chemical take hold, her treasured internal centering blurring outward as her nerves tingled with unwanted sensations.

From his place in his office, watching silently on the close-circuit monitor, Solo winced. It wasn't just a sympathetic reaction to the prisoner's plight that initiated this physical response. Nerves tingled throughout his body as he momentarily shook before gripping the edge of his desk and managing to reorient himself.

"Twenty-nine... twenty-eight... twenty-seven... twenty-six... twenty-five..."

The interrogator counted slowly backwards as he finally took his seat opposite the prisoner.

"Twenty-four... twenty-three... twenty-two... twenty-one... twenty..."

The prisoner's breathing slowed and deepened, though her body still shook as if caught in a violent windstorm.

"Nineteen... eighteen... seventeen... sixteen... fifteen..."

¹² No! No! No!

The two men clutching either of the prisoner's arms gradually released their grasps as her physical tremors lessened.

"Fourteen... thirteen... twelve... eleven... ten..."

The subject's body stopped trembling completely as her head sagged a bit forward.

"Nine... eight... seven... six... five..."

Natasha eased her arms from their locked clasp across the prisoner's shoulders.

"Four... three... two... one... and done."

The CEA removed the blackout hood from the head of the prisoner.

Hazel-brown eyes sought out the ice-blue ones of the interrogator. Though dazed and somewhat unfocused, that dark gaze was far from meek.

"Du vil aldri gjøre meg redd¹³," the prisoner stated in a soft but steady voice, the repetition of the old warning subconsciously part of her defensive mechanism against the powerful Command-concocted version of sodium thiopental the interrogator had employed.

"Such is not my intention," batted back the elder Kuryakin smoothly, outwardly untouched by her tactic though inwardly the knot in his gut tightened in its surety. "My intention is only to get you to speak the truth."

"Sannheten vil ikke sette meg fri¹⁴," she countered.

"Perhaps not," Illya conceded the point. "But such is not my concern. My concern is in protecting U.N.C.L.E."

"Ditt ansvar er å beskytte herr Solo¹⁵," she simplified his answer coldly.

"Mr. Solo, madam, is the chief policymaker for U.N.C.L.E.," Illya noted very forthrightly. "Thus those two goals are one and the same."

Illya knew his Norwegian, never one of his strongest languages, was currently rusty from long disuse, and he didn't relish the delay having to translate her answers might cause in pushing forward his turnabout questions. During any interrogation, but especially during one aided by a so-called truth serum, speed in parrying unguarded replies was key. The idea of a fast and furious verbal volley was to effectively limit downtime during which the subject might attempt to summon forth any mental reserve.

Since in her current drugged state Delphina was unlikely to refuse to obey a routine request, Illya decided to make that request.

¹³ You will never make me afraid

¹⁴ The truth will not set me free

¹⁵ Your concern is in protecting Mr. Solo

“Speak English please.”

Though she continued to eye him belligerently, she nevertheless complied as her next inquiry proved.

“What possible power can I have over Mr. Solo?” Delphina attempted to recollect the shattered remnants of her concentration.

“I’ll rise to the bait,” pushed back Illya quickly. “What possible power can you have over Mr. Solo?” he turned her question neatly back on her.

“None I can meaningfully demonstrate at present,” she found her chemically loosened tongue admitting. “Not now that you have stolen away my clarity of mind with your drugs.”

Alone in his office Napoleon felt his heart rise into his throat. What was she saying? What did she mean? He wasn’t even sure he really wanted to know.

Illya leaned back somewhat condescendingly in his chair, like a schoolmaster taking a recalcitrant pupil to task. “Pity that,” he granted. “Yet we can start from the beginning to make everything fall correctly into place, can’t we? Possible demonstration or not.”

“You know I have little choice but to permit you to get the information you want,” she stated dryly, “no matter which way you choose to probe for it.”

“Yes, I do know,” agreed Illya gamely. Whether it was unprofessional or not to do so, he really was enjoying this triumph. It seemed she was quite susceptible to drugging. This was perhaps not unexpected considering how chemicals had undoubtedly been used to physically alter her. Her body likely assimilated substance-induced changes at a much more rapid rate than the norm. “So let us start the knowledge-seeking repartee between us in earnest.”

Delphina felt the slowness of her pulse as the blood coursed sluggishly through her arteries and veins. Her mind was floating untethered, releasing her vocal cords to vibrate into expressing “confidences” without restraint. Her eyes were heavy, her vision unable to center on anything for any length of time. Her limbs alternated between weighing a thousand pounds each to feeling lighter than air itself. The drug had her in its full embrace and she couldn’t fight her way free, hadn’t even the energy to truly try.

“Start then,” she found herself incautiously prodding the male Kuryakin. Somehow her only current desire was to get this unpleasantness over and done as quickly as possible.

“That selection of...” Illya found the appropriate word sticking in his craw, lying like lead on his tongue, disgusting him that its technical overtones should be used to cover such blatant abuse of scientific method. “Specimens,” he finally spat out, “your father medically extracted from Mr. Solo’s body: Did these serve as the basis of his later research?”

“The ones I snuck out from the operating theatre through the transport rail in the lab?” she spelled out unnecessarily from Illya’s viewpoint. “Yes, they did. They provided the core of the studies and later of the trials.”

Napoleon shifted again. He felt as if he was losing all feeling in his extremities, going steadily numb. The sensation was less than pleasant.

“And what was Dr. Reikedahl seeking to glean exactly from those studies and trials?” Illya pressed for more details.

“Chemical compositions and electrical/magnetic wave patterns that could be used to modify nerve synapses.”

Walters shifted on his feet uneasily. Natasha listened intently, leaning her head forward just a smidgen as she focused on her father’s modus operandi for she knew well he had a sterling reputation as a hard-hitting and clever interrogator. Valdar moved not so much as an eyebrow.

“Modify in what way?” Illya continued to quest for more details.

“Stretch,” Delphina noted with a puckered brow, as if the word was not the one she wished to grasp but it was the best one that came immediately to mind. “Amplify,” her brow smoothed as a more proper term occurred to her.

“To augment the more regular patterns?” pushed the interrogator further.

“Yes,” the Thrush assented with a confident nod.

“Why?” Illya posed the most pressing question.

“Why?” repeated Delphina, obviously confused.

“Yes, why. To what ultimate purpose?” the interrogator refined the query.

Delphina sought to pull together the shards of her mental control, sought to concentrate; yet she found doing so virtually impossible. She spoke the next words because she found they were the only ones in her head.

“I never asked why,” she answered truthfully more than likely but much less than satisfactorily in Illya’s opinion.

Napoleon blinked. The child who obeyed without question because she did not understand what the questions should be. How had he sensed that so unerringly?

“And yet you agreed to act as guinea pig for those experiments?”

“I was **not** a guinea pig,” protested the Thrush uncompromisingly.

“Then what do you call what you were?” Kuryakin sought to catch her up.

Delphina frowned a moment, and then she smiled with unfeigned innocence, as if the heavens themselves had opened up and revealed their creator in full glory.

“En søt prøveversjon¹⁶,” she stated unequivocally.

“English please,” the Section III head reminded the prisoner. “But you actually see yourself so? As ‘a sweet trial’?”

¹⁶ A sweet trial

"I see myself as nothing," some iron returned fleetingly to her will, though it was quickly gone. "It is only how I have been described by others."

"I would not describe you so," acerbically jibed Illya. "A trial most assuredly, but just as assuredly not sweet."

"You are prejudiced," candidly taunted the Thrush right back. "You believe I aim to somehow permanently damage your Mr. Solo."

Natasha unthinkingly let a short but very audible gasp escape her lips. Jack gave his temporary partner a severe and undeniably critical glare. Walters offered the rookie agent a half-smile of commiseration.

"And do you aim to do that?" demanded Illya quite reasonably, ignoring any and all of the reactions from others in that room.

"You do not understand," Delphina expounded with distraught eyes and a perplexed shrug of her shoulders. "You could not understand what Papa did either. You refuse to accept that nothing he did permanently damaged Mr. Solo. So I sincerely doubt you will accept the assurance that nothing I do will either."

"Bull's-eye," noted Napoleon quietly in his only self inhabited office. "She's made a dead-on hit with that observation, Illya."

Secretly frustrated and more than a little annoyed, Illya kept his voice completely level as he moved on to another tack.

"Let's try for more specifics on these experiments and your involvement in them. Did they commence right away once your father was again in Thrush hands?"

"The experiments, yes," she answered very specifically. "My involvement in them, no."

"And why was that?" the interrogator probed with seemingly endless patience.

Delphina blinked at him several times before replying.

"You are a scientist, Mr. Kuryakin," she berated him almost with amusement. "The chemical compounds had to be discovered, disassembled to bare components, and then subtly reconfigured. The electrical and magnetic patterns had to be traced and successfully copied before any augmentations to them could be hazarded. There was no immediate need for subjects for clinical trials until all such particulars had been accomplished."

With his archeological background Jack, as a scientist very knowledgeable of technical procedure, had to concede the Thrush had snared Kuryakin pretty neatly in that casual scolding. Truth drug or no, she still possessed a polished slyness of wit, and Valdar begrudgingly gave her that tribute.

"When then did those clinical trials begin?" required Illya, never missing a beat.

"When it was time," Delphina responded again quite unsatisfactorily if quite straightforwardly.

"What year?" the interrogator precisely probed for accurate details.

“1971.”

Illya didn't give any clue as to his private surprise, but the answer mentally raised such in him all the same.

“1971?” he repeated skeptically, definitely expecting the prisoner to amend the year.

“Yes,” she stated surely. “I had just turned eleven years old, so autumn 1971.”

Now the steel knot of utter surety in Illya's gut began to unravel some. In 1971 Napoleon had been... well, not tied to U.N.C.L.E. That year was during the fifteen-year interval when his friend had gone his own way. So, if whatever Reikedahl had been concocting had been something to specifically affect Napoleon, why go ahead with any “clinical trials” at that point? Perhaps the subjecting of Napoleon to the specimen taking had been merely by chance, after all. Perhaps he had been basically an available U.N.C.L.E. agent on whom Thrush could perform a dual task of gathering test samples for future experimentation while effectively torturing an enemy.

But then Illya focused on those eyes of Delphina, those eyes seemingly stolen from his partner, and the knot of surety tightened once more. He remembered all the preliminary setup to Solo's capture during that old affair, and knew without reservation none of it had been accidental. It had been planned, vigilantly planned to entrap one particular victim. Something was off here, but he didn't believe it was his initial assumption.

“Thrush must have been disappointed that all their research wound up centered on a man who was not, at the point of the actual clinical trials, any longer associated with U.N.C.L.E.,” the interrogator attempted to gain some insight into this unforeseen riddle.

“Thrush has always employed very meticulous record-keepers,” were the only words that greeted his verbal prodding, those words delivered as if barely worth the bother as Delphina's somewhat preoccupied smile suggested her mind was already moving beyond them to other thoughts.

The hairs on the back of Solo's neck suddenly stood at attention. “It's not possible,” he muttered in disbelief. Meticulous record-keepers or not, how could Thrush be privy to information that even inside U.N.C.L.E. itself remained to this day within the sole purview of the five hemispheric chiefs?

Delphina, fortunately for U.N.C.L.E.'s internal security at that moment, went off on her own narrative tangent.

“You see it was theorized that the best environment in which to attempt to introduce any of the adaptive chemical and bio-magnetic structures into a test subject was during the onset of puberty,” explained the prisoner with surprising detachment considering the ‘test subject’ in question was none other than herself. “At that point in physical development, the body is already undergoing so many biologically-related changes; it is unlikely to outright reject the introduction of foreign biologic elements, whether chemical, electrical or magnetic.”

Walters whistled low and it was his turn to receive the severe and critical glare from the CEA. Natasha could well understand her fellow agent's uncharacteristic lapse of self-possession.

She had herself needed to fight the urge to physically shudder as the implications of what the prisoner so casually disclosed hit her consciousness like a bucket of ice water.

Illya would very much have liked to pursue Delphina's previous statement about those meticulous Thrush record-keepers and all that might imply. Nevertheless, he suppressed his own inclination and instead swam with the tide of the prisoner's revelations. It was essential to keep her talking without thinking. And backtracking might jeopardize that, giving her time to push against the force of the drug and more measure her responses.

"Did that theory prove accurate?" therefore broached Illya at this juncture.

"Yes and no," Delphina responded with a certain amount of ambivalence.

"How both yes and no?" the interrogator pressured for a more definitive answer.

"The basic premise proved sound," explained the Thrush, "but compromises had to be made."

"Such as the loss of your hearing?" ventured U.N.C.L.E.'s Number 1 of Section III. This was no more than an educated guess of course. Yet Kuryakin was well aware the child he had encountered in the Thrush complex forty-odd years ago had shown no signs of the profound nerve deafness from which this woman openly admitted to suffering.

"Yes," came Delphina's initial monosyllabic reply.

"When I was a child," she then continued wistfully, "I loved to dance. Papa indulged me and I received lessons in everything from classical ballet to modern jazz. Then my hearing had to be forfeited."

"Surrendered," Natasha mentally expostulated, *"to the selfish goals of Thrush science."*

Napoleon experienced a strange moment of loss, almost as if Delphina's "forfeit" had been his own.

"So 'Papa' created a special hearing aid for you," intimated Illya.

"He did do so," agreed the prisoner with obvious love in her voice. "Music, however, remains beyond my ability to auditorily connect. It's as if I hear only the separate pieces and cannot fit them together into a cohesive whole. I do not dance anymore."

This statement was so matter-of-fact, yet at the same time so achingly sad, Jack found himself reacting internally to that sadness, though externally no one would ever guess at any identifiable reaction on his part.

Solo, to his own astonishment, caught his breath in a moment of bleak emotional turmoil. He released that breath slowly, trying to ground himself once more.

"Yet there were some successes, were there not?" the elder Kuryakin wanted to know. "Such as your eyes..."

A lopsided and uniquely child-like grin graced the face of the Thrush technological residual.

“Ah, my eyes,” she began. “As a child I hated my eyes so very much. When I first saw the warm brown eyes of your Mr. Solo, I was captivated. I so wanted such eyes, eyes seemingly dark as the richest earth that could yet glint with sunlit gold or still with river green. So unlike the consistently glowing pink orbs that stood out in my own face like embers from the fires of hell itself. Papa promised me such eyes as part of the experiments, and he kept his promise.”

Illya experienced a chill of realization that the promise of those “warm brown eyes” was what had been used to sway the eleven-year-old into the role of guinea pig. Though he personally felt no especial empathy for Delphina Reikedahl, this realization did cause him all the more to despise the cold-hearted and self-centered ways of Thrush, even on so insignificant a level.

“Obtaining them requiring a fair bit of surgery,” the prisoner elucidated. “Size, shape, color: all had to be refined by scalpels as well as chemicals and even then—generally-untried surgical lasers. Thrush Central made the inflexible specification my retinal scans be altered to match those of Mr. Solo. That proved the most difficult part,” she enlightened with a purse of her lips. “Papa had to labor long and hard to manage that feat, though he did so in the end. It turned out; however, he couldn’t do anything about the cosmetic problem of the whiteness of my lashes and brows. You must appreciate that he naturally didn’t want to risk any chemical that might result in blindness.”

Walters harrumphed.

“That was decent of him,” remarked Illya acidly.

“It all worked out in the final analysis,” summarized Delphina. “I know my eyes are very like those warm brown ones now.”

“You know?” the interrogator caught the peculiarity of that assertion. “Can’t you see for yourself?”

“I can see as well as you, Mr. Kuryakin,” she huffed. “I would dare say better. Except that I only see things as black or white or gray.”

Napoleon pinched the bridge of his nose. A pounding headache was overtaking him.

“The color receptors in your eyes were forfeited to these experiments as well?” Illya forwarded in a very detached voice, carefully using her own terminology with regard to her loss of faculty. Keeping perspective was the best way to deal with such revelations, he knew only too well. Captives often endeavored to play on the sympathies of their captors. Even though he had no doubt what the Thrush said was true, he also had no doubt she would take any advantage she could get, especially in her current situation where her tongue had been loosened against her preferred judgment. If she had no choice but to talk, he was convinced from long familiarity with such interrogation scenarios that she would use the talk to strive toward at least a form of personal compassion from those currently in power over her.

The prisoner noted the interrogator’s obvious avoidance of a more sensitive term than forfeit for what had been required of her by the experiments, so she purposely utilized that term herself, robbing it of its emotive significance.

“Science often requires sacrifices, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“And science so often does lack grace,” Kuryakin expertly turned around her own words from that first encounter in Solo’s office.

The smile she gave him in response was almost feral, reminding everyone in that room in no uncertain terms that, drugged into unwilling disclosure of pertinent truths or not, this woman was cunningly dangerous.

“On the whole, however, your father’s ‘science’ was deemed a success?” Illya asked for a blunt clarification on this point.

Delphina furrowed her brow.

“Those in Central and especially those on the ruling council were not pleased by the length of time required before any noticeable results could be garnered,” the Thrush acknowledged with some distinct upset. “They always wanted everything done at once, and Papa’s experiments just didn’t fit into that mold. So in the main they looked upon those experiments as worthless.”

“Geniuses are never appreciated in their own time,” Illya quipped with droll irony.

“Just so,” gravely concurred the prisoner with a resigned sigh. “Still, Papa lent his expertise to a great many other projects for them, all of which had that desired aspect of quickly gained and immediately useful results. So they indulged him in his continued persistence with his pet project.”

“And permitted you to live, technological residual of valueless experimentation that you were,” stabbed out the interrogator with a dead-on thrust. He knew Thrush. Cutting losses was a tried-and-true strategy of their ultimate game plan.

Delphina smiled that almost feral smile once more.

“Papa saw to that,” she frankly affirmed. “And when he feared he might no longer be able to do so, he arranged for a protector.”

“A protector?” nudged Illya, his inner mental monitor registering the importance of this particular confession.

“Yes,” Delphina went on talking she knew far too much. “There was a man in Central who was fascinated by the experiments and by me as the outcome of them.” She remained self-infuriatingly powerless to stop the rash words from pouring in flood-like torrents out of her mouth. “Papa encouraged that fascination with the upshot this up-and-comer eventually became my lover and my champion.”

“And who was this keenly fond advocate?” Illya made sure to keep his tone indifferent.

“Niles Ospreye,” declared the Thrushie readily enough.

“You’ve got the pitch you wanted, Illya,” Napoleon conceded to his friend as he massaged his own aching temples. “Go ahead and swing for the fences.”

“I was seventeen years old when I became his singular obsession,” Delphina furthered her response without prompting.

“Obsession:” thought Jack to himself, *“that’s a precarious word indeed. I hope it serves to make clear to Solo the instability of the time bomb we presently have ticking in our midst.”*

“And still are?” pushed the interrogator, satisfaction with his score well hidden in his brusque manner.

“One survives however one can, yes, Mr. Kuryakin?” the Thrush insinuated shrewdly.

“One does indeed,” agreed Illya. “And thus sometimes one finds it necessary to accede to the plans of a protector, yes, Ms. Reikedahl?”

Delphina tilted her head at him, assessing him quietly.

“And what do you believe might be any such plans, Mr. Kuryakin?” she demanded with more circumspection than the truth drug would normally allow.

Likely the effect of the sodium thiopental was mitigating, and Illya was only too aware he had promised to administer no more than the one dose that could absolutely be accounted safe. *“I will have to move fast,”* he mentally advised himself. *“There is still much I need to know.”*

“I would prefer to hear your own estimation in that regard, madam,” he countered her.

“Perhaps the objective is to finally conclude all the clinical trials,” the Thrush put forth another statement that likely was truth, but just as likely not all of it.

“Didn’t those conclude long ago?” quizzed Illya.

“How could they, Mr. Kuryakin, when all things needful to such purpose remained out of reach?” she queried boldly as her eyes sought his with audacious intensity.

“Meaning Mr. Solo’s presence?” Kuryakin hazarded the likely reality.

“Earlier this evening, Mr. Kuryakin, as we both waited patiently upon your arrival,” ventured the prisoner with a strange little half-smile, “Mr. Valdar speculated that, in order to have gained unchecked access into Mr. Solo’s office, I had all but certainly made free with the secret entrance into that office reserved for the Continental Chief’s especial use.”

Now it was Jack who shifted a bit uneasily. He did not much like having his indiscreet exchange with an enemy made public.

“My protestations that I personally have no knowledge as to that entrance’s location could not convince your organization’s CEA such was unvarnished truth,” Delphina blithely continued. “Now, however, I pledge in good faith singularly to you, Mr. Kuryakin, the veracity of that statement I made to Mr. Valdar. Bluntly put: I have no rational clue where the fifth entrance to U.N.C.L.E. New York is located.”

“Which leaves the irrational,” Illya immediately picked up on her particular wording.

“But what man of science trusts in the irrational?” she mocked.

“Apparently Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl,” acknowledged Illya incisively.

“A genius before his time,” stated the genius’ doting daughter. “While you, Mr. Kuryakin, are surely the devil a dying man once claimed you to be. Yet even with the sizzling pitchfork of your self-proclaimed righteous methods of non-bloody physical coercion, you haven’t managed to burn me.”

“On the contrary, Ms. Reikedahl,” he gainsaid her assertion in his patented deadpan voice, “I believe I’ve seared you quite fork-tender.”

Just at that moment the prisoner began to shake once more, the tremors quickly increasing in speed and force. She was fighting her way out from under the remaining influence of the drug and she wasn’t doing it half-heartedly now. In what seemed no more than the blink of an eye, the tremors escalated to full-out convulsions, shuddering spasms rocketing through every muscle of her body as her eyes rolled back into her head.

“Medical emergency team to Interrogation Room 4!” Jack shouted into the intercom after moving his way there with professional alacrity.

“Get the cuffs off her!” ordered Illya immediately as he sprang from his chair at the observation of how those jerking limbs were causing the metal of the manacles to brutally bite into and bruise the flesh of her shackled extremities.

Natasha pulled back the head of the prisoner and placed what she had readily available between the older woman’s teeth so to keep her tongue from rolling back in her mouth and obstructing her breathing. In this case what was readily available proved to be the new-style pen communicator several field agents were now testing. The research folks likely wouldn’t be pleased by this unorthodox use of their innovation, but in the field – whether that was in some Thrush satrapy or an U.N.C.L.E. interrogation room – one did what one had to do.

Walters and Valdar set about the task of unlocking the cuffs and subsequently attempting to keep the woman from forcibly propelling her wildly twitching body onto the floor. The elder Kuryakin touched two fingers to the carotid artery in the woman’s long column of white throat making a concerted effort to measure the overtaxed beats of her pulse.

Napoleon placed a hand on his forehead, grimacing in agony. His brain felt like it was about to split wide-open. Feebly then he laid his throbbing head onto his crossed arms upon the huge revolving desk and silently prayed for the blinding pain to pass.

The medical emergency team arrived in the interrogation room and took over care of the prisoner, injecting her with a muscle relaxant though they would have preferred not to do so considering she was already under the barbiturate influence of U.N.C.L.E.’s truth serum. Still her convulsions were just too violent to do otherwise. Finally they got her stabilized, though she slipped into unconsciousness. Strapped to a gurney, she was wheeled away into U.N.C.L.E.’s in-house medical facility for further monitoring.

[...continued in Part 2...](#)

