

## THE WAVES OF CHANGE AFFAIR (PART 2) BY [LAH](#)

**December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

### ***Somewhere inside and outside the boundaries of sleep***

*She lay on her side, hunched her body close, and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She was trying to make herself physically as small as possible, hoping that by blending as much as possible into her surroundings she would cease to feel so totally alone. Nothing was really different, was it? Papa had explained it all to her as he always had, explained that she had needed to undergo these interrogations so that those in Thrush could see all the evidence of his training of her. And he had told her in advance she wouldn't fare well during this last procedure.*

*"I must not hide your weaknesses from them, Delphie," he had informed her as gently as he always had about things that could be categorized at the very least as unpleasant. "Your focus kept you centered during the beatings as I knew it would. I am quite proud of how you showed off your training there, my girl," he complimented her with an indulgent smile. "But drugs are entirely a different matter. Your body is now very accustomed to quickly and efficiently assimilating the effects of such, so you won't be able to resist any such effects and you'll break more easily than I would wish. Your means of concentration may be able to bring you out from under the influence of the truth drug sooner than expected, but that also means that coming around could prove quite physically violent."*

*Yet somehow, despite the forewarning, breaking so easily after so many years of training to maintain absolute self-control had still been intensely humiliating. She had stood up staunchly quiet and uncommunicative when being slapped and punched and slammed against walls, but it all seemed as nothing now. For once she had been injected with a veridical, her concentration had left her and she had become a talkative fool. And attempting to fight that utter lack of control with all her studied methods of centering had in the end only made her nerves tense in complete rebellion, her body going into wild convulsions.*

*And now she lay here in a Thrush medical unit recovering physically, but mentally she was isolated within her sense of lack of individual worth. Trapped within a dark world of self-loathing that no one else could comprehend. Not even Papa.*

*Just then she felt a caressing touch against the side of her neck. A mellow and memorable male voice questioned kindly, "How are you feeling?"*

*She turned slowly to look up into the face of Niles Ospreye. His expression was fond, protectively tender, and his eyes were warm.*

*Papa had said that to ensure this man's continued safeguarding of her she should go to his bed. That wouldn't be so difficult. He did seem somehow to account her as something uniquely precious, almost as if she would be a possession beyond price. And such possibility acted as healing balm upon her hurting heart.*

*"I'll be fine," she responded in an uncertain voice.*

*He smiled at her, a smile that somehow suggested he alone understood her always unexpressed desolation. With intense emotion all but utterly breaking his voice, he bid her, "Kom inn i armene mine, min søte prøveversjon<sup>1</sup>."*

*And so she did...*

Body curled defensively tight in on itself, Delphina lay on her side on a bed in U.N.C.L.E.'s medical facility trying to come to terms with her most recent bout of self-deprecation stemming from her customary inability to withstand the influence of an injected drug. A truth drug of course. The only bit of good fortune in the event is that she had managed to alarm her "torturers" with the violent way her body had finally freed itself of that unwanted influence.

She felt a light touch against the side of her neck and heard a deep and distinctive male voice question kindly, "How are you feeling?"

With an involuntary start, Delphina turned to look up into the face of Napoleon Solo. His expression was concerned, thoughtfully sympathetic, and his eyes were warm.

She had led him blindly into a Thrush trap many years before and for all he knew she could be leading him into another now. After all, that wouldn't be so difficult. Yet he did seem to view her without prejudice, ready to give her every benefit of doubt. And such breathing space urged the giddiness of autonomy into her shackled soul.

"I'll be fine," answered Delphina, finding her throat suddenly very dry.

He smiled at her, a smile that somehow suggested he did so wish he could understand what drove her current actions and reactions. "If you are up to it then, Ms. Reikedahl," he proposed with gracious charm strongly resonant in his voice, "I'd like for you to come for a walk with me."

"Around the steel-lined corridors of U.N.C.L.E.'s HQ?" she asked, slowly but surely regaining her equilibrium with regard to time and place and heart and soul.

"Someplace much less confining," Solo assured her. "Hospital rooms are always so antiseptically stuffy; I thought you might appreciate a bit of fresh air to help you recover. So what I'm suggesting is a mutual foot-tour of Central Park."

Delphina gazed at him warily, but finally nodded her agreement.

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### **Act I: ...then again perhaps not...**

For the chemical analysis to ensure the composition of the gun oil, they would send one of their own people. It was too critical a task to be left in outside hands. Yet for the assessing of the quality of the armaments, a mercenary would do fine, as one had the previous two times out. Not the same mercenary of course; that could prove dangerous. Thrush did not seek for anyone outside their own organization to become too familiar with their activities. But a one-time-hire independent whose only concern was doing the job for cold hard cash was definitely the way to avoid unwelcome tracking of the whole procedure by U.N.C.L.E.

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<sup>1</sup> Come into my arms, my sweet trial

Niles Ospreye paused in his perusal of the report on the mercenary arms specialist Thrush was considering using for inspection of the last shipment of weaponry that would soon be delivered to them by the Russian Mafia. His thoughts during this small window of idle time centered on matters much more personal. He was distractedly missing the physical presence of his “søte prøveversjon”.

Placing Delphina Reikedahl in the hands of U.N.C.L.E. had been a managerially necessitated but privately less-than-agreeable twist of fate. Delphina was his... How exactly to term the woman's place within his own regard was something that consistently eluded Ospreye. She was his mistress, but neither sexual antics nor romantic ideals were what accounted for his fascination with her; a fascination that had lasted three full decades in its current intimate form yet had begun five years before even that. His passion for her wasn't founded on lust or longing or love or anything so mundane. Instead it was based on a fixation with what she was, that being the result of technological experiments and intense training that had altered her physically and mentally in many more ways that could be seen externally. Delphina Reikedahl was totally unique, a one-of-a-kind Thrush invention who came courtesy of her own father's scientific research. She therefore fascinated him as no other being ever had or ever could.

Niles Ospreye was on the whole a rather pragmatic man. His rise within the echelons of the Thrush command structure was something for which he had purposely striven. Thus to facilitate that upward mobility within the shadow organization he had in general kept himself clear of what might be termed “emotional baggage”. Having weaknesses that could be exploited made for such inefficient power mongering, and he had an intense distaste for inefficiency in any aspect of life. Yet from the initial time he laid eyes upon Delphina during his auditing for Thrush of Reikedahl's pet research project, his personal absorption with her had taken firm hold. She had been but twelve then, her skin tone already normalized by her father's biochemical trials from its previous albino lack of pigmentation, but her eyes still wrapped in bandages from the first of many operations she was to undergo regarding shifting their retinal configuration as Central demanded. White hair still fully displaying the vagaries of the physical condition of her birth, elegant long neck providing her a delicate and almost ethereal grace, what had ultimately struck the then twenty-five-year-old Thrush rising star about the young girl was her air of unshakeable calm.

From speaking with her, Ospreye grasped that, young as she was, Delphina was not at all unaware of the rumble of controversy that surrounded her within the framework of Thrush's hierarchy. It was not of course that Thrush had any primitive ethical scruples about utilizing a child in the experiments. It was just that what exactly might be accomplished by those experiments was being constantly debated amongst the various members of the Supreme Council. The entirety of that Council was decidedly in favor of anything that might grant Thrush some sort of control over U.N.C.L.E.'s Napoleon Solo when he eventually gained Waverly's chair as a policymaker in that pesky organization. However what this particular research might eventually afford as tangible results in that regard remained rather sketchy.

Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl had scientific vision, but he also had a kind of technical castle-in-the-sky philosophy that to most bordered on the stuff of sheer science fiction. His intense preoccupation with synaptic research made most scratch their heads in bewilderment. Yet Ospreye watched the scientist as he put his daughter through an elaborate series of exercises in the gaining and maintaining of almost superhuman concentration, and he had recognized the doctor's plan was not based solely on biochemical, bioelectric and bio-magnetic alterations. That his method combined what could be done to the body by science with what the mind could be taught in support of those physical manipulations. And Ospreye was astute enough to

appreciate that at least the second part of the scientist's method would likely garner significant results even if the first part failed miserably.

He thus had championed Reikedahl's cause with Central and eventually, when it seemed the Supreme Council was tiring of the expense and slow pace of the scientist's pet project and began to make noises about disposing of the "guinea pig" in favor of getting on with research with more quickly quantifiable results, Ospreye stepped into the guise of protector for the then teenage girl. He ventured that it did no harm to keep her around as possible insurance for the future, as long as Reikedahl continued to provide valuable technological services in other areas to which Thrush assigned him, even as Reikedahl himself forwarded his daughter in ways categorically intended to make Ospreye aware she would be more than willing to become his personal prize. In the end, Central conceded the girl's continued existence and her father's continued experimentation with her, as long as the scientist kept that subservient to his other projects. And Ospreye gained himself a bedmate whose appeal for him was so beyond the ordinary that he just could not get enough of her. In thirty years he still hadn't.

His own meteoric rise within the ranks of Thrush had assured Delphina's survival. And though some within those ranks did "tut-tut" at what they tactlessly called his unrepressed obsession, Ospreye's efficiency in all other facets of his association with the Hierarchy wound up providing him an unassailable pass with regard to that one personal quirk. None dared question him on it now, now that he had a firm position on the Thrush Council and all the brute power that came with such a position. Of course he was also sufficiently circumspect never to have paraded Delphina openly and thus make his undeniable fixation with her an obvious Achilles' heel duly noted by outside enemies. In fact, he prided himself that – until her purposeful thrust into U.N.C.L.E.'s arms – not one of his enemies was even cognizant of her existence in his life.

"Possibilities pleasantly perfume the air," he muttered to himself with a lopsided grin. It was one of his pet expressions and one that all those within Thrush understood well as referencing a truly spectacular turn of an ingenious mind with regard to some particularly confidential activities.

With a soft sign of resignation at Delphina's enforced absence followed hard upon by a small smile of satisfaction at the potential outcome of such absence, Ospreye returned his immediate attention to the file displayed on the screen of the laptop in front of him.

"Nikolaevna Anuchin," Ospreye repeated the name aloud, rolling the Russianness of it on his tongue as his mind ruminated on all he had read. "Well, she seems competent enough and certainly comes highly recommended," he furthered his thoughts into speech. "Little young maybe," he noted with a bemused smirk for in truth, now that he inhabited his sixth decade, most of those around him seemed a little young. "But then in hired help there is some advantage to a bit of inexperience in dealing with intrigue. Makes it less likely she will have the worldly wherewithal to seek out anything she shouldn't."

With a grand flourish of his fingertips upon the compact keyboard, Niles Ospreye, Thrush Supreme Council member, sent the coded email providing Gennadiy Yunusov with Central's endorsement of the young female mercenary named Nikolaevna Anuchin in the position of arms assessor with regard to the final weapons shipment being made out of Moscow into New York.

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Though technically it wasn't part of his job and though some indeed wondered why the second-in-command of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E. liked to keep his hands in on such trivial technicalities, briefing agents on the new aspects of devices for use in their field arsenals

was a task Illya Kuryakin enthusiastically enjoyed. In some ways, now that age unequivocally bound him into the role of desk jockey, it made him feel closer to those operatives who were the lifeblood of the organization. He made an invariable habit of denying it if pressed, yet like Napoleon his heart would forever be in the field. Unfortunately time makes no exceptions for emotional preferences, and thus even adrenaline junkies like himself and Solo inevitably lost the most potent source of their fix.

Today, however, Illya was vicariously reveling in the field possibilities provided by the new pen communicator as he explained and demonstrated the improved version of the device to the six agents who comprised the core of the infiltration team for the Russian Arms Affair.

“As on the previous model you have been testing for some months,” the Section III Chief began, “the clip of the pen-unit has seven positions, each for use with a specific communications channel. All channels are scrambled.

“First position: Fully private, for communication individual agent to individual agent in the field.

“Second position:” went on Kuryakin as he rotated the clip until there was a barely audible click, “Semi private, for communications between all agents part of a specific field team.

“Third position: Field local, for communication between all agents part of associated field teams working on different aspects of the same mission.”

Illya rotated the clip to the fourth position with another click.

“Fourth position: Local exclusive,” he specified, “for communication between local command and individual agent.

“Fifth position: Local inclusive, for communication between local command and all field teams working on the same mission.”

Another click sounded as the Section III head rotated the clip yet again.

“Sixth position: Relay exclusive, for communication between home-base command, even when such requires an overseas connection, and individual agent.

“Seventh position: Relay inclusive,” Illya rotated the clip into the final channel point with another click, “for communication between home-base command, again even when requiring an overseas connection, and all field teams working on the same mission.

“Also as on the previous model,” Kuryakin stated matter-of-factly as he pointed out the involved parts, “buttons, purportedly for color changes of ink, each activate a specific function of the apparatus, five now as opposed to the previous four.

“Black,” he went on as he flicked that particular button, “activates an audio communications channel with both send and receive modes. The plunger at the top of the pen conceals the microphone.”

Click sounded the plunger under Illya’s finger as he noted, “Depress into the down position to open the channel. Depress again,” the next words came audibly highlighted by another definitive click, “to the up position to close the channel.”

The four men and two women of the Section II contingent kept silent though this portion of the recitation. These particulars of the communicator's workings were already familiar to them, as they hadn't changed from the last test model.

"The blue button activates a still image transmission channel, both send and receive," Illya went on with the full specifications. "Lens, used for camera send and projection receipt, is located on the clip bar of the apparatus," he tapped that area in visual demonstration. "The transmission is sent/received as a holographic three-dimensional image," he furthered as he projected into the room the image of the lab that a research assistant obligingly sent through, the twelve-inch square hologram vividly suspended in the air near the Section Chief's communicator. "Size of the image can be adjusted by waving the pen downward to decrease, with a minimum size of 2.5 centimeters square, and upward to increase, with a maximum size of 125 centimeters square," Illya noted as he gestured with the pen appropriately to exhibit these parameters. "Again, plunger down to open the channel; plunger up to close," he finalized as he clicked away the projection into nothingness. "You may also receive static maps in this way."

Several of the Section II agents nodded as the distinctive click/click sounded again.

"The green button activates a video transmission channel, send and receive," Kuryakin continued. "It can be depressed in tandem with the black to send or receive a full video/audio holographic transmission." He readily displayed a live feed from the same lab assistant, who obligingly waved and offered a 'Hello' to validate the vocal transmission. "Same routine for size adjustment and..." click/click – Illya's finger easily closed off the show, "for opening and closing the channel. "Fully functional navigation maps can also be received and utilized through this method."

"The red button activates the bio-magnetic field necessary for you to be monitored by the bio-drone relay. Send only mode, but better than any standard homing device. Same on/off procedure..." click/click "...as the other pen functions."

The Section II agents waited expectantly. All that had been demonstrated thus far was already known to them, but the next was the new bit and they were eager to hear what it might be.

"And now for the pièce de résistance," concluded Kuryakin with just the barest hint of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "The purple button activates a short-range bio-magnetic field that can be directed at a small target area for a spurt of two minutes. That signal is then bounced to the bio-drone relay and fed back to the apparatus with the result that, when encountering a human bio-magnetic pulse, the pen will emit an electronic buzz." Pointing the instrument toward his daughter where she sat amongst the Section II contingent, Illya pushed down the plunger to activate the function and the pen came to life with a responding idiosyncratic buzz. He then depressed the plunger so that it retracted to the up position and the buzzing ceased. "Of course it won't tell you whether the person detected is part of the library of stored bio-magnetic profiles of U.N.C.L.E. personnel or just a random individual. We're working on that capability via the use of two sets of tones, but for now there is this."

"I'm not sure I see the use exactly," forwarded Dutch agent Alfred van Niels.

"It effectively neutralizes much of the usefulness of Thrush's light manipulation suit," stated Jack Valdar certainly.

“Exactly, Mr. Valdar,” affirmed Kuryakin. “From testing we discovered that the suit does not fool the bio-drone as it does the human eye or even a camera lens. Bio-magnetics are not bound by the properties of light. So, while I admit it would be slow going to use this to detect everywhere a suit-wearing Thrush might be hiding within a confined space, and certainly it would be even less useful fully out-in-the-open, it nevertheless provides a modicum of defensive identification ability under such circumstances.”

“Cielo concede misericordia<sup>2</sup>,” Pedro Arquas noted with a huge grin. “We will gladly take any such abilities we can get.”

“Amen to that, Pedro,” agreed his partner, Linda Beckstein.

“A Geiger counter for invisible Thrushies,” remarked Natasha with a receptive grin. “Science does advance in leaps and bounds.”

“Yes, but unfortunately oftentimes in leaps and bounds that skirt ethical boundaries,” commented her father coolly.

“Like in that sassy bit of Thrush technological fluff we have in a holding cell currently,” Agent Kyle Walters casually expounded as he stretched languidly.

“She’s still recovering in medical, isn’t she?” questioned Natasha with a barely suppressed shudder. Her sight of the Thrush going into violent convulsions as she fought off the U.N.C.L.E. truth serum was still vivid in her memory.

“Apparently, greenstick, she’s recovered enough to keep the Number 1 of Section 1 company during a stroll through Central Park,” Jack almost snickered as he provided Delphina Reikedahl’s accurate location at the moment.

Illya Kuryakin turned to the CEA. “What did you say, Mr. Valdar?”

“Just that the erstwhile prisoner is currently taking a turn about Central Park with Mr. Solo,” reiterated Valdar. “I was asked by Section V this morning to assign a couple of Section II agents to complement the detail on the junket. Since this is essentially a personal excursion, Mr. Solo was rather put out by that. But I finally did manage to convince him that Ed Lein, capable though he is, and another Section V security type as backup weren’t going to be sufficient safeguarding in that specific situation. And frankly Section V just didn’t want sole responsibility in this case as it could prove far too easy for Thrush to take down the Continental Chief in an open area the size of Central Park. We also have no clue if the Reikedahl woman might not somehow assist in such an event. Thus the outing is being treated security-wise as an official junket requiring a full four-man team: two agents from Section II and two from Section V.”

Illya ran a hand distractedly through his hair. What the hell was Napoleon thinking now? And why hadn’t he been advised about this? Napoleon surely realized that his coming into direct contact with the Reikedahl woman could be extremely risky. That what had been learned during the interrogation yesterday suggested she was in some way connecting her nervous system into Solo’s. Granted, it still made little sense, but Illya didn’t believe in gambling unnecessarily. And here his friend had just up and gone for his own version of an adrenaline hit by diving headlong

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<sup>2</sup> Heaven grants mercy

into what could be a deadly dangerous situation. Typical Napoleon: still as reckless and overconfident as he had been forty years ago.

“Demonstration complete, Mr. Kuryakin?” Valdar queried of the older man after the Section II personnel had waited about five minutes for the expected dismissal from the Section III chief.

“Oh yes, Mr. Valdar,” nodded Illya, letting his thoughts come back to the moment at hand. “Each of you is to take one of the new communicators and make yourself fully familiar with it.”

Each agent picked up a communicator pen from an open box on the table and then made his or her way out of the conference room through the pneumatic door. Natasha, however, lingered behind.

“Dad?” she addressed her father tentatively after the others had exited. “May I talk to you about something?”

“Uhm?” was all the response Illya made, his mind obviously still preoccupied.

Natasha smiled.

“Dyadya always does have that incredible luck of his to cover his back, Dad,” she pointed out, comprehending only too well where her father’s mental attention was currently focused.

“Luck,” repeated Illya scornfully. “You know Natasha, though the hallowed legend stubbornly persists, it was never really luck, not entirely anyhow. Napoleon always had a kind of sixth sense about things, and he was never afraid to indulge that.”

“Instinct and intuition,” agreed Natasha with a nod, “and of course having you as his backup never exactly hurt either.”

Illya gave his daughter a little smile. “Just as me having him as my backup never exactly hurt. We were a good field team.”

“You two were the best field team U.N.C.L.E. ever had,” Natasha spoke bluntly, “which relates directly to what I want to talk to you about.”

“Having trouble with your partner?” guessed Illya.

“Jack is...” Natasha paused, seeking neutral words. “Difficult to get along with,” she settled on the most simplistic way of expressing the facts.

“Mr. Valdar is an excellent field operative,” stated Illya straightforwardly.

Natasha sighed.

“Oh, I know that. It’s just he’s so... aggravating.”

Illya chuckled.

“To the independent people who tend to be field agents,” he revealed plainly, “a partner often is so, until you get to know him... or her. I suspect, Natasha, Mr. Valdar finds you equally as aggravating.”

Natasha's facial expression gave evidence of her surprise at her father's statement.

"I am not aggravating!" she countered. "I'm funny..."

"And I suspect Mr. Valdar's wit is rather different than yours and that neither of you yet appreciates what the other offers as humor," insinuated Illya.

"And I'm smart..." persisted Natasha.

"Are you suggesting Mr. Valdar isn't?" her father batted back with a little smirk.

"No! but..." Natasha huffed, "He's condescending! He constantly refers to me as 'greenstick'!"

"Aren't you that?" pressed Illya in a nonetheless teasing tone.

"And he doesn't even talk to me as if I am human being with feelings!" came Natasha's next protest.

"Maybe because you don't talk to him as one," ventured her father.

Natasha sighed heavily. "Dad, you're supposed to be on my side!"

Illya laughed, but very soothingly, not in any way that could be construed as making light of her very real concerns.

"Moyo novoye serdce <sup>3</sup>," he assured his daughter, "I will always be on your side. And it may well be that Jack Valdar is honestly not a good match as a field partner for you. But I have to tell you outright that you haven't yet given the partnership much of a chance. And you are the more outgoing of the pairing, Natasha, so I'm afraid it must fall to you to make the initial push toward forging a workable bond with Mr. Valdar. Reticence of nature is a kind of social chain that needs reconfiguring to mesh with the links of others. Napoleon made the first move into my sphere of personal restraints you know, and it's something for which I will be forever grateful."

"Dyadya in full charm mode could never be brushed aside even by the most determined of dour Soviets," now it was Natasha's turn to rib.

"And neither can you in that mode, my girl," complimented Illya as he chucked his daughter fondly under the chin. "You have your Dyadya's full arsenal there. No clue how it was passed onto you, but somehow it was."

"Osmosis," intimated Natasha with a playful wink, "the very scientific result of you letting him around me so much as a child."

"I wouldn't doubt it," agreed Illya readily.

And, with almost as telltale a mental click/click as the audible one produced by the pushing in and out of the plunger on the new style communicator, Illya for the moment forgot the problem presented by his partner's headstrong tendencies and basked in the memories of that friend's long-ago extending of goodwill that had in time led to fast friendship and total trust. Trust

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<sup>3</sup> My renewed heart

maybe he would do well to let take the forefront now with regard to Napoleon's spontaneous handling of Delphina Reikedahl.

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Delphina breathed deeply of the cold winter air. It felt so good to fill her lungs with oxygen unprocessed through the filtering system of U.N.C.L.E.'s New York headquarters. And Central Park in its light blanket of snow was a welcome sight to eyes that had become too accustomed to sterile steel enclosures. The feel of the wool sweater and slacks she had been supplied for this outing were warm and inviting, as was the plush coat. And she would never have previously thought having her feet once again protected within leather could have seemed such decadence. Yet, though she was extremely grateful for this respite from claustrophobic indoor spaces, the standard prisoner black jumpsuit and constantly bare feet, she had no doubt it would come at a price. Napoleon Solo obviously wanted to speak with her outside the confines of U.N.C.L.E.'s tight security and routine monitoring.

After some time spent in silence as the two of them simply walked about the park, Solo's ubiquitous security contingent trailing some yards behind them, the Thrush decided to get right to the heart of the matter.

"Is there something you want to ask me, Mr. Solo?"

"Napoleon," the Continental Chief corrected her. "And maybe I just wanted the pleasure of an attractive woman's company during my walk."

She stopped her stride, causing him to halt as well, as she turned to face him directly.

"While I do realize such would indeed suit your overall character, Napoleon," she used his given name without hesitation but with a certain casual élan, "I honestly doubt that is what prompted this invitation to me today."

"That obvious, huh?" inferred Napoleon with one of his infectious smiles.

"Only because you want it to be that obvious," challenged Delphina knowingly.

Napoleon didn't bother to deny or belabor this point.

"Delphina..." he began. "May I call you Delphina?" he delayed his more meaningful response by politely requesting permission for a first-name intimacy to exist on both sides of the interaction between them.

The Thrush waved one hand in relaxed acceptance of that intimacy. "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," she spoke with a lopsided grin.

"Well then, Delphina," Napoleon recommenced both talking and strolling, "I thought away from the atmosphere of security holding cells and interrogation rooms, you might be inclined to talk a little more freely."

"About what in particular, Napoleon?" she paced his words and his steps.

"You claim you are the mistress of Niles Osprey."

"For thirty years," she affirmed straightforwardly.

“And you also claim yourself to be his ‘obsession’ – your own word,” stressed Solo as he watched her mouth set in an unyielding line, “for those same thirty years.”

“If you are seeking some secret insight into Niles’ mind or soul,” warned Delphina bluntly, “I’ll not provide you that.”

“You already have provided that,” batted back Napoleon somewhat smugly, “simply by revealing he has an obsession.”

“While under the influence of that damnable U.N.C.L.E. veridical,” countered the Thrush with definite bitterness. “Perhaps it was no more than a ruse on my part to reveal such.”

“Perhaps,” allowed Napoleon, “but then again perhaps not.”

They walked on in verbal silence for several minutes, the icy coating of snow on the faded yellowish grass crunching noisily under their feet furnishing the only sound.

“What do you want me to say, Napoleon?” Delphina at last inquired in frustration.

“I’m not sure, Delphina,” divulged Solo.

Delphina stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face the man at her side once more as he halted his own forward movement at this cue.

“Do you want me to protest that I am some sort of innocent who is being tactlessly manipulated by Niles?”

“Are you some sort of innocent who is being tactlessly manipulated, either personally by Ospreye or more generally by Thrush?” Napoleon asked plainly.

“No,” she gave her answer, short and to the point.

Solo audibly sighed.

“Then this is going to be more difficult than I had hoped,” he conceded.

“I would say that I’m sorry for making it more difficult but, after what happened yesterday, it would only be a lie.”

“Whereas before yesterday it would have been something other than a lie?” Napoleon tested.

Delphina silently resumed walking, Solo matching her stride for stride, as did the coterie of security following at a discreet distance.

“Doesn’t that trailing posse play havoc with your social life?” Delphina now quizzed Napoleon as she indicated with a movement of her head the four-man security detail stalking in their wake.

Solo laughed. “There was a time,” he responded glibly. “Inconvenient safety measures come with the territory however, and usually it’s just one bodyguard yapping anxiously at my heels.”

“Should I be flattered that U.N.C.L.E. deemed me enough of a threat to increase your security while you are in my company?” she quipped, a slightly mocking smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“That depends,” Solo noted. Then indicating with a subtle sweeping gesture of his hand several men standing at various points around them, not too close but not too distant either, he quipped back, “Should I be flattered so many birdwatchers came out to spy on our little walk?”

Delphina smirked as she reminded him, “You are the first among equals of the five top men in U.N.C.L.E.”

“But it is you who is the supposed obsession of a high-ranking member of the Thrush Central Council,” Napoleon reminded her in turn.

“Then I’ll let you ascertain the answer to your question for yourself, Napoleon,” Delphina demurred. “I will disclose, however, that Niles will be less than pleased any such potential avian observers were espied so readily.”

“Then I imagine they are to be pitied,” hazarded Napoleon, “for we’ll ensure he finds out soon enough.

“Shall we sit?” he then suggested as he indicated a nearby park bench with a wave of his hand.

“If you like,” agreed Delphina.

They walked on shoulder-to-shoulder toward the bench. Once they had reached it, Solo gallantly brushed the thin coating of snow off the surface with one gloved hand and made another sweeping hand-gesture signifying the Thrush was to be seated before he was himself. Delphina sat, smiling an amused smile as she did so.

“Always the gentleman.”

“Not always,” countered Napoleon with a smile of his own as he took a seat beside her on the bench.

“Is that a warning regarding the nature of any questions to come?” goaded Delphina wryly.

“Rather a warning never to take anything solely at face value,” Napoleon rejoined gamely. “Or are you going to tell me you have always trusted in the kindness of strangers?” he pointedly paraphrased Tennessee Williams’ created character of Blanche DuBois.

The amused smile stretched her lips once more.

“You are hardly what I would call a stranger, Napoleon.”

For the first time during this conversation, Solo found himself less than fully at ease.

“About that...” he began.

“You want to know if I truly gained sensory knowledge, shall we call it, by somehow using my amplified synaptic impulses to reach and connect to yours,” she forwarded his query in much more succinct terms than he could have managed.”

“Yes, I want to know that,” he acknowledged.

“And yes, I did that,” she guaranteed him. “I won’t elaborate further.”

“Not the answer I wanted to hear,” admitted Napoleon with a concerned puckering of his brow.

“Because it lessens your perceptions of personal autonomy?” guessed Delphina.

“No, because it makes me something of a threat to U.N.C.L.E.,” he matter-of-factly informed her how off the mark had been her conjecture.

“Ah, but it doesn’t,” corrected Delphina nonchalantly. “It makes **me** something of a threat to U.N.C.L.E. But you and your entire organization have already been assuming that. So this revelation changes nothing.”

She reached up with one hand – a bare hand, Napoleon suddenly noted, though she had been given gloves – and gently brushed the backs of her fingers against his cheek.

“I will do nothing to permanently damage you, Napoleon,” she pledged in a soft voice. “Thus could I never make you a traitor to your own.”

Her skin against his sent actual physical frissons of energy through his body, almost like an intense form of static electricity hitting directly upon unexpectedly exposed nerve endings. The unusual but not strictly unpleasant shudderings widened his eyes in stunned cognizance.

“You’re doing it now,” he challenged her, “connecting.”

“Once it was initiated, that connection gained more of a life of its own than even I anticipated,” she confided to him frankly. “I can control it when there is no physical contact between us; yet when we touch I have no such governance over the connection.”

Solo deliberately grasped her hand in his own, moving that hand of hers from his face, and finally laying her hand in her lap as he released his own grip.

“You are afraid of this connection, Napoleon?”

“I am justly wary of it, Delphina.”

“Mr. Kuryakin will be pleased by this new wariness,” she teased him as she briefly brushed back his hair, purposely letting her fingertips lightly graze his scalp.

Her touch was no more than momentary, just long enough for Solo to register those undeniably electric quavers in his nerves once more.

“You do that to demonstrate your power?” baited Napoleon through hooded eyes.

“I do that because I am intrigued by this power, as you call it,” Delphina confessed. “Long did my father logically speculate on this result of his experiments, but he was never able to fully test and analyze his theories. Thus I have never before actually experienced this connection either, Napoleon, and it fascinates me. Human beings are such uniquely self-contained creatures. Everything we are physically is held tightly bound within the sphere of an individual body. But

now suddenly between you and me there is this shared sphere of sensory abilities that is equally part of both our bodies. Don't you find that somehow humbling?"

"It is hardly equally shared," Napoleon disputed her supposition. "It seems in fact very one-sided from where I sit; with you able to gain access to my sensory pathways and me only physically aware of you doing so."

"Is that really true, Napoleon?" Delphina verbally probed his mind as she leaned in and quite boldly let her lips physically probe the rim and lobe of his left ear.

With a start, Solo realized that it wasn't really true. When she had been under the influence of the truth serum, hadn't his body responded to her senses fighting to free her body from the drug?

"When you were being interrogated yesterday..." Solo started to voice his abruptly churning thoughts.

"Yes?" encouraged Delphina as she trailed cool fingers along the nape of his neck. She desperately wanted to hear what he had to say in this regard. His reactions, whatever they might have been, would serve as important data needed to document the full scope of her father's theories.

"I..." commenced Napoleon. "The dizziness; the numbness; the intense migraine:" he continued in a strained voice, "You're telling me those were... consequences of this connection?"

"I'm not 'telling' you anything," she advised easily as her brain catalogued his words and her fingers curled languidly around the side of his neck. "It is all still experimental, after all."

Solo grabbed her hand from his neck and held it firmly in both of his.

"This is all about finishing those clinical trials on your father's research?" he demanded.

"Yes," she replied without any hesitation.

"For which my proximity is definitely required?" postulated Napoleon, though of course this was already more than speculation.

"Yes," again Delphina's response was direct.

Solo's heart was thumping wildly in his chest as adrenaline rushed in waves through him. Here was excitement and danger once more. Here was being part of the world of action again. Here was not sitting behind a desk but pondering and controlling. Here was... being.

He jumped to his feet, uncertain how to contain that surge of adrenaline; even more uncertain he wanted to contain it. Illya had cautioned him long ago about this persistent quirk in his personality, told him in no uncertain terms his penchant for 'socially engaging' the enemy under the exhilarating influence of personal jeopardy could so easily prove his undoing. Angelique, Serena, scores of others over the years: yet from all of those encounters he had won more than he had ever lost, hadn't he? And truthfully, though as opponents he and they had always acknowledged one another as intrinsically dangerous, he had liked them in some ways and he was sure they had liked him in some ways as well. Just as he found he liked Delphina

Reikedahl, disconcerting though she undeniably was. So, though he would concede Illya's point that such 'social engagement' was an exceedingly perilous way to 'cross swords' with an adversary, it was nonetheless for him a tried and true technique, part of his intelligence-seeking arsenal, and a method at which he excelled.

Delphina eyed his back-turned figure with a knowing smile.

"And now you are intrigued too," she concluded calculatingly.

He turned quickly to face her once more.

"I can't afford to be," he made his pronouncement sound extremely certain. He needed to draw her out, to play out the conversation.

"You can't afford not to be," Delphina countermanded, understanding the wile and not above using a particular one from her own arsenal. "You can't afford for Thrush to understand some process you do not. You can't afford for your enemies to have such secrets. Especially now that you know U.N.C.L.E. secrets you thought forever secure from Thrush access have never been so."

Napoleon squinted hard at her.

"Should I know to what you are referring?" he hedged.

"Did U.N.C.L.E. ever truly believe they could keep under the guise of 'need-to-know' wraps information about aspects of your past that bridge a certain gap of years in your public association with the organization?" she forwarded calmly. "All it took was meticulous record-keepers to uncover that subterfuge."

Napoleon stiffened his stance.

"I still don't know what you're talking about," he insisted.

"If it makes you uncomfortable to admit the truth, I surely understand," granted Delphina with a careless shrug. "After all, it must be disquieting to have to concede that your best friend isn't one who is accounted as part of that 'need to know' minority within your organization. A shame really," she finalized with a hint of implication in her tone, "since he would be the most likely to commiserate on past unpleasantness of that sort."

"I don't bother with letting any unchangeable details, if such do exist, prove disquieting," forwarded Napoleon. "I hold to the philosophy of life that best summarizes as: Abandon what is bad from the past, relish what is good, and always live in the moment."

"And I am handing you now just such a chance to live in the moment, Napoleon," she pressed.

"By participating in your 'making an end', as you noted that first night in my office, to your father's experiments?" he queried, his all-inclusive self-confidence re-emerging with noticeable buoyancy. No Thrush had ever or was ever going to best him in a contest of words or wills.

Her eyes surveyed him closely. Yes, he was definitely a being with a core of steel as inflexible as her own. But that mattered little. Her father had taught her there were ways and means to

achieve everything. She had never doubted his wisdom in anything, and she did not doubt that wisdom now. True, it would be easier if she didn't so much like this Napoleon Solo, but she could deal with that. She wasn't going to do him any permanent injury, after all.

"I will make an end in any case," she guaranteed stubbornly.

"Without my cooperation?" he challenged. "How do you intend to do that? Or do you think you can manage me by some form of coercion?" he pursued with an amused grin at the very arrogant absurdity of any such assumption on her part.

"I will make an end however I can," was the only answer she would give this particular query.

Napoleon squinted at Delphina, mentally assessing the full breadth of her determination in this. He accounted that determination genuine, credited absolutely that somehow completing her father's experiments was the main, if not the only, force driving her. However, despite whatever Delphina might believe honestly or otherwise, Solo did not believe in the least that Thrush had no more pertinent motive in this venture. Ospreye was a master of guile. It was thus perfectly plausible Delphina was sufficiently gullible not to pinpoint the possibility the Thrush Council member might be slyly using her iron determination in his own design. It was just as plausible, however, to account Delphina fully aware of any possible stratagem on Ospreye's part that went far beyond merely forwarding the completion of the experiments of the decade-dead Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl, and that piggybacking that Thrush plan onto her own desires was perfectly agreeable to her.

"And how does Niles Ospreye intend to make an end?" Napoleon, therefore, posed the most loaded question with far more steel than silk in his tone.

Delphina's eyes, so much like Solo's, hooded in retreat.

"However I manage it," she noted with a hard edge in her own voice.

"He trusts in you that much?" submitted Napoleon suspiciously.

"He trusts in the science that much," advanced the Thrush.

Solo set his eyes unwaveringly on hers.

"He must account it very potent science then," he drawled with cool nonchalance, some inner part of him still hoping she might yet grasp the rash artlessness of her viewpoint, "since he deigned to let you reveal a valuable new Thrush device to U.N.C.L.E. in the form of the light manipulation suit just to get you situated in that proximity to me this supposed science mandated. Or maybe that was just his obsession getting the better of his judgment?"

"How valuable can any device be to Thrush when U.N.C.L.E. already possesses the means to neutralize it?" she countered perhaps thoughtlessly. Yet then again perhaps there was method to her seeming thoughtlessness.

Inwardly Napoleon smiled. Delphina was intelligent and cunning... and quite willing to participate in the thrust and counter-thrust of this inimitable style of crossing swords. Socially engaging the enemy did indeed provoke tantalizing parries, even if it was always an addictively risky gamble. Ilya had never quite understood that.

“As to this science, it is very potent indeed.” Delphina continued with deliberate and careful enunciation of every word as if she was picking only the choicest of fruit from a generously filled basket. “Potent, lacking grace, and requiring sacrifices,” she intimated that she more than expected Solo to come personally, even if unwillingly, to full comprehension of this truth.

“I won’t make sacrifices in the interests of Thrush science, Delphina,” he told her quite ingenuously.

“I do realize that, Napoleon,” she assured him in a resigned voice as she rose to her feet to stand near him. “But the real question is:” she furthered in a much more speculative tone, “What sacrifices will you make in the interests of U.N.C.L.E.’s science?”

She let that question hang in the air between them as Ed Lein, Solo’s bodyguard, came up to the side of the Continental Chief and advised him it was more than time to return to headquarters.

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“Thrush is after the bio-drone, Illya,” stated Napoleon certainly to his friend as they sat within the security of the Continental Chief’s office in U.N.C.L.E.’s New York headquarters. “Whether to steal it, sabotage it, or simply destroy it, I can’t say. Yet that the bio-drone is somehow the ultimate goal in all this, that I can say without doubt.”

“It makes sense,” Illya conceded. “After all, the bio-drone makes their light manipulation suit semi-useless.”

Solo nodded his agreement with that statement.

“And the woman,” forwarded Kuryakin, “she is the one intended to implement whatever plan regarding the bio-drone Thrush has concocted?”

“She has her own motives, Illya,” Napoleon put forth without hesitation or reservation. “Those motives might just be providing a cover for Thrush. Yet they are central enough in her mind for her to either pragmatically adhere to any other open agenda operating in tandem with her own or unrealistically not be troubled by any other closed agenda running behind hers. Which one of those scenarios is the true one is something I can’t be certain about either... at least not yet.”

Illya squinted pointedly at his friend.

“Socially engaging the enemy again, Napoleon?” he inquired of the other man with definite censure in his tone.

Napoleon smiled one of those infectious smiles of his.

“Scold me later, Illya,” he advised his one-time partner nonchalantly. “Right now just back me up in using whatever method works to get all the answers we need. All right?”

Kuryakin let out an exasperated sigh.

“I don’t suppose I have much choice,” Illya declared somewhat sullenly.

“This is all still a bit hazy,” Solo forwarded. “There are a lot of blurred edges that have to be sharpened before we can determine exactly what action to take.”

“Some of those blurred edges encompassing rather surprising outlines,” noted Kuryakin in turn. “Such as the fullness of U.N.C.L.E. information currently stored in Thrush archives by their meticulous record-keepers,” he meaningfully probed.

Napoleon’s hazel-brown gaze met and held Illya’s ice-blue one.

“Let that be, Illya,” he plainly but undemandingly commanded.

Illya’s eyes held those of his friend a moment longer, and then he pointedly dropped his own gaze.

“You’re the Number 1 in Section I,” he acquiesced.

But the scrupulous wording of that acquiescence made Solo distinctly disquiet.

“I’ll see about instating further security measures around the bio-drone,” Kuryakin finalized as he rose from his seat.

“Thanks, Illya,” Napoleon gave his gratitude voice, his tone indicating that such gratitude encompassed something beyond Kuryakin’s efficiency in overseeing the protection of the bio-drone.

Illya simply nodded and made his way out the pneumatic door.

After his exit, Solo summoned his assistant into his office.

“Jenny,” he instructed straightforwardly, “I want you to make immediate arrangements for a Summit Five conference call.”

“A Summit Five?” gawked Jenny with wide eyes.

Any conference involving all five chief policymakers of U.N.C.L.E. – whether done in person, by computer, or most simply by phone – was a huge undertaking. Security had to be faultless. When done in person there were travel and location considerations. When done via computer or phone there were unique encryption codes that had to be created and applied. All-in-all it was not an easy thing to accomplish and generally took weeks of planning.

“Yes, Jenny,” affirmed Solo, “and I want it done ASAP. By next week if possible.”

“Sir, I will try my best,” Jenny assured her boss, “but to coordinate it all in no more than a week...” Her voice trailed off as the enormity of the task hit home with her.

Solo gave the young woman one of his most charismatic smiles.

“I know you’ll do your utmost to make it happen, Jenny,” he encouraged her warmly.

“Yes sir,” acknowledged Jenny with a responding smile, subconsciously preening under the confidence in her abilities implied in the words of the top policymaker of U.N.C.L.E. Thus did she let the inimitable charm of the Continental Chief of the North American division lull her into full compliance without further complaint.

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Jack shifted his shoulders in a subtle attempt to get comfortable once more in his own clothes. Without the underpinning of the familiar clasp of his shoulder holster and the accustomed weight of his U.N.C.L.E. Special, his suit jacket seemed a trifle too loose a fit. Yet a visitor didn't take a weapon of any kind within the precincts of a secure holding cell, and that was how he was going into such a place at the moment. Not as an on-duty operative, but merely as a private individual making a personal visit to a prisoner. His outfit pointedly excluded all of the hidden devices part of an Enforcement Agent's standard kit. He was going in naked, so to speak, and that idea was something that made him edgy.

The CEA, a man who would not abide skirting the rules, had made a special appointment with the Continental Chief of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E. just hours after yesterday's incident in Interrogation Room 4. He had related to his superior at that meeting all that had been said between himself and the Thrush agent, in no way sparing himself righteous self-censure for his own carelessness during that conversation. But Solo hadn't been overly concerned with that carelessness, or with chastising Jack for it. What had interested the Number 1 in Section I had been Delphina's reaction to Valdar's mentioning of the bio-drone, and her unexpected proposition to the Number 1 in Section 2.

"Take her up on the offer, Jack," Solo had charged his subordinate.

"Sir?" Jack had questioned, somewhat confused by this tack.

"Take the bait and then tangle the fisherman – or in this case the fisherwoman – in her own line when she makes her final attempt to fully reel you in," had clarified Solo.

And so that order had brought Jack here to the private holding cell complex, when he was supposedly off-duty, now about to ask Delphina Reikedahl to "teach" him whatever it was she had hinted at during that previous exchange between them in the interrogation room.

As he stood just outside her cell, Delphina lifted questioning eyes to his. He said nothing, merely took one observable deep breath, punched in the key code on the control pad that secured the electronic lock on the steel-ribbed sliding panel of the Plexiglas-fronted cell and walked inside, the panel sliding shut automatically behind him.

"U.N.C.L.E.'s CEA is thought a necessary security measure to escort me to my next interrogation session?" the Thrush guessed somewhat flippantly.

"No, I am here quite unofficially," clarified Jack.

"Oh?" Delphina inquired of him with a raised eyebrow.

"You offered to teach me your means of sleight of hand."

"As I recall, I offered to teach 'stealthy feats of dexterity'," she reminded him purposely, "and such encompass much more than mere sleight of hand."

Jack flushed, which made the Thrush laugh.

"Do not be anxious, Mr. Valdar," she soothed him with some amusement. "I am not seeking to compromise your virtue. I prefer maturity to at least match my own in men in whom I take that

particular kind of interest. But am I to assume by this non-perfunctory visit that you wish to take me up on my actual offer?"

"Yes," responded Jack monosyllabically.

"Strictly your own decision?" she taunted with a knowing smile. "Or prompted by Mr. Solo?"

Jack was silent.

"I wonder how many people bother to look beyond Napoleon's insouciant charm to gaze fully upon the considered shrewdness beneath," Delphina commented with a little shake of her head.

Now it was Jack who smiled, but there was wryness in that smile.

"Few to none I would imagine," he spoke certainly.

Delphina's hazel-brown eyes met Jack's steel-gray ones for a long moment and in that moment an understanding passed between them.

"It is of no real import," noted Delphina with a shrug, "whether your superior 'suggested' you accept my proposition or whether you determined to do so entirely on your own. Either way I am pleased you have so accepted, for there is much I can teach you, Mr. Valdar. Much you will find of paramount utility when the time comes."

"When what time comes?" Jack charily queried.

"You will recognize the moment when it is at hand," she cryptically responded. "Yet now to work, Mr. Valdar. For you to learn in perhaps a span of no more than a few weeks even the smallest fraction of what it took me decades to assimilate is indeed going to put a severe strain on my capabilities as instructor and yours as student. But I am up to the challenge. While you, Mr. Valdar," she stated as she eyed him critically, "I suspect are up to any challenge."

"Which means?" persisted Jack as he scrutinized her through hooded eyes.

"My, but you are a suspicious one," she backhandedly complimented him.

"I tend to be that way around Thrush agents," he parried her words, "especially Thrush agents offering 'lessons'."

Delphina laughed openly and heartily.

"Not a bad way to be in your line of work," she admitted once her laughter had subsided. "Yet what I am going to teach you, Mr. Valdar, is a form of mental dexterity no agent on any side of the fence should be without. What I am going to show you is how to achieve the sublime art of perfect cerebral focus, the ability to center concentration with an intensity most would never even dream possible."

Jack raised one eyebrow in her direction.

"And why do you wish to coach me in this?" he wanted to know.

She shrugged once more.

“Because you have the aptitude to become fully skilled at it. And few actually have that aptitude, Mr. Valdar. I recognized the latent talent in you immediately.”

“Should I be flattered?” he asked her in a flat tone that definitely indicated he wasn’t.

She laughed once more.

“That is entirely your choice,” she informed him straightforwardly. “I care not whether you are flattered or flustered by the untapped facility I see in you. What I do care about is that you truly work with me to learn what I can teach.”

Jack said nothing, but Delphina correctly interpreted his silence as acknowledgement he would indeed work to learn. She had no doubt much of why he would had to do with the fact he had been ordered to do so, but that fact didn’t matter. She would reveal the method and he would absorb the method, and that was all that actually did matter.

“Now,” the Thrush continued, eager to begin the first lesson, “I suggest you take off your jacket and tie and get comfortable. You will find this training, mainly mental though it may be, quite physically exhausting. Thus it’s best to be as relaxed as possible when we begin.”

Reluctantly Jack did as she recommended, draping his jacket and tie on the back of the solitary chair in the room. Then the U.N.C.L.E. CEA took a seat on that chair and set his mind to alert attention upon the tutoring of the Thrush technological residual.

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Napoleon Solo, arms loaded with holiday packages, was startled by the door to the familiar Murray Hill brownstone opening in his face before he had even performed the perfunctory task of ringing the doorbell.

Illya Kuryakin set accusing eyes upon her friend. “Why did you not tell me?”

For a split-second coldness clenched at Napoleon’s insides, fear gripping him that things had been settled on a particular score before he had gotten the chance to push through the necessary clearances to personally speak of it to his closest friend.

“Dr. Schulman told me you had what he referred to as ‘an incident’ during the last interrogation of the Reikedahl woman,” declared Illya with definite irritation in his voice.

The coldness inside Napoleon thawed. There was no fear in him regarding this line of questioning.

“It was just a migraine,” Solo stated simply.

“Not according to Dr. Schulman,” countered Kuryakin.

Solo gave a dismissive grunt.

“You know how the U.N.C.L.E. medical staff reacts to anything where I am concerned. Every little ache becomes a major health crisis.”

“Gentlemen,” forwarded a somewhat exasperated Ed Lein from his protective position behind Solo, “could this discussion be continued behind closed doors? I do not much appreciate two of

U.N.C.L.E.'s Section Chiefs standing out in the open like gift-wrapped Christmas parcels ready to be ripped apart by Thrush snipers."

Without another word, Illya moved sideways in the doorway to allow Napoleon and his bodyguard entry.

"Take me to your tree," Napoleon spoke to his friend in a joking 'take me to your leader' manner as he pointed one particularly long, narrow present toward Illya as if it was a menacing weapon.

Meanwhile Ed carried out the customary duty of re-activating the home's security locks. Since Illya Kuryakin was the second-in-command of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E., there were a goodly number of them.

Illya led the way into the living room with its traditionally decorated Christmas tree, but still spoke nothing. Napoleon rolled his eyes once in exasperation and followed in his friend's wake. Illya, no doubt about it, was in an implacable Russian sulk.

"Merry Christmas, sweeting," Trice greeted her husband's best friend with a kiss on the cheek as he entered the confines of the living room.

"Apparently more like Miserable Christmas, if your husband has any say in the matter," grumped Napoleon as he strode to the tree and unceremoniously deposited his armload of brightly papered and beribboned packages under its evergreen boughs.

"Do not blame me for any foul mood associated with your own guilt in furtively keeping from me what happened," chastised Illya crossly.

"I didn't realize my having a migraine was a cause célèbre that had to be shouted through all the corridors of U.N.C.L.E.," returned Napoleon with equal brittleness.

The two men were standing quite close now, physically as well as verbally confronting one another.

"Thank you, Napoleon," spat out Illya acidly, "for equating me in significance with the file clerks at headquarters."

"Enough!" determined Trice sharply as she bodily set her herself between the two men, outstretching an arm on each side to place a palm flat on the chest of each. "Both of you apologize this minute for this juvenile sniping at one another!"

When neither Napoleon nor Illya seemed willing to be the first one to say he was sorry, Trice repeated with a very starched and unbendable edge invading her British-accented voice, "This very minute!"

Both men stood staring at one another for a moment more while looks of continued belligerence stemming from their current conflict, then embarrassed shame emanating from their peevish childishness, and finally regret having roots in the arrogant treatment of a trusted friend flashed in succession across their faces. Finally they mumbled all but simultaneously, "I'm sorry."

From her seat in a wingchair on the opposite side of the room Natasha amusedly remarked, "Nice refereeing, Mom. Perhaps U.N.C.L.E. should consider hiring you to mediate during routine Section Head meetings."

"But then she'd have to handle Jack Valdar as well," put in Napoleon in an attempt to lighten the mood, "and I doubt even your mother could put up with the three of us grousing in a closed room."

Natasha smirked at that image and passed her Dyadya a conspiratorial wink.

"Now suppose we all sit down and discuss this like adults," suggested Trice, ignoring the playful byplay between Natasha and Napoleon.

Napoleon, still wearing his topcoat, dropped himself somewhat disgruntledly into an available easy chair while Illya perched tensely on the sofa. Trice came and sat beside her husband on the couch and soothingly took one of his hands within both her own.

"What is this about?" asked Illya's wife.

Illya looked to Napoleon and Napoleon met his friend's gaze. Together they nodded, wordlessly communicating between themselves that it would be fine to speak of the situation as long as no actual facts that had been revealed during the interrogation of the Thrushie became part of the conversation.

"I had a second interrogation session with the self-surrendered Thrush agent yesterday," ventured Illya, "and during that session a veridical was used."

"To which Delphina," went on Napoleon, not even noticing how he was so casually using the Thrush agent's first name, "had a particularly violent adverse reaction."

"Delphina is it now?" Illya caught the personalized reference as he raised one eyebrow in his friend's direction.

"I know you don't agree with the way I go about getting enemies to talk, Illya," noted Napoleon. "That's an old argument."

"That's not exactly with what I do not agree, Napoleon," Illya begged to differ.

"Be that as it may," Trice put in a word to get the dialogue back on track. "I take it this adverse reaction has something to do with the current hostility between you?"

Napoleon idly scratched an eyebrow.

"Yes and no," he hedged.

"I'm going to be blunt," put forth Illya. "Because of a certain episode in the past..."

"Napoleon told me about that past episode, darling," Trice informed her husband candidly.

Illya blinked in surprise, but subsequently noted, "Then you understand that there were supposedly experiments done with..." He hesitated, obviously uncomfortable. "Look darling," he forwarded to his wife as he squeezed her fingers in his, "the bottom line is this Reikedahl

woman supposedly was altered to amplify her nerve synaptic patterns to somehow touch Napoleon's."

Now it was Trice who blinked.

"Typical Thrush mad science and all that, Mom," put in Natasha gamely.

"And Thrush mad scientists, or their adherents, usually claim a good deal more than is substantive fact," Illya assured his wife. "But it seems that during the interrogation session, Napoleon..." Illya glanced over at his pointedly quiet friend. "Napoleon actually did experience many of the physical symptoms the Thrush was having as she tried to fight off the truth serum. Something he neglected to tell me afterward."

"It was just a particularly intense migraine," stressed Napoleon through tight lips.

"And Dr. Schulman strongly disagrees with that self-diagnosis, Napoleon," Illya waylaid his friend.

"Which only makes me regret letting Jenny summon him to my office," Napoleon related in annoyance. What he neglected to mention was that his assistant had been more than a little concerned when, some twenty or thirty minutes after the end of Delphina's interrogation session, she'd found him with his head buried in his arms on his desk, his breathing erratic and his eyes squeezed tightly shut in all-too-obvious pain. Thus Jenny likely would have summoned the good doctor with or without her boss' consent.

"As Dr. Schulman communicated the diagnostic synopsis to me, your physical state bordered on intense drug reaction acutely similar to Ms. Reikedahl's," persisted Illya, disregarding his friend's attempt to make less of the 'incident'.

Napoleon pressed the fingers of one hand to his lips and kept purposefully silent.

"The woman is a danger to you, Napoleon," pronounced Illya without a doubt.

"I agree, sir," Ed Lein spoke unexpectedly from his position leaning against the entryway into the living room proper. He was not part of this family group, so he kept himself generally unobtrusive. Yet he had been in Central Park with Solo and the Thrush woman and, though he hadn't known exactly what was happening between the two, he had noted the tension that had alerted his trained senses to some form of indefinable threat to his charge. Thus had he been more than routinely anxious to remove the Continental Chief from the immediate company of the strange supposed prisoner.

"You'll excuse me, sir," Ed directed his words toward Solo as every pair of eyes in the room focused on him, "but when you were in the park with the Thrush... The way she kept touching you, the way she looked at you, like she was unduly spellbound with your reactions... Well, it chilled me right through to my bones and sent sharp warning needles pricking all my senses. Now you know I'm not an irrational man, sir, and thus such instinctive reactions on my part cannot be accounted merely unfounded hypersensitivity to an atypical state of affairs."

Napoleon dropped his head in one hand and rubbed his furrowed brow as he relented, but only marginally, steadfastly refusing to directly address the contention Delphina was somehow a danger to him. "If you are seeking assurances, Illya, that I will be more cautious around

Delphina, you have them,” he voiced the halfway concessions he was willing to make. “I won’t do anything stupidly reckless. And I’ll tell you in future if I get a migraine or any other physical reaction that could allegedly relate to her in some way. All right?”

Illya, Trice, Natasha and Ed all exchanged discontented glances. But there was little else to be said. Napoleon would do as he promised. Of that there was no question. Yet in that very promise was the implicit assertion he did not intend to completely cut off all contact with Delphina Reikedahl.

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The housekeeper answered the doorbell and sighed at the cellophane-wrapped plate of pastries she saw in the deliveryman’s hand. Skolebrod. She had forgotten about the standing holiday order with the specialty bakery for these Norwegian filled buns.

“I should have cancelled those,” she murmured more to herself than to the deliveryman as she reluctantly accepted the parcel. “Only the snow miss likes them and she isn’t here this year.”

In the study off the main entry, Niles Ospreye looked up at the softly spoken words of his housekeeper.

Ospreye maintained two residences in the New York metropolitan area: one expensive condo penthouse in Manhattan as his public home, and this palatial and very secure estate on Long Island as his private abode. The “snow miss” was never to be found in his public home, but she was normally a fixture here. Still, having one of his servants so casually acknowledge the presence of Delphina Reikedahl within any dwelling he owned was a security risk Niles did not take lightly.

At the door the deliveryman shrugged.

“I was ordered to deliver them as usual, so I have,” he stated a bit bitterly, likely resentful of having to make a delivery on Christmas Day.

“Veronica,” Ospreye requested his housekeeper’s presence once he heard the front door close behind the deliveryman.

Veronica steeled her spine at the particular tone of the voice. Her employer did not sound in the least happy.

“Yes sir?” she inquired as she stood in the open doorway of the study, wrapped plate of skolebrod still in hand.

“You are not to mention to anyone outside these walls who is or is not in residence here at any time,” he chastised the woman sternly.

“I beg pardon, sir,” mumbled the housekeeper, painfully aware she might have just written her own death warrant with her careless words. Thrush management types were not generally of forgiving natures and, for all his well-bred polite manners, Niles Ospreye was no exception to the rule.

Grunting noncommittally, Ospreye returned to his seeming preoccupation with reading a Finnish newspaper. The housekeeper, knowing when to make a strategic retreat, soundlessly walked toward the kitchen at the back of the house.

“Time for a change in staff,” Niles mumbled to himself once the woman was clear of earshot. Decision made, he gave the matter no more current thought. He had minions that could deal efficiently with ‘firing’ Veronica. Such details required only his command, not his personal action.

For some minutes Niles busied himself with reading an editorial in the newspaper. It seemed, from the condemnatory nature of the article, that the Finnish government was being chastised by a good portion of that country’s citizenry for its “lax regulations” regarding lucisorqe. Those regulations had now been tightened of course, but many – like the writer of this column – considered the new measures “too little too late”.

Niles smirked to himself, agreeing with the author. It had been ridiculously easy for Thrush to arrange for lucisorqe to be stolen from supposedly secure stockpiles in Finland. But then his smirk twisted into a grimace as he realized that, with the new regulations in place, such an operation might not prove so easy in future. Fortunate then that the Russian mob was getting the main shipment of the mineral smuggled into the U.S. within the week. Very fortunate indeed as this shipment might comprise the entirety of Thrush’s own stockpile of the scarce mineral at least until a new process was successfully put in place to surreptitiously obtain more. Yet that made it all the more important that the current consignment make its way into Thrush’s hands without U.N.C.L.E.’s damnable interference.

Lucisorqe’s necessity in the coating of the light manipulation suit made it problematic that the mineral was so rare. Making the suits standard Thrush kit during covert operations had the promise to confound U.N.C.L.E. on so many fronts; it seemed like a particularly sweet dream to Niles and all the members of the Thrush Central Council. Yet right now the shadow organization did not control enough of a supply of the mineral to make that dream scenario a reality. Because of that fundamental lack, only a half-dozen of the suits existed at present with one of those for the moment at least in the hands of U.N.C.L.E. itself.

And such was not the only problem that needed ironing out. The fact weaponry could not be concealed under or on the suit was yet another issue. However, the most pressing setback lay in the fact a wearer of the suit could still be detected by the magnetic fields of U.N.C.L.E.’s own pesky new technology, the bio-drone.

The thought of the bio-drone made Niles harrumph noisily. How was it that U.N.C.L.E. had been able to come up with something to counteract the light manipulation suit before they had even known of its existence? Thrush’s own technicians were trying desperately to recreate the science of the bio-drone so that the light manipulation suit could be reconfigured with some immunity to its magnetic probe. Thus far, however, they had met with no success. The only real option was, therefore, to steal the technology from U.N.C.L.E. itself.

This last thought brought a little smile to Ospreye’s lips. Yes, that was the ticket and a plan to do just that was well underway. It seemed Thrush had an exclusive secret weapon that few on the Council other than himself had credited as such. Before he had forwarded to his high-level peers the advantage of what they had previously created and how it could be used, that is.

“Ah, Delphina, my unique one, it is just a shame we cannot readily reproduce in others what is now inherent in you,” Niles remarked softly to himself. “What an extraordinary task force such a group of specialized agents would be! But your father’s genius, my dear, relied on an unparalleled opportunity and a span of years of individualized study even Thrush has not the means to duplicate. You are truly one of a kind, min søte prøveversjon.”

Just then the doorbell rang again. This time it was one of the maids who answered its shrill summons and subsequently let David Islenleque, Ospreye's right-hand man, into the hallway and then into the privacy of the study. Niles had been expecting the Frenchman and had made that clear previously to his household staff.

"So David, you had the video enhanced?" questioned Niles of the tall, well-dressed man in his late thirties who entered the room where Ospreye sat now folding his newspaper.

"En effet, Niles," answered Islenleque in his French sprinkled and accented English. "The audio portion was the most difficult to improve in quality, since U.N.C.L.E. had some sort of electronic interference device secured on Solo to make recording difficult. I hate to admit it, but it fulfilled its purpose admirably. Still, we did manage with some advanced augmentation procedures to overcome most of the deliberate static it produced, making at least part of the conversation audible."

Niles nodded his understanding of the technical limitations and pointed toward a closed cabinet that housed, as David well knew, a flat-screen television and DVD hookup. The younger man produced a sleeved disc from his inside coat pocket, slipped the CD out of the plastic sheath, pressed the button to open the slide on the DVD player, and finally placed the disc in the compartment letting the machine automatically pull the drawer back into itself. He handed Niles the set of wireless headphones stored near the player, thus ensuring his superior would get as clear an audio feedback from the disc as was possible.

The video that began to play was of Solo and Delphina's outing in Central Park, and Niles watched it with hungry eyes and ears. Hungry not only for knowledge as to what had gone on, but hungry as well for the sight and sound of his Delphina. That hunger did not escape David's notice as the subordinate's disapproval showed plainly in every line of his body.

The audio quality of the recording was indeed not the best, and a good deal of what was said was completely unintelligible to Niles. Yet enough was understandable to register a smug smile on his face.

"She's plays him well," he remarked in a self-satisfied tone.

"You sure he isn't playing her?" retorted David. He had seen and heard the entire video more than once and was in no way convinced of Delphina's upper hand during the exchange. "Solo's no imbécile you know."

"Oh, that I do know," granted Ospreye. "But Mr. Solo is also a bit more soft-hearted than is recommendable in his position. That has always been his weakness."

"I always heard his weakness was sex," noted David with a shrug that seemed to exemplify his supremely Gallic indifference to any such weakness.

Considering Ospreye's own mistress was so inextricably entangled in the current state of affairs with Solo, this blunt assertion on David's part was no doubt intended to give his superior apprehensive pause. Niles' reaction instead was a snort of amusement. Sometimes even intelligent people like David failed to see beyond the obvious.

"Yes and no," Ospreye corrected the other man. "While I certainly don't deny the existence of that particular weakness in him, it is itself but a veneer wrapped around his soft-heartedness."

He has a bit too much of the idealist in his soul. Thus he craves the warmth of individual human contact as a touchstone against all he's experienced of the cruelty inherent in humanity's more collective coldness. Considering his profession, sex was certainly in his younger days the quickest and safest way to gain that reassurance, at least after a fashion."

"And now?" queried Islenleque with squinted eyes as he watched the scene unfolding silently before him on the television panel.

"Now we play on his memories of a little albino girl who held his hand when he was trapped and in dire straits," replied Niles. "Now we let that soft heart in him empathize with someone he thinks he understands."

"Yet essentially cannot," finalized David somewhat acidly.

Ospreye glanced up at the other man. There was no love lost between David and Delphina. He knew that quite well.

"You distrust her?" he asked plainly, knowing the 'her' did not need more clarification as to who was being referenced.

"Mais bien sûr<sup>4</sup>. I always have and I always will," David stated frankly as he casually brushed an imaginary bit of lint from his impeccable suit in counterpoint to his statement. "You know that. She knows that. I won't lie about it."

"No, don't ever lie about it, David," noted Niles, "because if you do I will know it is time to start distrusting you."

David said nothing. He knew better than to do so.

"I'll keep the DVD," further spoke Ospreye he removed the headphones with the finish of the video. "The arms assessor, the Anuchin woman," he continued fluidly on to other business. "Where is she now?"

"Venezuela," supplied Islenleque, "finishing up a weapons buy for some South American insurrectionists."

"I want her taken into Thrush custody for protected transport to her assignment for us," spoke out Ospreye with authority.

"Tout de suite<sup>5</sup>?" questioned David pointedly.

"Let her finish out her current contract by all means. We are not in the business of preventing mercenaries from earning their way in the world," Niles asserted 'reasonably' causing David to smirk. "But as soon as that is done, have her taken in hand. Gently, mind you."

"Naturellement," granted David.

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<sup>4</sup> But of course.

<sup>5</sup> Immediately?

“We can’t afford for anything to go wrong with the transfer of the gun oil into our safekeeping. And Ms. Anuchin is a necessary cog in the machinery put in place to assure that eventuality.”

“Je comprends<sup>6</sup>,” guaranteed David.

“Oh, and I’d like you to see about replacing Veronica,” the older Thrush stated nonchalantly, as if in afterthought. “She’s become a bit too talkative.”

David smirked.

“Bien sûr<sup>7</sup>, Niles,” he acknowledged the unspoken part of the other man’s command.

Ospreye waved a hand in casual dismissal and Islenleque turned sharply on his heel, leaving the way he had come.

After David’s exit, Niles Ospreye started the video over from the beginning, letting it play silently as he watched. Rising from his chair and walking up close to the television screen, he lightly traced the outline of Delphina’s image projected there.

“Careful, min søte prøveversjon,” he cautioned his absent mistress, his eyes following the way she made physical contact with Solo during the recorded interlude. “Do not let that soft heart of his touch you too deeply, or I will know it is time to start distrusting you.”

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Though the rest of that Christmas Day passed in a much more convivial manner within the Murray Hill brownstone, it was toward evening – after a large, satisfying and undeniably delicious holiday meal prepared by the culinarily-gifted Mrs. Sedowsky – that Napoleon experienced an extreme pang of conscience. He had pledged Illya only that he would tell his friend of all **future** reactions he might have that could be linked to Delphina Reikedahl. He had said nothing of **past** reactions in that vein. Still, his purposefully evasive wording began to gnaw at his own ethics. The truth was he just didn’t want to inform Illya of what had occurred in Central Park the day before. He simply didn’t want to give his friend any substantive reason to insist he have no more direct dealings with the Thrush technological residual. And it was cowardly of him to hide his feelings on this score behind ambiguity.

If there was one thing Napoleon Solo was not, it was a coward. Thus he asked his friend if they could talk in private about some supposed other business matter and found himself alone with Illya in the younger man’s private study, double-doors confidentially shut against even the pervasive presence of Napoleon’s bodyguard.

“Look Illya,” began Napoleon uneasily after Kuryakin had offered and then poured them both snifters of good brandy, “I don’t want you making a mountain out of this, but...”

Napoleon swirled the rich golden-brown liquor in his glass, pointedly studying the resultant movement for a few moments before he took a deep breath and spoke again.

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<sup>6</sup> I understand

<sup>7</sup> Of course

“In the park yesterday,” he felt his way through this revelation, words not coming to him with their customary effortless, “Delphina... Well, I’m not sure even how to put this. It all seems absolutely preposterous when I really think about it. Nonetheless, she...”

Napoleon sighed, still unsure how to verbalize any of it.

Illya’s light-colored gaze caught the darker one of his friend.

“She made sure you felt the connection between you,” accurately deduced Illya.

Napoleon nodded mutely.

“I’m not sure I believe in any of this technical mumbo-jumbo regarding amplifying nerve synapses,” forwarded Napoleon after a short span of silence had passed between them. “Yet I am sure I experienced an odd... Well, it was like my nerves were wires from which the protective coating had been stripped and they were pressing against likewise stripped wires within her to produce a shared electrical spark. That’s the best way I can explain it.”

Illya smiled one of his infamous half-smiles.

“That’s actually a remarkably accurate description,” complimented Illya, “if a bit non-technical in approach.”

Napoleon smiled in turn at his friend.

“Always the smart Russian,” he teased.

“But apparently not smart enough to get you to comprehend in how much unnecessary jeopardy you are putting yourself through close contact with this woman,” spoke Illya with bemused defeat in his tone.

“We need answers, Illya,” Napoleon offered explanation of his own motives. “We need to know what Thrush intends to do with the bio-drone. We need to know why Ospreye sent Delphina forward to pave the way for whatever is Thrush’s ultimate intention. We need to know the full extent of what Delphina herself can do, and if any of whatever powers she has can be recreated in any form in others. And you know and I know we aren’t going to get those answers by playing it safe.”

Illya sighed.

“I don’t dismiss the truth of anything you’ve said, Napoleon,” he granted his friend, “but what you are doing seems a huge gamble with no reasonable assurance of a worthwhile payoff. And we have no clue what side-effects there might be...”

“She pledged it would do me no permanent damage, Illya,” abruptly interrupted Napoleon, that abruptness born of his own surety regarding Delphina’s honesty in this assertion. “Nor would anything she did make me a traitor to my own, as she phrased it.”

“And you believe her,” stated Illya unnecessarily, “but I do not since I simply do not credit her with the foreknowledge necessary to make any such grandiose guarantee. She is willing to play a high stakes game, Napoleon, because she is tenaciously mired in the certainty her father was

a genius. Thus in her mind his theories cannot do otherwise but be proven immaculately perfect and she will bet everything on her sheer conviction of that outcome. In the end, however, her certainty and her conviction are based on nothing more substantial than obsessive adoration.”

“And that is her weak point, Illya,” speculated Napoleon. “We can find a way to use that to get all our answers.”

“Or she will use your heedless pursuit of this gambit to instead get all her answers,” countered Illya.

Napoleon stubbornly thrust out his chin.

“It’s my risk to take, Illya,” he reminded his friend.

“It’s U.N.C.L.E.’s risk,” corrected Illya. “I know how resourceful you are, Napoleon, and I also know how often your aggressive, sometimes fast-and-loose style has benefited U.N.C.L.E. In fact, no one knows that better than I do. I also know what the Command means to you, and thus what you will and will not wager involving the organization itself. You may be able to nonchalantly bluff others in that regard, but you cannot bluff me. Yet your purposeful and bolshie obtuseness in one particular never fails to surprise me, tovarisch, considering the habitually inflated state of your ego,” Illya could not resist alleviating the gravity of the discussion with a mischievous jab at his friend’s personality.

Napoleon harrumphed before taking an uncharacteristically gauche, rather large swig of his brandy in an attempt to keep from rising to Illya’s verbal bait. Illya inwardly smirked at his friend’s reaction, satisfied that the affable, if competitively edged, partnerly ease was fully restored between them after their earlier bout of “sniping”.

“You time and time again fail to appreciate, Napoleon,” Illya returned to the full seriousness of his previous line of speech, “what your individual loss, whether physical or mental, would cost U.N.C.L.E. as an organization. As Waverly once embodied the Command, so now do you. Therefore all I’m asking is, if you won’t play it close to the vest with regard to your own individual interests, that you at least consider well **all** U.N.C.L.E.’s interests before jumping into this headfirst.”

With Illya’s final thought-provoking admonition, they spoke no more on the subject. Instead Illya set up the chessboard on the table between their comfortable leather chairs, and for the remainder of the evening the two men companionably sipped their brandy and strategized on the non-world-affecting moves needed to win a far less complicated match.

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## **Act II: There are more things in heaven and U.N.C.L.E...**

On the day after Christmas 2007 U.N.C.L.E. returned to an all-too-full schedule of covert missions intent on thwarting the grandiose plans of various megalomaniacs and criminal organizations. The season of “peace on Earth” didn’t seem to be having any ethical effect in those particular quarters.

Illya Kuryakin had his own sights honed in on another interrogation session with the Thrush technological residual. Napoleon Solo, however, had bid him in no uncertain terms to “let things lay” for a while, an order that the other man found intensely frustrating. The truth drug used during the last session had unquestionably produced positive inroads into breaking through

Delphina's controlled camouflage. Napoleon's own more casual talk with the Reikedahl woman during their sojourn in Central Park had apparently produced even more. Thus Illya was certain now was not the time to "let things lay", but rather to relentlessly press forward. The Russian was determined he would uncover whatever Thrush plot remained coiled and poised to strike under the smokescreen of Delphina's supposed surrender. Yet he couldn't get his closest friend, the man who also happened to hold the highest command authority within U.N.C.L.E., to agree with his assessment of the situation.

However, Napoleon had mentioned nothing regarding an "informal chat" with the Thrush on Illya's part. And perhaps, lacking the rigid set of rules that governed a formal cross-examination of a prisoner by the Command, such a chat might prove even more successful than the standard means of information gathering. Thus did Illya make it a point to pay a visit to Delphina Reikedahl on this after-Christmas morning.

Seated within the cell's one chair, Delphina looked up from her breakfast where it was set out on a small wheeled cart as Illya punched in the key code to her cell door. He entered the cubicle's confines and the electronic portal automatically closed behind him.

"Ah, Mr. Kuryakin," she addressed him with ill-suppressed amusement, "would you like coffee before grilling me this fine day? I'm sure the guard would be willing to bring in a second cup. Though, rather than fine china, I'm afraid it will be sturdy steel like mine," Delphina noted as she experimentally rapped the currently empty metal cup against a table leg. Then she set about filling it with coffee from a small, equally metal pot that rested on the table's surface.

"I'd prefer stimulating conversation to stimulating beverages," responded Illya decidedly as he perched tensely on the edge of the cell's small cot.

"Of the former I have made no offer," noted Delphina, "so your preference between the two is a moot point."

Illya eyed her coolly.

"Steadfastly determined not to be rattled by my unofficial presence, Ms. Reikedahl?" he taunted her.

"You have no truth serum in my veins now to force me to utter nonsensical emotionalisms, Mr. Kuryakin," Delphina stated bluntly. "So do not expect me to rise like Osiris with every barb you toss."

"Even dead, Osiris wound up torn limb from limb at his own brother's hand."

"And needed Isis' love to be gathered back together enough to even receive an honorable burial," finished off Delphina tersely. "Meaning what, Mr. Kuryakin? That I should expect Thrush to treat me as Set did Osiris? Or that I should envision U.N.C.L.E. in Isis' role?"

"It was you who first mentioned the Egyptian god of the dead," pointed out Illya with a shrug. "Perhaps you see yourself as something similar in Thrush's eyes: buried for years beneath the onus of being but the result of what were considered failed experiments; suddenly resurrected to the forefront of that organization as an exotic approach for bringing down an old foe; perfectly content to dwell in a nebulous netherworld on the edges of Thrush rather than face the truth you are nothing to them but a concocted means to a desired end."

Delphina's eyes narrowed.

"What do you want, Mr. Kuryakin?" she inquired acidly. "Speak plainly."

"I rather thought I was already speaking quite plainly. Nonetheless I will concede that I do have one specific want at the moment."

"And that is?"

"I want to know what happened between you and Napoleon on your walk in Central Park," put forth Illya straightforwardly.

Delphina leaned back as much as was possible in the straight-backed chair in which she sat.

"Why not just ask him?" she taunted Kuryakin. "After all, he is your friend, isn't he? Your closest friend who hides from you no secrets?"

Something in her tone needled Illya, but he did not let his agitation show.

"He only knows what happened to him," he thus countered, feigning unawareness of her goad. "He doesn't know what you did to make that happen."

"What makes you think that I did anything at all?" Delphina demanded in her turn. "What makes you think I have control of any kind over the phenomenon?"

Illya eyed her for a long time without saying a single word.

"I do have another question," he finally forwarded. "Was your hair, like your eyes, intended as another ploy to some ulterior purpose?"

"My hair?" she asked him with an amused but somehow very knowing smile.

"Don't play the innocent;" Illya baited her, "the role suits you ill. Your eyebrows and eyelashes are still the pure white customary for an albino. So it is a logical conclusion that the natural state of your hair is just as white, and that you thus particularly chose not only its present style but its current color as well."

"It is a fairly common style and color," Delphina smoothly put him off. "Any reputable beauty salon will provide both with little fuss."

What came privately to her mind was the memory of having the multilayered blond dye – a very special dye complexly laced with liquid lucisorqe – applied to her hair in a Thrush lab shortly before her odd surrender to U.N.C.L.E.

"That doesn't answer my question and you know it," Illya pronounced somewhat sourly. "But I will make my question more direct so to avoid any convenient misunderstanding of my meaning on your part. Was that color and style chosen as a means to play on Napoleon's old memories and possibly engender in him a false sense of trust?"

Delphina smiled that amused yet knowing smile once more.

“And why should any such possible sense of trust be accredited as necessarily false?” she asked boldly.

Illya eyed her in silence once more. Then, seemingly having worked out whatever he needed to, he rose to his feet.

“Thank you, Ms. Reikedahl, for the very enlightening conversation,” he articulated with pointed politeness, marking an end to his visit.

Illya walked to the small call button on one side of the ribbed doorframe and pressed it firmly. The guard summoned by his action punched in the necessary key code on the control panel located on the other side of the Plexiglas-fronted cubicle, allowing the Number 1 of Section III to pass outside the cell’s boundaries once more.

Before vanishing down the security corridor beyond Delphina’s line of sight, however, Illya turned back and questioned, “Does Niles Ospreye even suspect the nature of the incendiary bomb he’s willingly handed over to a munitions expert?”

“And who or what do you believe I can blast into full conflagration for you, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“We shall see,” pronounced Illya with a sardonic half-smile.

Without waiting for any reaction on the part of the Thrush technological residual, Kuryakin was gone.

Delphina found herself staring down the hallway where Kuryakin had made his pointed exit long after his physical form had disappeared from her view. Her mind was far away from that hallway in U.N.C.L.E.’s New York headquarters, however. It was stationed in a Thrush lab on a day not so many weeks ago...

*“You don’t have to do this, Delphina,” Niles assured her, even though he unquestionably knew that wasn’t true.*

*“Nonsense,” she protested. “Little as I like your man David and thus am loathe to agree with him on anything, he’s right in this. It does have to be tested on me. I may have an entirely different reaction than others have had, and we both know why.”*

*This was nothing more than truth. Since absorption of lucisorqe into the bloodstream seemed to have a disorienting effect on the senses that ultimately resulted in a destructive reconfiguration of certain synapses in the brain, finding out if her enhanced versions of those synapses might either intensify or mitigate that effect was valid science.*

*Neither Delphina Reikedahl nor Niles Ospreye could ignore the possibilities of such science: Delphina because it could very well reflect on her father’s research and Niles because it could very well prove useful to Thrush. That the science might in the end leave her forever in a permanent state of sensory confusion was something on which both preferred not to dwell. So Delphina kissed her lover in reassurance and made her way into the glass-enclosed and atmosphere-controlled chamber where this experiment would be played out in full.*

*She sat in the single chair in the small cubicle as a gloved lab technician took a small vial of pure lucisorqe – no mucking about with mixtures for this test – and poured a small dribble on the*

*exposed flesh of each of her arms. He gently rubbed in the pearlescent mineral, almost as if he was applying a soothing lotion or healing balm Delphina found herself thinking wryly. Then he nodded and left the chamber and Delphina waited.*

*Oxygen was sucked out slowly from the cubicle and then stabilized at a particular point where the environment was a good deal less than ideal and more in the range of high mountain terrain. Delphina found herself taking abnormally deep breaths, trying to force more of the depleted life-giving gas into her lungs. She found herself becoming lightheaded and then it happened: she couldn't see but she would swear there were strange sounds coming from everything she tried to look at, like little electronic pulsing noises. She touched the arms of the chair, or thought she did. She felt nothing yet smelled something akin to the scent of linen every time she moved her fingers over those arms.*

*Panic beginning to set in, she set her jaw and concentrated. She could control this. She would control this.*

*Her decades of training in extreme mental focus took over. She stared forward and told her brain what to do. After some minutes of fluctuating between the drug-like power of lucisorqe and her utter concentration, her iron control won out.*

*"I see you again, Niles," she said with slow distinctiveness, willing herself to hear her own words as she spoke them to her lover who stood beyond the glass. "I lost sight of you for a while, but I see you again now. I can feel and hear rightly too. Though I have to concentrate very hard to keep everything in proper function, and it's very exhausting."*

*"Take out more oxygen," commanded David Islenleque with complete detachment.*

*The tech did as ordered and Delphina fought to regain the delicate sensory balance she had found in the previous atmospheric state of the chamber. Sweat broke out on her brow as it furrowed with the effort of her mental exertion. She gripped the arms of the chair in tight fingers as her chest rose and fell with heavily panting breaths.*

*"I can still see you, Niles," she assured the only person beyond the glass who mattered to her.*

*"Perhaps a bit more oxygen depletion," suggested David.*

*"No," determined Ospreye with steely conviction. "That's more than enough. All the others would have been long past the point of convulsions by now, with all their senses in disarray. There is nothing more to prove, David."*

*Islenleque nodded his reluctant acquiescence to the wishes of the Thrush council member. He signaled to the tech, who slowly restored the cubicle to a normal oxygen level. Finally it was deemed safe to escort Delphina out of the chamber.*

*Niles was immediately there to draw her into his arms.*

*"It does not affect you like the others," he noted quietly as he held her close.*

*Delphina shook her head.*

*“No, it affects me the same,” she corrected him. “I just used the techniques my father taught me to control the disassociation of my sensory pathways and force them back into normal patterns. But like any exercise of that focused mental centering, it has exhausted me beyond measure. I could sleep for two days straight,” she furthered as she leaned more heavily against Niles’ supportive body.*

*“I’ll see to it you get all the rest you need, min søte prøveversjon,” protectively soothed Niles as he softly kissed her forehead. “Even David must now admit there is more to be vigilantly hoarded within your uniqueness than indifferently discarded.” ...*

Delphina’s mind snapped back to the present as she murmured quietly, “Oh, I imagine Niles has at least an inkling of your perspective, Mr. Kuryakin.”

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Napoleon Solo, Number 1 in Section I of U.N.C.L.E.’s North American division, eyed the four men and two women who sat in chairs surrounding the circular desk that served as the centerpiece of his office. The six individuals were all highly capable, impeccably trained Enforcement Agents, members of the Section II elite of the organization. Still Solo regretted the danger into which he would be sending them within just hours. He knew them all prepared to deal with the immense risks involved, knew them all alert and efficient and willing. Yet they were all in the prime of life and the idea of any of them forfeiting the continuance of health and longevity into the careless hands of fickle and feckless Fate bothered him more than most realized. Solo made a point to always come across as assured and confident, not a man who doubted the necessity of hazardous actions. Nonetheless strictly to himself he admitted it had been much simpler when it had been his own life he had been gambling in the field. Assigning others to face possible death or torture was a reality that secretly unsettled his stomach and gave him many a restless night.

This particular mission was well organized and resourcefully primed. Nothing about it lacked appropriate groundwork. If it remained nonetheless perilous in the extreme, he could at least rest easy that every detail had been gauged with clockwork precision and infinite care. There should be no surprises. But then there were always surprises, weren’t there? Things out of the blue, aside from the expected, beyond calculation. And Napoleon’s generally infallible inner instinct was warning him something out of the blue, aside from the expected, beyond calculation would indeed be encountered during this mission.

Shaking off his unfounded yet persistent feeling of foreboding, Napoleon dealt directly with the matters immediately at hand.

“We’ve had word through our sources,” he informed the group straightforwardly, “that Thrush intends to send an escort into South America to bring Nikolaevna Anuchin in for her contracted assignment regarding the weapons shipment from the Russian Mafia.”

“Not totally unexpected,” coolly noted the CEA of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E.

“No, not totally unexpected,” conceded Napoleon, “but not totally to the best of plan either.”

“I suppose that means I am on a flight for Venezuela today or tomorrow?” questioned Agent Kuryakin.

“The red-eye tonight to Maracaibo,” Solo responded simply. “Jack will be accompanying you, Natasha.”

"I am to play out the hired bodyguard gambit then," Chief Enforcement Agent Valdar did not ask, rather stated.

His superior nodded.

"We know where the weapons will be stored for transport?" matter-of-factly inquired Agent Beckstein.

"According to our deep-cover agent within the New York workings of the Russian mob, a private warehouse in Matawan, New Jersey," Solo gave her the necessary facts. "You will be introduced as the warehouse management's security expert, Laura."

Laura nodded. "Which means Yunusov will attempt to keep me out of the way of everything going on."

"Yet he'll be forced to deal with you or risk exposing the illegality of his activities to the warehouse owners," supplemented Solo, even though he realized Laura was fully aware of how her role would be used.

"Pedro," Napoleon now addressed the Mexican, "you'll go in as hired grunt muscle."

"Si," acknowledged Agent Arquas with a lopsided grin, "a mere hauler of boxes who of course will also be kept at an arm's distance by the Russian mobsters and whatever people Thrush press into the vise."

"But always at my right hand, Pedro," Laura commented easily as she gave her partner a ready wink.

"Que va siempre sin la necesidad de decir<sup>8</sup>," responded Pedro with a ready wink of his own.

"Kyle, Al," Solo proceeded with the briefing, "you've both been given fully wrapped avouchment by our Moscow deep-cover agent. Thus Yunusov will accept you both as transfers from Russia to the group's operations in New York. I hope you've been practicing your Russian language skills."

"Kazhdyj den' i do pozdnej nochy<sup>9</sup>," Agent Walters assured him, his accent flawless.

"Dostatochno, chtoby ikh ubyedit', shto ya Gollandets, kotoryj desyatiletije zhil v Moskvye<sup>10</sup>," spoke Agent van Niels in turn, his accent much less perfect but very much in keeping with his own back-story.

With a quick nod of his head, Solo gave evidence of his approval of their competence.

"Then it appears all is as ready as can be," the Number 1 of Section I gave his blessing to the upcoming mission. Something still was not sitting right with him. Something he could not put a finger on, could not quite capture in his mind, and thus something that had to go unvoiced.

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<sup>8</sup> That goes always without the necessity of saying

<sup>9</sup> Every day and well into the night

<sup>10</sup> Enough to convince them I am a Dutchman who has lived a decade in Moscow

“What if Jack is recognized as an U.N.C.L.E. agent?” Natasha ventured boldly into this very real possibility. “His cover as my bodyguard is a pretty vulnerable one should they investigate too closely.”

“Thrush satraps retain so much independence, they oftentimes overlook the obvious,” put forth Napoleon bluntly.

“And I’ll be disguised as well. My hair goes redder, my eyes go green, and I sprout a light beard,” tossed back Jack with practiced nonchalance.

Natasha eyed Jack with particular forwardness, wanting him to comprehend it was his physique that made him most readily identifiable. And such wouldn’t be masked for this mission since they needed that asset for possible bait to trap Yunusov.

“No offense, but it might take more than that for you to go unnoticed,” she threw back bluntly, trying for as much nonchalance in her tone as had been evidenced in that of her partner. “And you are pretty high on Thrush’s list of most wanted for interrogation by Central.”

“Perhaps so,” Solo agreed with the youngest member of the team, “but it might play to our advantage for him to be so recognized by Thrush. As long as you stick to your guns about him being your hired bodyguard and react with spoiled petulance to any suggestion you might have been duped by him. Understood?”

Natasha eyed her ultimate superior steadily. Oh yes, she understood all right. She was being told that, if the mission required it, she abandon her partner without a fight to whatever fate Thrush decreed. And looking at Jack’s composed expression, she realized the man himself took no issue with this being the sanctioned course of action.

Now Natasha would be the first to admit she and Jack were far from friends. Yet, like or dislike, they were partners in the field. And field partners discarding one another into the hands of the enemy without at least attempting resistance was not the ideology she had been taught by years of stories from her own father and the man currently asking her if she understood the intent of this personally foreign decree.

The hazel-brown eyes of the Number 1 of Section I were holding her own blue ones in an uncompromising stare. This was an order, plain and simple, an order she would be required to obey without question.

“Understood?” repeated Solo meaningfully as Natasha found herself swallowing hard.

“Perfectly understood,” she finally declared to her Dyadya, knowing full well he of all people would never even have considered for so much as half-a-minute doing what he was asking of her had he been going into the same situation with his own field partner forty years ago.

“All right then, you all have your assignments,” finalized Napoleon. “I know you’ll each fulfill your part in this admirably.”

And with that the Russian Arms Affair began its final phase.

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Sitting in her favorite easy chair in the living room of her Murray Hill home, Trice Kuryakin almost literally jumped a foot in the air at the normal chiming of the hour by the old grandfather

clock in the nearby hall. With a sigh, she abandoned any more useless attempts to read from the novel lying open in her lap, slamming it shut with a pointed thud. She had been restless since the phone call from her daughter a couple of hours ago, that phone call wherein Natasha had simply advised her mother she would be “out of town for at least a few days and maybe for a few weeks”.

Trice hadn't questioned as to where the young woman was going or how to contact her. Illya Kuryakin's wife knew better than to do so, knew her daughter was off on a mission for U.N.C.L.E., knew Natasha neither could nor would tell her anything more than what she had already. She also knew this trip was one from which her daughter might return injured... or not return at all. Yet Trice kept all that anxiety purposely out of her voice as she had wished her daughter a heartfelt safe journey. Now, however, all that coolly suppressed worry was catching up to her.

She had always been well aware of the dangerous path in life her only child had chosen. She had never sugarcoated its very real hazards in her mind, even when she uttered all the correct and falsely blasé words the loved one of any individual in such a line of work had to say. The public front of normalcy must always be maintained, as much for the individual's own state of mind as for any other more obvious reason. It had been difficult enough with Illya, though he had spent but a short time in his return to the field after she had met and subsequently married him. His current position as an administrator within U.N.C.L.E. remained perilous to some extent, but at least he wasn't generally confronting adversaries, gun in hand, with guns likewise pointed at him. Now though, with Natasha's life at direct risk, all the strain of the necessity of keeping up that public front of normalcy was wearing Trice's nerves to a frazzle.

Trice was not by nature a nervous woman. Nor was she overly protective and smothering of Natasha. She truly appreciated her daughter's deep sense of purpose and idealistic certainty, certainty that granted the young woman the internal strength needed to pursue the career she was. Still, in her heart of hearts Trice sincerely wished Natasha had set her goals in another direction. The wife of a former Enforcement Agent and mother of a current one sincerely wished constant concern over whether either member of her closest family might not wind up dead at the hands of some criminally-minded goon or self-serving megalomaniac wouldn't be her mental and emotional purgatory for as long as she... and/or they... lived.

Just then the sound of a key turning in the front-door lock caught Trice's attention. Illya, it had to be Illya, though his arrival home was a bit earlier than usual. Taking a deep breath, Trice rose, discarding her novel in the seat of the chair as she did so, and walked into the hallway to greet her spouse. Truth be told, she really needed his steady presence tonight.

Once the door was unlocked and the entry devices properly disabled, Illya turned briefly to the security guard standing behind him on the stoop and nodded briskly.

Though Kuryakin's position at U.N.C.L.E. did not warrant a permanent bodyguard as did Solo's, he nonetheless always received a security escort to and from his home and New York headquarters. And if he was off on some representative task for the Command in another city or country, he was constantly shadowed by a two-man security detail.

The guard nodded in turn to Kuryakin, acknowledging his own dismissal by the Section Chief. Illya passed further into the front entry hall of his home, closing the outer portal firmly and resetting the necessary alarms.

"I'm glad you're home early," stated Trice with just a hint of relief in her voice.

Illya gazed into her face, fully reading the disquiet in her familiar features.

"Natasha called to bid you goodbye then," he observed frankly.

Trice grimaced.

"Please don't say it like that, Illya," she entreated.

Illya walked up to her and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. "Forgive my clumsy tongue, dearest. Even after so many years, English still doesn't offer me the surety of expression of my native language," he furthered with a rueful little smile that caught at Trice's heart.

Trice found herself melting into his welcoming arms, seeking the sure strength of feeling his well-known body against her own, unwinding into the safe refuge provided by laying her head on his solid shoulder.

"Promise me she'll be alright, Illya," she begged this indulgence of her husband, knowing it was a foolish request, a request he couldn't honor.

Illya raised her chin with one finger and shook his head slowly.

"You know I can't do that, Trice," he reminded her in a very gentle tone. "But I can promise you she has and will have every facility of U.N.C.L.E. at her disposal, in her training and her teammates and her gadgetry. She'll do fine, love."

Trice looked into his honest blue eyes and slowly nodded. She took one deep, calming breath and then inquired with a small, embarrassed smile, "Would it be too self-indulgent to give in to the temptation for a before-dinner drink to settle my nerves?"

Illya smiled broadly in return. "Not as long as you agree to let me join you," he countered gamely as he drew a loving arm around her waist and steered his wife in the direction of their dining room.

At the wet bar in the butler's pantry off the dining room, Illya asked Trice what she wanted to drink and then poured out the sherry she requested. Forgoing his more usual libation of iced vodka, he decanted a second glass of the dark liquor. The sweetened oloroso was more saccharin tasting than he liked, but for tonight he thought it important to share even such a small thing as identical cocktails with his wife.

They enjoyed their aperitifs in comfortable silence, content just to be in each other's company. Afterwards they ate a light but delicious supper of butternut squash soup followed by a traditional Cobb salad, both dishes prepared by the incomparable Mrs. Sedowsky. They chose to drink their after-dinner coffee in the living room, each ensconced in a favorite chair.

"Sometimes it's just extraordinarily difficult," spoke Trice as she idly stirred a teaspoon into the hot liquid within the cup that she balanced with her other hand on its saucer upon one knee. "To magnanimously accept that death hovers always so near the ones I love most."

Illya smiled a reflective little half-smile.

“Napoleon insists that death will always hover near all the living until it finally stakes its full claim,” he remarked in a somewhat hushed voice.

Noting the introspective quality of her husband’s tone, as well as the brooding look in his ice-blue eyes, Trice’s love-inspired sixth sense picked up not only on his overall mood, but on its dual cause.

“You are doubly worried, aren’t you, darling?” queried Trice, understanding sympathetically displayed in her hazel-green eyes. “First there’s Natasha, and then there’s Napoleon. You’re still troubled about whatever it is that Thrush woman seems able to invoke in him, aren’t you?”

Illya sighed.

“It wasn’t my intention to burden you with that at this moment, dearest,” he acknowledged unhappily. “You have enough to concern you with the possible dangers inherent in Natasha’s first real mission.”

“You can talk to me about anything, Illya, always,” pressed Trice in a soft voice. “Just don’t try to hide from me what you’re feeling. I want to believe you trust in me more than that. I’m not going to fall apart at the emotional seams and rail at you like a beleaguered harpy because you are as much troubled by your ex-partner’s current situation as by our daughter’s. I of all people know well there is more than sufficient room in your heart to feel equally for both.”

Gazing into Trice’s steady and compassionate hazel-green eyes, Illya realized it was foolish to try and keep any of his qualms from her. Foolish and emotionally self-defeating. Her love was sure and sustaining, and had been so for almost twenty-five years. He had never thought to find the calm port in the storm Trice had turned out to be in his life. Her love was undemanding and rock-solid, and had offered him from the very beginning of their relationship a tranquility of mind he had never hoped to have.

In contrast his soul-bonded friendship with Napoleon, though just as unquestionably rock-solid, could never be equated with a calm port in a storm. Rather it was like having an unwavering companion standing shoulder-to-shoulder with you at the tiller in that storm, steadfastly braving the elements with you and keeping your own uncertainties in check because there was someone beside you who you just couldn’t and wouldn’t disappoint or desert. There was indeed demand in such a relationship: demand to never be less than you could be, to always challenge yourself to do just a little more than that of which you initially thought yourself capable. Though it was never an intolerant or unforgiving demand, it nonetheless made that rapport far more mentally bracing than tranquil.

Illya had found in the wisdom of years that both types of powerful interactions were essential to the continued bounce-back robustness of his spirit. Both made his life worth living. Without the former it was probable day-to-day being would become an exercise in restless frustration, while without the latter such everyday existence would become but lazy monotony. Thus was he grateful beyond reckoning that he had never been forced to choose between one and the other. That his wife had always appreciated his link with his closest friend, and that his friend had always respected his connection with his dearest wife.

“I don’t know why it haunts me so much,” admitted Illya to his wife, “but somehow I just can’t shake the premonition that this woman will permanently break something inside Napoleon. I

know it's ridiculous to think that way, know that he's mentally tough and emotionally resilient; yet..."

Illya broke off with another small sigh, this one definitely born of irritation with his own reaction to the Thrush and her unusual ties to his friend.

"Do you think it is her intention to, as you say, permanently break something inside Napoleon?"

"I think," began Illya, brow furrowing as he sought the correct words to properly convey his opinion on the matter, "that she is drunk with new power. Physically drunk with the unexpected potency of her synergy with Napoleon. Mentally drunk with the tantalizing prospect of justifying her father's experiments and proving his theories. Emotionally drunk with the heady opportunity being granted her to become something other than an outcast, both within Thrush and inside herself. The drunk are always dangerous because they become reckless of everything and careless of everyone. And unfortunately it is Napoleon who is directly in the collision path of that recklessness and that carelessness."

"And you are dead-set on forcibly pulling him out of that collision path," stated Trice matter-of-factly. She knew her husband well, knew the stubborn nature of his protective inclinations when it came to his erstwhile partner.

"Kicking and screaming, if I have to," pronounced Illya in his most single-minded state of resolve. "I don't know how exactly to accomplish that feat... yet. But accomplish it I most assuredly will."

Trice placed her cup and saucer down on the nearby coffee table as she rose and walked to Illya's chair. Perching on an arm of that chair, she reached out and took her husband's face within her hands, turning that countenance to hers.

"I recognize that you are doggedly determined no harm come to Napoleon, but darling please do try and keep some perspective in this," she cautioned him sagely. "Remember that Napoleon is shrewd and rather experienced in thwarting those who threaten him."

"Napoleon has always been cavalier about his own well-being," Illya spoke in counterpoint. "He'll take on the entire underworld with all the bravado of a charging bull, and unhesitatingly pursue courses fraught with impossible risks, trusting in his instincts alone to keep him in one piece."

"I always thought you admired his resourceful audacity," taunted Trice as she playfully rubbed the ridges of her husband's cheekbones with her thumbs.

"I do admire that in him," conceded Illya, refusing to rise to the good-humored ribbing, "but I also am not going to let it destroy him. I've always had his back and I intend to keep to that plan."

"And I would never dissuade you from that plan," conceded Trice in her turn, allowing herself to respond seriously once more. "Yet surely you will grant Napoleon's instincts are pretty darn good," she added as she leaned in and kissed her husband lightly on the tip on his nose.

"Pretty darn good, no question," stated Illya as he set his own cup and saucer on the surface of the coffee table. "But his instincts are absolutely impeccable," he finalized with a slightly smug

smirk, finally relaxing into his wife's mischievousness, "when my considered forethought backs them up."

Trice's amused laugh fully lifted the remaining anxiety from the atmosphere.

"The two of you are quite the pair," she settled the matter certainly. "One wonders what eccentric alignment of the universe brought about such a unique and enduring joining of such disparate personalities."

Illya laughed too, all the strain brought on by the reality of Natasha's first full-on mission coupled with Napoleon's odd involvement with the Thrush technological residual blissfully leaching out of him for the moment at least.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Mrs. Kuryakin," teased Illya as he mirrored his wife's previous action by taking her face within his hands, then charting his own mischief by nipping impishly at various points on her lips, "than are dreamt of in your stiff-upper-lip British philosophy."

"Thank the alignment of the universe for that!" exclaimed Trice as she slid gracefully into her husband's lap to enthusiastically continue their private romantic interlude, all but more pleasurable "pressures" slipping into the background of their minds for the satisfying duration.

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The insistent pounding on the front door of the carriage house in Gramercy Park that Jack called home put the agent in a foul mood. Whoever was trying to draw his attention was being rather rude in the attempt. Slamming shut the lid of the suitcase he was packing and retrieving his Special from its current position on the bedside table, Jack quickly made his way down the open-frame wood staircase from his loft bedroom to the main floor below. He clicked on the display unit for the camera mounted in the outer eaves of his doorway. Recognizing the figure on the video screen, he muttered to himself in Italian as he let the arm hefting his gun fall slack to his side. Only then did he disengage the security locks and pull to his front portal to face his visitor.

"You don't have a doorbell," remarked Natasha Kuryakin matter-of-factly as she made her entrance into the angled entryway.

"No, I don't," agreed Valdar tersely as he banged the door shut behind her and reset all the bolts and alarms. "But you seem to have had no trouble making relentless use of my doorknocker."

Natasha ignored his sarcasm as she casually dropped the valise she was carrying into an available corner of the hallway and then turned to face her partner head-on.

"Why didn't you challenge him?" she demanded fiercely. "God knows, you challenge him on just about everything else. Yet regarding this you just sit there as docile as a damn dormouse!"

"What in the blue blazes are you talking about?" demanded Jack in his turn, his tone equally as fierce.

"At the briefing today," Natasha elucidated impatiently, "when..." She stopped her words abruptly, realizing she was about to use the term Dyadya to reference Napoleon Solo and that such a reference would be entirely inappropriate in the current context. "When the Chief," she

restarted her tirade with the replacement of a much more neutral address for their superior, “all but said ‘throw him to the wolves if you must’, why didn’t you make some sort of objection?”

“Madre e tutti gli apostoli,” swore Jack, “mi protegge dalla ingenuità di buone intenzioni dei partner di rookie!<sup>11</sup>”

“I don’t understand Italian and you know it,” spat back Natasha, “so do me the courtesy of speaking a language I can actually interpret. Not that it will likely make much difference, since I rather doubt you can explain in any language what went on to my satisfaction.”

“I have absolutely no intention of explaining anything to you!” threw out Jack hostilely.

“Just toss it into the black pot marked ‘rookie ideals’, heh?” she countered gamely. “I’m not letting you off this hook so easily, Mr. CEA of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E.”

Jack turned on his heel, intending to return to the packing waiting upstairs in his bedroom, but Natasha grabbed his forearm in a vice-like grip and spun him bodily back around to face her.

“No matter what you may think, Jacques Valdar,” she stated as her temper continued to seethe, “I am neither a dewy-brained idiot nor a wide-eyed innocent. I know the score. I know agents die in the line of duty. I know the goals of a current mission and the continued security of U.N.C.L.E. always come first. And I know sometimes lives have to be sacrificed to those ends. But abandoning a partner without even the inference of a fight or an attempt at rescue is another thing altogether.”

Jack’s gray eyes searched hers for a long moment. Perhaps she did need some clarification. Perhaps she deserved that.

“If the plan were to be compromised resulting in the capture of one of us,” he hypothesized, “which of us do you think more likely to survive torture, both physically and mentally?”

“You,” admitted Natasha monosyllabically.

“And which of us do you think more likely to find a means of escape from any such enforced captivity?”

“You,” spoke Natasha a second time. “But that doesn’t…”

“That does,” her partner finalized. “We are not yet equals in the field, greenstick,” he advised her without any hint of condescension. “Perhaps one day, but not just yet. And thus the Chief was only reminding us of this reality in the most direct way possible. I’m not angry with him for that, and you shouldn’t be either. This mission has to succeed, and it has more chance to do so if I’m the one put at ultimate risk.”

Natasha studied the hard-angled countenance for a long moment, assessing both his conclusion regarding her Dyadya’s intention and his own honesty in presenting it. Finally satisfied with both, she drew a long and somewhat shaky breath, releasing the last of her anger as she did so.

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<sup>11</sup> Blessed Mother and all the apostles, protect me from the well-meaning naiveté of a rookie partner!

"It's just I want..." she began tentatively.

"You want to prove yourself a partner to me equal to that your father was to Solo," Jack vocalized her thoughts with surprising ease.

Natasha bit her lip to ensure she kept her tongue from adolescently protesting this adult truth. She definitely hadn't expected him to be able to read her like this.

"You grew up hearing tales of that legendary partnership," furthered Jack, "an adoring witness to the renowned rapport that had developed between those two agents during their days of absolute trust in the field. But we aren't Solo and Kuryakin; we are Valdar and Kuryakin. Thus must we develop our own kind of rapport if our partnership – temporary as it may be – is to work at all."

"So what do you suggest?" ventured Natasha almost timidly now.

"I suggest we both do our jobs as ably as we can," determined Jack. "I suggest in doing just that we permit ourselves to learn where we mesh and where we clash in talents and methods. And finally I suggest we allow that gradually gained knowledge to itself build the proper rapport between us."

Natasha eyed him speculatively for a moment longer. Then she stuck out her hand toward him.

"Agreed," she stated matter-of-factly, as she waited for Jack to accept her outstretched hand in the proffered handshake.

Jack hesitated a second or ten, but in the end took her extended hand within one of his own and shook it firmly.

With that settled, Natasha playfully pulled forward a lock of her partner's dark auburn hair.

"Didn't I hear something about this going redder?" she teased in her imitable way, her easy gesture certainly making Jack's cheeks flame most assuredly redder.

He realized her tactile tendencies were something to which he would need to become accustomed, since it was doubtful his partner would curb that part of her effusive nature in deference to his less demonstrative temperament. Yet becoming so accustomed to casual touches would not be easy for a man as self-protected as he.

"I was going to shower and put in the henna rinse after packing. Which task I was finishing when you so wantonly took advantage of my innocent doorknocker, necessitating my gallant rescue of its faltering virtue," deadpanned Jack.

Natasha laughed lightly. So he did have a sense of humor after all. A bit on the dry side, to be sure, but still...

"You'd best hop to it then, Mr. Valdar," she admonished him good-naturedly. "You know we should be at the airport at least three hours before the scheduled departure of our international flight, and myself I'm simply on pins-and-needles waiting to encounter you with leprechaun-green eyes. Might put a sense of Gaelic mischief into you," Natasha insinuated with a brazen wink.

"If I provide contact lenses to turn your eyes a nice sedate shade of black," countered Jack stoically, "will that take the bawdy edge of Slavic waywardness out of you?"

"Never!" shot back Natasha with a wide grin. "Fiery Russian rebelliousness is too deeply ingrained in my genes."

Jack gave an overly loud mock sigh.

"Pity that," he groused without any true complaint.

"Go make yourself Irish," lightheartedly directed Natasha. "I'll make myself at home meanwhile. You have coffee I presume?"

"Some still hot in the carafe," Jack answered. "It's a couple of hours old though."

"No worries," Natasha assured him. "I like it strong."

"Help yourself then," invited Jack noncommittally as he proceeded back up the stairs to the master bedroom suite. Halfway up the staircase he glanced over toward his partner, who had already made her way into the small open kitchen area and was pouring herself a mug of the steaming dark liquid from the steel carafe resting on the coffeemaker's hotplate. "By the by," he offered coolly, "I never thought you a dewy-brained idiot. A wide-eyed innocent, however..." He made the universal gesture for maybe/maybe not by tilting one hand from side-to-side. Then he resumed his climb to the loft above.

Natasha found herself unconsciously grinning as she drew the cup to her lips. The grin turned abruptly to a grimace with her first sip of the coffee.

"I like it strong," she remarked quietly to herself, "not condensed into battery acid."

Nevertheless she continued to drain the hot drink from the cup as she wandered aimlessly about the main floor of the carriage house, taking in the atmosphere as it were. She paused in her meanderings only briefly as she temporarily put down the mug to unbutton and remove her fur-trimmed coat, dropping it over the back of a hunter-green leather Chesterfield sofa.

The furnishings of this main living space within Jack's carriage house were very conservative bachelor, library-style chic. Dark green and pale gray leather furniture, brushed nickel fixtures, dark-toned wood accents and floors. Nothing too trendy; nothing too antique; nothing too polished; nothing too rustic. The floorplan was open concept: living, dining, and kitchen areas set in one free-flowing great room design, all the spaces pin-neat and without a single accumulation of piled clutter. A door to the right at the back of the lounge revealed a small powder room embellished with a truly exquisite block-design wood vanity topped with a natural stone vessel sink in a very masculine rectangular shape. But it was the matching door to the left at the back of the lounge that raised her curiosity as the low lighting showing through the partially ajar portal caught her eye with its unusually golden gleam.

Pushing fully open the barrier (after having quickly convinced herself it was not prying since the door had not been pulled fully shut), Natasha caught her breath in surprise as overhead illumination automatically flooded the interior. Along several tiers of glass shelving, each fully enclosed with more glass and lit within with what she assumed were low-intensity heat lamps,

resided dozens of pieces of antique pottery, small statuary, hieroglyphic papyri and cuneiform tablets all lovingly positioned and carefully displayed.

Natasha made her way almost reverently into the chamber, pausing to examine various pieces behind the glass, silently marveling at each of them. How long she roamed amongst the ancient treasures she really could not specify, but likely it had been at least a half-hour when her quiet and much awed scrutiny was interrupted by a voice from behind her.

"I like to keep up with my original field."

Completely caught off-guard (something that rarely happened to an U.N.C.L.E. Section II Enforcement Agent, to be sure), Natasha spun to face a very different-looking Jack Valdar standing framed in the open doorway. The pomegranate-red hair made him look almost boyish, despite the heavy growth of five-o'clock shadow he was purposely sporting, and the emerald green eyes seemed to de-emphasize the sharp angularity of his countenance by placing focus squarely on its upper half.

"These are magnificent," remarked Natasha, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible as she turned back to the exhibits.

"They are indeed," agreed Jack readily, "though unfortunately none of them are really mine. They are all on loan from various museums and universities, the administrators of which are graciously permitting me to continue my study of them."

"You must be quite valued and trusted as an archeologist for the boards of such institutions to allow you to store these in your home," Natasha complimented her partner.

"Being with U.N.C.L.E. sometimes grants unexpected privileges," responded Jack with a smile that Natasha could only classify as roguish. "Of course showing them the high-tech caliber of my storage and security measures didn't do any harm either."

"Temperature controlled I take it?" queried Natasha as she turned back to the glass cubicles.

"Yes, and air quality controlled as well," noted Jack with obvious pride. "The glass is bullet-proof of course, and completely shatterproof under all but the most extreme circumstances. And each box has the latest of electronic locking devices and alarms, all worked by sound and light waves and quite invisible to the naked eye."

"Impressive," conceded the younger agent with real admiration. "Most of these pieces are Egyptian in origin, aren't they?"

"Egyptian with a bit of Sumerian and a few other ancient Mesopotamian cultures in the mix."

"Was that your field of specialty?" Natasha inquired with real interest. "When you are an active archeologist?"

Jack smirked faintly. Somehow he had never imagined someone could ever be classified as an "inactive archeologist".

“In the main,” was however the only verbal answer he gave. “I have somewhat of a natural facility for hieroglyphics and other pictographic written languages. My brain just seems wired toward the interpretation of symbols.”

“Must come in handy as an agent when decoding ciphers,” came Natasha’s offhand comment.

“It does at that,” Jack had to agree after a moment or two of silent reflection on the connection of skills between his two lives. “You got a somewhat unprecedented opportunity to peruse these precincts on your own as usually I keep the door to this room locked,” he stated frankly, “so to keep Akhenaton from getting into any devilment in here.”

“Akhenaton?” questioned Natasha with a blink as she turned back to face Jack once more.

“My Maltese pup,” explained Jack.

“You have a dog named Akhenaton?”

“Though the Maltese was regarded by the ancient Egyptians as an animal of beauty sufficient to be worthy of worship, I somehow thought it inconsiderate – since my pup is male – to name him Nefertiti,” came Jack’s pokerfaced rejoinder.

Natasha smirked.

“Anyhow, he’s a black Maltese,” Jack furthered, “so naming him after so unconventional a pharaoh seemed rather appropriate.”

“Where is Akhenaton at the moment?” asked Natasha with an undemanding smile.

“At the home of a friend. She takes care of him whenever I have to be away.”

“She?” Natasha pointedly latched onto that detail of his statement.

“Yes, she,” Jack allowed his rookie partner her stab at personal curiosity regarding his private life. “Her name is Alicia, she’s a veterinarian, and I’ve been seeing her off-and-on for two years. Prying done now?”

“For the moment,” Natasha nonchalantly shrugged off his sarcasm. “By the by,” she ventured without a pause as she reached out and touched the stubble on his chin, “the rogue look suits you. So do keep the beard just on this side of unkempt: more simply unshaven than fully grown-out. Ceallach MacGonigle will thus, I absolutely guarantee you, have Gennadiy Yunusov hopelessly drooling.”

Jack blushed clear up to the tips of his ears as he took her hand briefly in his own to remove it from his face.

“I’ll get the job done,” he remarked flatly.

“We both will,” corrected Natasha as she purposely let her eyes hold his. “You’re not going into this alone, Jack. Remember that. I’ll do my part.”

“That part you can’t do,” verbalized Jack coolly, causing Natasha to smirk at his smooth detachment regarding what obviously was for him an uncomfortable particular of the upcoming mission.

“Well, I suppose not,” she countered with just as smooth impassiveness. “Still, I’m not above running interference to make dear Gena pant like a dog from having to try and clear a certain feminine obstacle in his way. What do you say, partner mine, to petulant Nikolaevna being herself rather enamored of her hired bodyguard and jealous enough to attempt to keep Yunusov from the object of his desire?”

Jack thought for a moment.

“Could make him even more determined in his pursuit,” he conceded, “and thus result in him becoming sloppy about other things.”

Natasha nodded.

“Things like the whole security and transport setup of the arms shipment transfer,” the younger agent suggested.

“Or it could make him very anxious to prove his important persona to the object of his desire...” advanced Jack speculatively.

“Thus more than willing to spill a few secrets about his Thrush connections to the oh-so-lusted-after Ceallach,” Natasha supplemented the thoughts of the other operative.

“It could definitely work to our advantage,” admitted Jack.

“And give you the chance to play hard to get,” concluded Natasha with a teasing wink.

Jack squinted, mentally assessing all the possible angles.

“Which is something I presume that, in the presence of Yunusov, you won’t be playing with me,” he deduced.

Natasha laughed heartily now, a full and throaty sound.

“Not on your life,” she taunted. “Nikolaevna is not the subtle type, or hadn’t you noticed?”

Jack’s eyes looked her thoroughly up-and-down, taking in the laced midnight-blue velvet vest she wore without an underlying blouse, the hip-hugging if knee-length navy leather skirt, and the matching ankle boots with their teeteringly tall stiletto heels.

“I noticed,” he assured her. “Sometimes I wonder what possesses the Camouflage personnel when they come up with these false identities.”

Natasha shrugged.

“I suspect our Nikolaevna Anuchin, with her fantasy genre take on haute couture, is some computer nerd’s nightly wet dream,” she put the matter bluntly.

Jack’s jaw almost dropped to the floor.

"I swear, greenstick," he announced once he had regained control of his mouth, "you do say the most unpredictable things."

Natasha shrugged once more.

"You'll grow accustomed to it," she pledged him unflappably. "Probably a lot sooner than I'll grow accustomed to where Nikolaevna conceals her gun," she added as she shifted her stance a bit awkwardly.

"I hesitate to ask," uncertainly returned Jack.

"It's in a thigh holster," she informed her partner easily, "only the business end of it faces the inner thigh."

Jack flushed yet again, feeling absolutely ridiculous as he did so.

"Must be uncomfortable," he nonetheless commiserated.

"All to promote the pursuits and protect the principles of U.N.C.L.E.," countered Natasha gamely. "At least it's only a Glock 19."

At that Jack had to laugh heartily, allowing the atmosphere between them to become friendlier than it had ever been.

After his laughter had subsided, Jack advised his rookie partner, "As intriguing as it would be to see how you handled yourself on a long terminal walk wearing that rig, I suggest you lock up the G19. U.N.C.L.E. has arranged everything with the airline in regard to us carrying firearms onboard, but not with us actually wearing them on our persons during the flight. That would rouse suspicions unnecessarily."

"Never so willing to obey an order!" exclaimed Natasha enthusiastically as she unceremoniously reached under the right outside portion of her skirt and unbuckled the thigh holster, catching both it and the semi-automatic weapon it contained in her opposite hand.

Then she moved off back toward the entry hall and her satchel to retrieve the standard weapon lockbox and pack the gear away, leaving Jack blinking in astonishment at her total lack of self-consciousness.

"This mission is certainly going to prove interesting," he spoke under his breath as he moved back into the main of the carriage house as well, closing the door to his specially outfitted study firmly behind himself.

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Napoleon Solo had no real clue why he was still ensconced within the halls of U.N.C.L.E.'s NY HQ at this ungodly hour. There wasn't any current crisis that needed his constant attention, and truth be told he really could use some sleep. Emotional knots, resulting from his assignment of his goddaughter to her first true mission, had left him thoroughly exhausted. Yet he knew he would not sleep if he went home to bed. His mind was just too active and thus he realized he would lie physically stock-still on his mattress while that on-edge mind of his continued to churn at breakneck speed, with the natural result that absolutely none of him would get any rest at all.

As a younger man under similar circumstances he likely would have sought out some sexual companionship for the night to push himself beyond ceaseless mental cognition and into the realm of sated bodily relaxation that could turn off even the most agitated mind. But in his more senior age, though he still pleasantly enjoyed a “friend with fringe benefits” type of relationship with several women of his acquaintance, he was less inclined to use those relationships simply as mental anesthetics. Thus he might as well stay awake at headquarters and pretend there was some pressing business to hold his concentration, even though what he was doing involved nothing more pressing than the routine perusal of various international situations and recent mission reports.

Solo also had no real clue why, after several hours of such routine perusal of international situations and mission reports, he found himself traversing the corridors of U.N.C.L.E. toward the lower level security cells. Particularly toward one security cell: that currently housing Delphina Reikedahl. He nodded perfunctorily to the guards on duty at the monitoring area, who all came to full and formal alert at his approach, and strode purposefully on to the actual cellblock.

Through the Plexiglas, Solo looked at the form slumbering quietly on the small cot. Napoleon had no reasonable idea what drew him to this woman. Though he was more than intimately familiar with the “fringe science” in which Thrush had so liberally engaged over the decades, something in him vigorously rebelled at the possibility of his nervous system being inexplicably connected to hers. Yet just as inexplicably he found himself perfectly aware of the exact moment she came awake under his watchful gaze, though she hadn’t moved a muscle or made a single sound.

*“Likely I just picked up on a subtle change in her breathing,”* Napoleon mentally comforted himself at the disturbing thought of his being able to adjust to her state of being so readily.

After a few minutes, Delphina sat up in bed and set her eyes directly on his.

“Why don’t you come in?” she suggested coolly. “Since it would seem you wish to talk to me.”

She pulled back the covers on the cot and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The black jumpsuit had been replaced for sleeping by a lighter-weight white one. Another standard issue item to U.N.C.L.E. detainees, and something to remind Napoleon again of her status as an imprisoned foe.

“I don’t usually seek out strangers to talk to in the middle of the night,” Napoleon interjected awkwardly, not yet making any move to let himself into the confines of the cell.

“Ah, but Napoleon, I’m not a stranger,” Delphina reminded him with a small smirk.

“An enemy then,” amended Napoleon.

Delphina shrugged noncommittally.

“If you like,” she acquiesced to his description of her.

“How could it be otherwise?” questioned Napoleon somewhat brusquely. “You are Thrush.”

“Yes, I do admit Thrush are my keepers,” she countered with an almost feral smile.

“Keepers?” repeated Napoleon in an inquisitive and speculative tone.

Delphina’s hazel-brown eyes swept over Solo’s. Eyes like her own; yet not like at all. Despite the physical resemblance between their orbs of sight, Delphina doubted that anyone ever looked into her eyes and saw a genuinely caring, deeply passionate and yet charmingly mischievous soul behind them. Yet such a soul was impossible to miss behind Solo’s eyes.

“Do not read too much into mere words, Napoleon,” she warned him with an unexpected gentleness. “I am as I am. Words cannot change that.”

“And what are you?” Napoleon found himself demanding to be told, though he knew the query intolerably rude and quite impracticable to truly answer.

Delphina considered the question for several very long minutes. Then she said musingly, “I’d rather answer indirectly, by saying what you are to me.”

“What I am to you?” puzzled Napoleon as a frown pulled at the corners of his mouth, puckering his forehead with deep vertical lines between his drawn brows.

“Yes, Napoleon. You see I am coming to realize that you are my soul,” she dropped the potent verbal bomb straight on target.

“I don’t think I have one of my own, not really,” she continued. “Perhaps all the experimentation demanded that forfeit of me as well,” she hypothesized with an almost arrogant sense of self-deprecation. “Yet when I’m around you, I find myself somehow sharing your soul,” Delphina finalized with her gaze set intently and quite assiduously upon Solo, as if conjecturing on the scientific feasibility of such an absolute impossibility.

Napoleon’s mouth opened first in astonishment and subsequently in objection, but in the end he said nothing at all. Instead he turned away from the cell and walked back wordlessly through the corridor, forgetting entirely to nod to the stationed guards as he passed them to move fully and gratefully beyond the restrictions of the security holding area.

He wasn’t exactly sure what game Delphina was playing. Hell, at this point he wasn’t even sure what game he was playing himself. Yet he was absolutely sure, whatever the game was, it was being played on both sides with more intensity than he had ever suspected it would be or could be. And instinctively he recognized it was imperative that he win.

Returning to his office, Napoleon debated only a minute or two before reaching for his new style communicator and connecting to Illya’s channel. Kuryakin’s response was far from pleased to the full video/audio holograph greeting him when he pushed in the plunger of his special pen to answer its annoying two-tone summons. (It was Solo who had convinced Research that it was apropos to utilize the old electronic acoustic signal on the new contact tool, though while in the field agents could and would set it to a less irritating and far more discreet vibrate mode.)

“Napoleon,” Illya grumpily advised the other man as the dual open channel showed his glance over at the alarm clock residing on the side table in his bedroom, “it is three o’clock in the morning. Is the pursuit of sleep at a decent hour anathema to any Number 1 in Section I? Or are you just personally determined to aggravate me whenever humanly possible?”

“What is it?” asked Trice in a drowsy voice from her side of the bed. “Is there some kind of emergency?”

For a moment Illya’s heart skipped a beat as he mentally registered the possibility of a seriously ill twist of fate having seized upon his daughter.

“Is there some kind of emergency, Napoleon?” demanded Illya as Solo, through the video link, observed Trice bounce up into a sitting position in bed.

Napoleon mentally chastised himself for his stupidity in not considering what a communicator summons in the middle of the night might appear to signify to the Kuryakin couple under current circumstances.

“No, no emergency,” Napoleon hurriedly interjected into the conversation, seeking to quickly allay their fears. “I just had something I wanted to ask you, Illya.”

Trice physically relaxed as she collapsed down on the mattress once more.

“Napoleon,” she made her own objection to her husband’s friend regarding the late night call, “it’s 3:00 a.m.”

“I know,” began Napoleon. “Or actually I didn’t... and I didn’t think to check either. I’m sorry; it’s just...” His voice dropped off, but not before Illya picked up intuitively on the undercurrent of distress in his partner’s tone.

“Talk to me, Napoleon,” therefore directed Illya, though his own vocal tone was more soothing than insistent.

Napoleon took a deep, steadying breath.

“Illya, is it possible,” ventured Solo, the tenor of his voice changing suddenly, making Illya suspect that the words spoken by that voice were in the end altered as well from those that had been originally intended, “for the bio-drone to run on two systems simultaneously? The main on the buggy obsolete software and the redundant on the debugged new?”

“Why would we want to do that?” logically queried Kuryakin as he ran a hand absently through his sleep-tousled hair.

“Just humor me, Illya. Can it be done?”

“Anything can be done with a modicum of effort, Napoleon,” replied Illya acerbically. “The more relevant question is: Are you going to provide me a reason to go through the effort?”

“Call it a hunch,” was all the explanation Solo offered, “and I learned a long time ago never to disregard my hunches.

“Can you start on the project tomorrow, Illya?” Napoleon requested, though of course his position made it much more than a request.

“You’re the Number 1 in Section I,” retorted his second-in-command just a trifle sarcastically. “It will mean re-routing a lot of systems to use the redundant bio-drone server...”

“This really is important, Illya,” Napoleon assured his friend.

“If you say so, Napoleon,” acquiesced the Russian. “We will go over everything that needs to be done tomorrow morning. 9:00 a.m.?”

“9:00 a.m.,” agreed Solo. “And Illya...”

“Yes, Napoleon?”

“Thanks, old friend.” Relief sounded clearly in the timbre of the smooth voice vocalizing that simple statement of gratitude.

With those words the transmission cut off from Solo’s end.

Illya clicked the plunger on his communicator back to the up position, mentally pondering the odd exchange he had just had with his partner.

“What was that all about?” asked Trice as her husband slid back down in bed beside her.

Illya shook his head uncertainly.

“There are more things in heaven and U.N.C.L.E.,” muttered Trice as she snuggled closer to Illya to burrow back into sleep.

“Indeed,” conceded Illya as he wrapped his arms about his wife and wondered exactly what things in U.N.C.L.E. had set Napoleon’s mind off on such an unorthodox course.

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### **Act III: Arms for arms...**

The exchange of places between the Section II agents and their Section III counterparts, who had been in South America “keeping up appearances” for the Thrush surveillance of their hired arms assessor and her hired bodyguard, went off without a hitch in Maracaibo. For their parts, the lower section agents were glad to be rid of their public disguises. Both were an inch or two shorter than Natasha and Jack, but in the end that worked out well as the perceived height differential between Anuchin and MacGonigle remained intact. The female Section III had worn a wig to emulate Natasha’s long platinum blond hair, and the male Section III had donned a muscle enhancement undershirt beneath his clothes so to imitate Jack’s bodybuilder upper physique. These camouflages, considering the fact the Thrush watchers had been keeping their presence understated and thus less than near-at-hand up to this moment, had done their job in giving the two a reasonable resemblance to the actual undercover pair. But now was the time for the ruse to end and for the mission to begin in earnest, a mission much too dangerous to incorporate Section III personnel.

Seamlessly taking up residence in the adjoining two-bedroom suite of the high-class hotel where the Section III pair had been housed for the past five days, Jack and Natasha readied themselves for what they were sure would be the imminent personal introduction of the Thrush contingent assigned to escort them back to the United States. U.N.C.L.E. had used its resources to make it known Nikolaevna’s venture in South America was now profitably concluded, and the two Section II agents doubted the Thrushes would let grass grow under their feet in assuring Anuchin was safely in their hands. After all, no Thrush with any wits at all liked to deal with Osprey’s displeasure when one of his orders wasn’t followed to the letter.

The partners had checked the rooms and swept them free of listening devices (something the Section III agents had advised them they had done everyday, since it seemed such devices were constantly being replaced by Thrush). Thus they felt safe enough for the moment to talk quietly without resorting to their cover identities.

“We should likely make some public show of ourselves tonight,” Jack recommended the next course of action.

Natasha nodded. “I agree. We can make reservations at an expensive restaurant for dinner. Nikolaevna would definitely be the type to celebrate her business successes.”

Now Jack nodded. “Good thinking, greenstick,” he complimented the younger agent.

“Do you think you could call me Natasha?” she queried somewhat frustratedly of the CEA. “Or even Tash if you like. Many of my friends call me that.”

Jack eyed her somewhat smugly as he noted, “I think for the present I should get used to calling you Nikolaevna.”

“Nalya,” she corrected him.

“What?” he asked, a bit confused.

“It’s one of the Russian nicknames for Nikolaevna,” she explained to him, “and the one I prefer.”

“Wouldn’t it be a trifle familiar for your bodyguard to refer to you that way?” he suggested uncertainly.

Natasha shook her head in defiance.

“Not with Nikolaevna hot for his body,” she taunted with purposeful bluntness.

As she had expected, Jack looked uncomfortable and she relished the thought she had unsettled him as thoroughly as his reference to her as ‘greenstick’ always did her.

“She would insist on the presumed intimacy and, as a man in her personal employ needing to stay in her good graces, Ceallach would scarcely be in any position to refuse. So use the nickname you must.”

“Nalya it is then,” conceded Jack if less than enthusiastically.

Natasha pulled her head downward as she began seemingly searching for something in her bag where it lay open on the bed. In reality it was but subterfuge to hide from Jack her self-satisfied smirk, for certainly Nalya was a better way to be addressed than was greenstick.

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As they entered the elite Ciao restaurant in Maracaibo, Jack had to admit that his partner knew how to turn heads. Hair twisted in an elaborately braided, crown-like up-do, dressed in a high-necked – though completely backless – ankle-length champagne-hued lame gown that clung in all the right places, and shod in matching stiletto-heeled sandals: she shone from the top of her silver-blond head to the tips of her pale gold-painted toenails. She thoroughly dazzled, not just with looks but with charm as well. The minute she addressed the maître d’ in that perfectly

modulated if less than perfectly fluent Spanish with its underlying twist of a Russian accent (and Jack really needed to study how she did that, managed an accent not her own beneath yet another foreign language), eyes that had initially wandered to her because of her openly sensual beauty stayed riveted because of her natural grace with word and accompanying gesture. Laughter like the gentle tinkling of bells made the watchers smile involuntarily. Here, they surmised, was a woman who knew well how to enjoy life and needed to make no pretensions about doing so. Her ebullient charisma was natural and never constrained for the sake of propriety.

Seated at the best table (for who could grant such a woman anything less?), she ordered a magnum of the best champagne and chatted amiably in English with her impassive, if incredibly built, red-headed male companion as they selected their various courses and partook of them at leisure as they were served. All the while the eyes of a pair of well-dressed men at a conveniently angled table observed them in surreptitious silence.

“It is time to relax now, Ceallach,” Nikolaevna chastened her suddenly sullen escort over final espresso. “All is as it should be and the money is in hand to indulge ourselves utterly tonight. I am feeling rather... expansive of mood,” she finalized as she placed one expertly manicured, long-fingered hand over one of his that rested on the tabletop.

The man, Ceallach, pointedly removed his hand from under hers. She sighed dramatically.

“Are all the Irish so obstinate of temperament?” she demanded with some vexation.

“I don’t know all the Irish,” retorted Ceallach with acerbic factualness, the merest touch of a Gaelic accent softly burring his words.

“It’s a wonder you know any, with that surly attitude of yours,” decided Nikolaevna as she punctuated her own lightly Russian-inflected words with an expressive gesture of hands.

“I know who I want to know,” he returned meaningfully.

“While I am just someone by whom you are employed, da?” she teased him just as meaningfully. “Yet combining business with pleasure is not a situation always to be avoided,” she all but cooed as she let her blue gaze purposefully hold his emerald green one.

Just then the two well-dressed men from that conveniently angled table made their approach.

“Miss Anuchin?” the shorter and stockier of the two addressed the woman.

“Da,” replied Nikolaevna. “Do I know you gospoda<sup>12</sup>?” she asked as she passed her eyes from one to the other of the men.

“No, not us particularly,” ventured the same man with an attempt at a congenial smile. The attempt mostly failed as the resultant grin came off a bit shark-like. “But you are familiar with our organization.”

“Ob`'asnit’,” Nikolaevna returned in her native tongue. “Explain,” she translated at the man’s confused look.

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<sup>12</sup> gentlemen

“You have been hired by one of our... board members to complete an assessment for our group shortly,” the man did explain, “in New York.”

Nikolaevna waved her hand in dismissal.

“That is not for days,” she rejected their current contact with her. “You may tell your employer I will be punctual for the assignment as I always am. If your organization has researched my methods, as I am certain is the case, both he and you know I unfailingly keep to the stipulations of my contracts. Now leave me to enjoy my free time as I please in the meanwhile.”

“I’m afraid that is not how it is to be,” responded the man simply.

“Ob`asnit’,” repeated Nikolaevna, this time more sternly as Ceallach slowly moved his hand toward the gun resting in the holster inside his dinner jacket.

Nikolaevna raised an open palm toward Ceallach, warning him off drawing his firearm.

The man’s eyes crawled over Ceallach contemptuously. “Your bodyguard?” he questioned in a manner that made it clear he believed her companion to be something much more intimate and far less of a bona fide threat than that.

“Da,” she answered flatly. “You thought perhaps he was my brother?” she challenged the man’s assumptions. “You have not more than three minutes to explain before I allow Ceallach to wipe the floor with both of you. Be aware he easily can. I do not hire incompetent people. And also be aware that he is not the only one of us who carries a gun.”

The man laughed softly. “We were told you had style,” he complimented the woman.

“Spasibo,” she acknowledged the compliment with cool nonchalance. “Now tell me what your employer seeks from me?”

“He wishes only to see you housed safely away from the prying eyes of any authorities who might have reason to disrupt your assignment with our organization.”

“Housed safely away?” inquiringly repeated Nikolaevna. “As in locked in some guarded location like a distrusted hireling of little personal merit?”

“You will be well looked after,” the man assured her. “Luxuriously looked after, in fact. But I’m afraid there is no room for discussion on this. You and your bodyguard,” again the man threw that contemptuous look toward Ceallach, “are to come with us now.”

Nikolaevna sighed dramatically, as was her usual wont.

“The skittishness of the administrators of supposedly powerful worldwide organizations never ceases to amaze me,” she stated unhappily though resignedly. “Very well, we will come, but first give me the chance to settle the bill for our meal.”

“It is already settled,” finalized the man with that shark-like grin again, “with the respects of our mutual employer.”

“At least he has manners,” she noted bluntly as she rose to her feet, Ceallach taking her lead in this, “which is more than I can say for his lackeys.”

The barb was meant to sting and undoubtedly, by the grim look on the face of the shorter of the two men, it did. The other had expressed nothing in either word or feature since the beginning of the confrontation, and still didn't.

Ceallach meanwhile hid an amused and impressed little smirk by pausing to wipe his lips a final time on his linen napkin before the foursome exited the restaurant with the three men following in Nikolaevna's magnificent wake.

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Less than an hour later, all four were seated in a private jet set for take-off to New York. Ceallach kept up his stoic exterior while Nikolaevna complained in no uncertain terms, though only in Russian, about the way she was being hustled off under cover of darkness onto an unscheduled flight, all while still rigged out in her unsuitable-for-travel evening finery.

"I speak Russian most fluently, Mlle. Anuchin," finally ventured the taller of the two Thrushes, his perfect English noticeably tinged with a French accent.

Nikolaevna glanced over at him coolly.

"Then you are keenly aware that I am less than pleased with this treatment," she challenged him without a qualm.

From his very relaxed position on the two-seater couch facing her, the taller Thrush smiled calmly and confidently at her. Beside him his shorter companion was busily reading a Venezuelan newspaper and pointedly keeping out of this conversation. The taller Thrush was the man ultimately responsible for the success of this undertaking, and the shorter one was perfectly content with having performed his own task at the restaurant exactly as ordered.

"I am indeed keenly aware," the taller Thrush assured the Russian woman. "But alas, loose ends in business matters must always be tied up as neatly as possible."

"And you are an expert in that necessity?" questioned Ceallach, his eyes appraising the other man without any attempt to hide that scrutiny.

The shorter Thrush, knowing the coldblooded effectiveness of his companion, snorted once rather noisily, but said nothing.

"I do pride myself on my proficiency in that particular field, oui," the taller Thrush acknowledged with his own eyes equally as keen and direct in appraising Ceallach. "I think perhaps I know you, Monsieur...?"

"MacGonigle," Ceallach provided, not so much as an eyelash displaying any inner unease.

"Monsieur MacGonigle," allowed the Thrush. "Though I rather think I might know you by another name."

"You might," speculated Ceallach, his Irish accent shifting not one vowel or consonant out-of-place, "but then again you might be presuming falsely."

"I might at that," the Thrush dropped the issue for the moment. "But I have been less than forthcoming myself, n'ai-je pas? An unforgiveable breach of etiquette in a host. Permit me to redeem myself in that area at least. My name is Islenleque, David Islenleque."

Jack Valdar knew that name, no question. But with complete top-agent aplomb, he kept his cover firmly in place and gave no telltale reaction of his knowledge. After all, Ceallach MacGonigle knew nothing of David Islenleque, the man who was Niles Ospreye's right wing, so to speak.

"Should I claim to be pleased to meet you after you have so cavalierly rattled my client's composure?" demanded Ceallach bluntly.

"Your client has a contract with my superior, and I am only seeking to guarantee that agreement is ultimately fulfilled," Islenleque countered in a liquid voice and with a charming smile.

"I will not be talked about as if I am not present here!" spat out Nikolaevna imperiously.

"She has a Russian temperament," Ceallach warned David with a conspiratorial smirk.

"And I have a Gallic one," forwarded David with an equally conspiratorial smirk. "We shall need, I believe, to find common ground where our hot-blooded dispositions do not clash."

"Good luck with that," Ceallach playfully cheered on the other man as he leaned back in his seat, pushed down the headrest and prepared to nap on the air journey.

"Ceallach!" Nikolaevna chastised from where she sat beside him in a two-seater row of the small private plane, punctuating her verbal rebuke with a smart and self-secure slap to his lower right arm. "I do not pay you to ignore those who harass me!"

Ceallach sat upright once more. "Want me to shoot him?" he questioned laconically.

"No, of course not!" retorted the woman. "As he has said, I have a contract with his employer. Thus I have no wish to upset that employer of his, at least not before I have received my negotiated compensation."

"Then Nalya, I don't see what is my particular role in all this at the moment," Ceallach told her straightforwardly. "You are not being physically threatened in any way, and you admit this man does have some authority to do what he is doing. So what exactly do you want from me?"

"Ya ozhidayu, shto ty oberegayesh' moyu chest' ne meneye strogo, chem moyu personu!"<sup>13</sup> came Nikolaevna's incensed response.

Ceallach raised a quizzical eyebrow at his client. "Is your honor being impugned?" he queried.

"My professional reputation is so being!" she rejoined angrily.

"I'm sorry, Nalya," apologized Ceallach unperturbedly as he leaned back in his seat once more. "There is no amount of money in the world sufficient to cause me to go about defending any woman's reputation, no matter in what quarter that reputation falls."

David laughed lightly at the Irishman's candid statement.

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<sup>13</sup> I expect you to guard my honor as least as closely as my person!

“You don’t defend, yet neither will you sully,” Nikolaevna voiced acidly in return. “Is that your standard method of operation, Ceallach?”

“I have always found it a most sensible approach,” conceded Ceallach before closing his eyes to prepare for his airborne nap.

A flood of Russian furiously escaped Nikolaevna’s lips as she unbuckled her safety belt, rose from her seat, climbed somewhat awkwardly in her clingy gown and spike heels over the thrust-out legs of the half-reclining Ceallach, and moved pointedly to an empty row at the back of the small plane. David watched with an amused smile as she, still obviously seething and just as obviously frustrated, settled in purposely separate from the men.

“It seems you have a stymied admirer, Monsieur MacGonigle,” he advised the Irishman.

Ceallach shrugged without opening his eyes. “Hazard of the trade. Most female clients tend to want a bodyguard to do more than merely guard their bodies.”

David laughed once more. He rather liked this Irishman... or this supposed Irishman, if his suspicions were accurate.

“You are a man after my own heart, Monsieur MacGonigle,” he made his case.

Ceallach opened one emerald green eye.

“I rather doubt that, Mr. Islenleque,” he countered with a lazy smile before closing that one open eye to settle into sleep... or what passed for sleep.

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Illya Kuryakin sat in the office of U.N.C.L.E.’s North American Section I Chief, Napoleon Solo, as the two men were carefully reviewing the dual setup of the bio-drone the Section III Chief would be supervising into full operation upon his superior’s final approval and “take it live” command. Heads bent in concentration over the schematics showing in tandem on each of their computer screens, Napoleon’s on that of his built-in desk monitor and Illya’s on a laptop positioned upon the surface of the great revolving desk, they spoke in fully business-oriented tones.

“So the issue of the pen communicators using the auxiliary server to access the bio-drone has been resolved?” questioned Solo.

“It took a bit of finagling the system, but yes it is working perfectly in test now,” replied Kuryakin. “Whether the tests reflect actuality will be determined once the switch is thrown.”

“If you have found it to work perfectly during testing, Illya,” Napoleon voiced his confidence in the other man’s abilities, “I have no doubt it will work perfectly in actuality whenever that switch is thrown.”

Illya raised his gaze above the screen of his laptop to look over at the other man across the expanse of the revolving desk from him.

“Napoleon,” he ventured simply, “you still have not told me why it is so important we do this, run the bio-drone off the backup server functioning on the latest software while maintaining primary connection with the main server running an outdated program.”

Solo glanced up from his own screen and into the searching blue eyes of his friend.

“It’s just something niggling at the back of my mind, something about the fact lucisorqe manipulates light,” Napoleon tried to put into words a suspicion that resided more in his gut than his brain.

“The bio-drone makes no use of light,” the scientist reminded the administrator.

“Not in its main function, no,” conceded Napoleon. “But when a core dump occurs, all the schematics and programming are visually, if momentarily, displayed upon the server monitor through the auspices of light on an LCD screen.”

Kuryakin ran a hand through his gray-blond hair, a gesture of intense reflection regarding Solo’s own often creatively convoluted thinking. It was a gesture so familiar to Napoleon, it made him smile despite the gravity of the moment. Yet that gravity remained intensely present in the atmosphere of the room. For what the Number 1 in Section I was asking be done to one of U.N.C.L.E.’s most secure internal systems was unprecedented and risky, and both men were well aware of that fact.

“Napoleon, do you have reason to believe Thrush has found a way to initiate a core dump of the bio-drone?” Illya found himself, therefore, directly questioning the man in the main responsible for all of U.N.C.L.E.’s operations.

The Section I head didn’t answer and it seemed to the Section III head that he was doggedly evading doing so.

“Even if they somehow managed that herculean feat, they would not be in the right location to capture the results of the core dump,” the second-in-command tried to assuage his senior’s misgivings. “That can only be done from the server itself. And truthfully, the huge spill of resultant information is displayed upon the monitor for such a minute amount of time, the human eye cannot interpret it. That information will not download to any portable device, and upon entry into the server area film of any kind is automatically exposed, rendering it useless.”

“Just keep humoring me on this, Illya,” was Napoleon’s unsatisfactory response.

Illya raised an eyebrow at this continued avoidance by his friend to provide him full answers.

“I know it sounds a bit crazy,” Napoleon finally expanded upon his reply, “but it’s something that seems to be emanating from Delphina...” He sighed in exasperation. “I don’t know exactly. There is something on the fringes of my consciousness...”

“You are not going to tell me you can read each other’s minds now, are you?” demanded Illya skeptically.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” Napoleon settled any speculation that he even considered such a possibility. “And I’m not sure I even believe it has to do with any supposed synaptic connection. Rather it’s just one of those feelings in my gut when I’m around her. A frisson of... I don’t know how to describe it. Excitement, expectation, perhaps even exhilaration in her that seems centered on the discovery of something, the utilization of something unforeseen to achieve a desired end.

"I don't know. I don't know," repeated Napoleon in definite bemusement, the furrow between his eyebrows deepening with the inadequacy of his verbalization.

"I will grant you our testing on the pure lucisorqe has revealed some remarkable facets to the mineral," Illya forwarded, seeking to relieve the mental tension evident in every line of Solo's bodily posture and facial expression, "much more than previously suspected. It can play havoc with sensory impulses far beyond the perception of the absorption of light. Still, our testing showed no particular capability for lucisorqe to itself retain photographic images, if that is where this is headed."

"I'm not certain where this is headed," granted Napoleon, frankly a bit bothered at Illya's attempt to limit the scope of any of this to what fit neatly within the boundaries of currently established concepts. "Yet I'm also not certain we are talking about photographic images achieved through any conventional method."

"What are we talking about then?" asked Illya as he leaned back in his chair.

"More a form of enhanced sense memory," countered Napoleon, watching Illya's reaction to that bold assertion.

"Something with which you have become personally familiar as of late," summarized the Russian pointedly and rather glumly.

"I don't understand any of this, Illya," admitted the American candidly, noting as he did Illya's disapproval and unhappiness at his continued peculiar bond with the Thrush technological residual. "I really don't. And maybe my intuition really is based on nothing more than complete nonsense being somehow intentionally foisted on me by Delphina. I willingly concede she has the upper hand with regard to this expanded nerve synapse union between us."

This was a huge concession for Napoleon to willingly make, and Illya was both surprised and pleased at his friend's admission of this actuality. He gazed unwaveringly at his one-time partner, trying to fully assess his current emotional state. He so disliked the Reikedahl woman cavalierly yet tenaciously playing havoc with that in Napoleon.

Sensing the particular vein of Illya's current scrutiny, Napoleon smiled wryly.

"This was much easier in the old days," he made a stab at lightening the mood. "Back then I would have simply seduced our Thrush provocateur into bed and wheedled the truth from her under the guise of intimate pillow talk."

Illya permitted his lips to curve upward just at the very corners.

"Yes, so you would have," he readily went along with Solo's boastful claim. "Though as often as not you wound up with less wheedled truths and more bumps on the head by the provocateur's backup muscle as a result of such methods," Illya taunted playfully.

"Ah, but when that happened, you always arrived to take the muscle in hand and check I still was able to think straight after you'd roughly slapped me to consciousness," teased back Solo with one of his disarming wide grins.

“But that was then, Napoleon, and this is now,” Illya bluntly encapsulated reality, bringing their conversation back around to complete seriousness. “Our responsibilities are much heavier and our chances for recovery from mistakes much diminished.”

Solo sighed. “And our bodies much less reliable and our schemes much more restrained.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Napoleon,” rejoined Illya in his most deadpan voice. “Your schemes are still more audacious than I would judiciously prefer.”

Napoleon laughed, the mental pressure and emotional strain almost visibly falling away from him as he did so. His steadfast partner was still firmly beside him, believing in the probable success of his plays even when he didn’t concur with the practicality of them.

“Take this as just another of my audacious schemes then, Illya,” Napoleon finalized with the self-assurance of definitive authority, but also with the surety of long friendship. “After all, even you have to agree it is the wiser course to take extra precautions in safeguarding the particular piece of U.N.C.L.E. technology we know Thrush is currently after.”

Illya squinted at the other man for a moment, recognizing when he had been backed neatly into a corner, even if that corner wasn’t the wrong place to be at this particular point in the game of one-upmanship continuously waged between them.

“I can’t argue with that logic,” Illya accepted the situation as it stood and let the quest for more clarification as to rationale pass into history for the present at least.

It was at this point that Solo’s secretary entered the inner sanctum of her boss’ office.

“Sir, you’ll find in the current alerts database on your computer an unencrypted version of the message received minutes ago in non-verbal signal code from Mr. Valdar,” Jenny stated simply, that statement adequately explaining the reason for her interruption of the Continental Chief’s meeting with his Intelligence Chief.

Napoleon immediately punched in the proper access code for the current alerts network, keyed quickly to the appropriate section, and silently read the information displayed on his screen. Then he performed the necessary keystrokes to display that message upon the screen of Kuryakin’s laptop, watching in further silence as Illya took the small amount of time needed to read that brief communiqué.

Illya’s eyes sought and held Napoleon’s once he had finished the missive.

“Islenleque,” he uttered pointedly. “Valdar will be tagged as an U.N.C.L.E. agent.”

Napoleon nodded shortly.

“He’ll be tagged,” he agreed with the other man. “Fortunately it appears from Jack’s sparse rundown that Natasha is not suspected at all. Let’s hope they both can manage to keep it that way.”

“And that Islenleque keeps to his preference of being absolutely certain about any issue before acting,” furthered Illya. “At least then Jack should be able to accompany Natasha to the warehouse where the illegal weapons are being stored.”

Napoleon smirked. "Oh, he'll keep to that preference. He'll want to ascertain exactly what U.N.C.L.E. knows and doesn't know, and allowing Jack a bit of snooping will be part of his self-indulgent technique. Islenleque has all the conceit of the French in his surety of superiority."

"He also has all the guile of the French," Illya reminded his friend.

"And that is why Natasha is going to have to be fully on her game. No extra footholds to compensate for missteps."

Illya audibly sighed.

"I would have preferred her first full-on mission be one less turning on a knife's edge," he freely admitted to his friend.

"Do such missions exist for U.N.C.L.E. Section II Enforcement Agents?" questioned Napoleon straightforwardly, gently if pointedly reminding his one-time field partner of the constant realities of the business in which they both were longtime participants.

Illya's ice-blue eyes again directly caught and held Napoleon's hazel-brown ones.

"No," he conceded, if somewhat glumly.

"It's a career she chose, Illya," Napoleon quietly noted. "You can't cocoon her from the difficult truths of that career. And neither can I."

Jenny cleared her throat in an attempt to regain the attention of the Continental Chief.

"Something else, Jenny?" Napoleon asked his personal assistant as his gaze returned to her.

"That conference call you asked me last week about setting up, sir," ventured Jenny, knowing that with someone else in the office, even though that someone was the second-in-command of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E., she ethically should not and organizationally could not reveal the conference call in question involved a Summit Five protocol. If Solo wanted Kuryakin advised of this fact, it was his prerogative, and only his, to provide such classified details to the other man.

"You've arranged it?" queried Solo, recognizing Jenny was bringing it up at this particular juncture because she needed his okay on the date and time to finalize the security measures, and that all too obviously she didn't have much leeway to accomplish this last piece of the planning.

Jenny nodded.

"But I'm afraid the wee hours of New Year's Day is the very earliest it can be managed," she informed Solo. "If you would prefer a slighter later date, I can..."

"Wee hours of New Year's Day is fine, Jenny," cut in Napoleon quickly.

Jenny nodded again.

"Very well then, sir," she acquiesced to her boss' decision. "I will confirm with all necessary parties."

Jenny made her way out the pneumatic door and Napoleon looked over to find Illya, head tilted to one side, speculatively observing him.

“A pesky matter of certain changes in security clearance,” Napoleon brushed aside his friend’s unspoken curiosity.

“Nothing of which I need be aware, I presume?”

“Not at the moment,” was all the response Napoleon deigned to give before he decisively resumed perusal of the schematics on the proposed bio-drone programming alterations, non-verbally indicating to Illya by such action that they return to the original subject of their meeting.

Trusting in Napoleon’s organizational judgment, Illya once more accepted the situation at it currently stood and left resolutely unasked any questions lingering unanswered in his mind.

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Niles Ospreye slipped into his well-appointed office in midtown Manhattan with all the ease of a man accustomed to the accoutrements of wealth, taste and success. His scientific research grant foundation operated as a reputable front for all his Thrush endeavors and had for some thirty-five years. His daytime employees had no clue about his connections with the shadowy supra-nation. In his “day job”, he was a respected philanthropist possessed of an overabundance of family money and a personal fascination with technological research.

U.N.C.L.E. had been trying to prove his Thrush association for years, but they had come up empty in every such attempt. Ospreye was a shrewd man who knew well how to swathe his true persona within the cloak of the mainstream of society. And his foundation provided enough financial support for research projects with true humanitarian scope to place him in the eyes of many in the guise of Good Samaritan. Thus publicly Niles cultivated a character of genial goodwill, only revealing the deadly purpose behind that façade to fellow members of Thrush.

As he sat down in the enormous black leather chair before his very modern and spacious glass-and-steel desk, Ospreye’s secretary, she of the daytime employee variety, entered the precincts of his office.

“Good morning, Mr. Ospreye,” she greeted him warmly. She found, after all, nothing to dislike in her boss. She placed an ebony bone china cup of Brazilian coffee prepared just the way she knew he preferred it, black with the merest hint of sugar, on the desktop with one hand. In the crook of her opposite arm she held several noticeably aged books with sturdy and somewhat scarred brown leather covers. “These are Dr. Reikedahl’s original notes from terminated Research Project 72-OA that you requested retrieved from storage. Though that was a project we took up midstream in development, I have confirmed all the material in these dossiers is available, translated into English, on our intranet. Perhaps, therefore, you would find it more expedient to search through the data electronically?”

“Not for my particular purposes, Celeste,” he assured the woman with a smooth smile. “I’m more looking for personal annotations than technical text.”

“Those are included in the data files, Mr. Ospreye,” the efficient assistant pledged the fullness of the company’s electronic records.

“The sentences are there, Celeste,” he agreed, “but not the way a pen puts emphasis to any particular word, or the way a volume may open almost by itself to a page that was often

referenced. I want to feel the essence of the scientist's private viewpoint through these journals."

Celeste placed the small pile of bound notebooks upon his desk as she accepted without further debate his wish to rummage through their timeworn and discolored inked pages. For written words do not hold up as well to the ravages of time as do digitally-stored ones.

"As you please, Mr. Ospreye," she dismissed this peccadillo. "Yet I will admit I am certainly glad the foundation terminated this project in 1977. Reading these notes... Well, if you'll forgive my saying so, Dr. Reikedahl could be accounted as having a great deal in common with Dr. Frankenstein."

"Yes, so we determined," Niles seemed to concur with her opinion. "He was a brilliant man caught in the throes of his own uncompromising vision. That vision blinded him such that he lost all sight of ethical boundaries."

In point of fact Project 72-OA had never been officially terminated. Yet in 1977 – the year Delphina had come into Niles' own bed – that project had simply gone underground, proceeding forward only when Reikedahl had an agenda clear of other Thrush technological undertakings. The scientist's cover association with the Ospreye Technical Research Foundation had been purposely and very thoroughly obscured at that juncture. A good ploy, since it made it possible for Niles to admit he had once funded a project by Reikedahl, but insist that project had been closed down by his foundation for possible ethical violations, with the records of his company bearing that all out nicely.

"The rumors say it was his daughter on whom he experimented," Celeste remarked with seeming casualness as she subtly probed to satisfy her own curiosity with regard to the truth to this tantalizing, if upsetting, bit of gossip.

"Not rumors," Niles shook his head, for all the world like a man profoundly disappointed in one of his fellows. "His daughter was indeed the transformation subject."

Celeste visibly shuddered.

"She was born with a particularly severe form of albinism," continued Niles in that oh-so-believable tone of human commiseration. "Perhaps that was the true cause of Reikedahl's scientific blindness."

"A tragedy," came Celeste's own form of human commiseration. "What happened to her?"

Niles shrugged.

"I never heard," he lied smoothly. "And of course the foundation could not risk its reputation by attempting further contact."

"Of course not!" agreed Celeste readily. "That might have proved the ruination of your life's work."

"Yes, exactly," affirmed Niles. "Still," he verbalized with a very credible sigh of regret, "I do wish sometimes I had made it a personal mission to find out."

“Do not fret on it, Mr. Ospreye,” counseled Celeste gently. “The welfare of the entire human race is not your responsibility. And you truthfully already do so much to provide for the possible betterment of the human condition through the auspices of this foundation.”

“Thank you, Celeste. The sentiment is greatly appreciated.”

Celeste smiled warmly upon her boss before exiting the office and returning to her own desk just outside the portal to Ospreye’s inner sanctum.

The Ospreye Technical Research Foundation had become publically attached with Research Project 72-OA in, as not coincidentally noted in the coding, 1972. That was the year Niles, still new to Thrush but already highly regarded, had suggested the philanthropic organization as a shield for various Thrush technical operations. And he had possessed the personal money necessary to bring his suggestion into reality.

However, as Celeste had noted, the official documents from Research Project 72-OA contained material from prior to that association. These journals went back to the very beginning of the project, to the initial concept that had caught Reikedahl’s technological imagination. Therefore, after picking up the first book, the opening few pages through which Niles leafed were all dated within the year 1961. That was the year after Delphina’s birth, and it was such event that had served as the impetus for the genetic scientist’s initial interest in a particular form of research.

The text was all written in Norwegian and Niles own fluency in that language was more conversational than perfected in the form of the written word. Thus he had to re-read each passage several times to be sure of his mental translation.

In the course of working on solutions to reduce or eliminate physical divergences from the norm resulting from the genetic condition oculocutaneous albinism, I have discovered some intriguing possibilities with regard to neural tendencies. I realized from the start that biochemical manipulations would likely aid in realigning physical makeup to a more standard set. And bioelectric pulses to achieve such permanent chemical changes always seemed a workable idea to pursue. What I did not think on were the realities of associated bio-magnetics. Yet now those realities present me with a hypothesis that goes far beyond the biological exploitations needed to diminish albino peculiarities.

The gist of the discovery rests on the fact that the five senses have polar regularities through which constant points the nervous system processes received data. While the irregularities provide for the individuality of a bio-magnetic profile, it is the regularities that shape the uniformity of particular sensory input.

This causes me to ponder: Since such regularities exist, could they not be expanded beyond current bodily boundaries? When combined with biochemical and bioelectric input, could not these bio-magnetic regularities make of the synapses of the brain navigable seas through which a vessel of sensation could sail from one being to another?

Such sensory pathways could provide a possible means to interconnect human beings along these neural conduits. Not to share the complication of thought, but rather the simplicity of sensory reaction to our physical environment.

Scribbled in the margins on the page was a much more personal observation.

Think on it. A world of humankind where any of we separate beings could process sensations beyond our own. Perhaps a means to allow the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Or for those with the inconvenience of a common cold to have normal experiences of smell and taste.

Perhaps indeed by such means the innate physical separateness of human beings could be mitigated as we all came to experience the wonder of joint sensory communion. And what might such communion allow with regard to the removal of inbred prejudices? How much easier might it be to minimize the importance of superficial differences if indeed we could physically perceive the world through another's sensory input?

Yes, Dr. Kjell Asbjørn Reikedahl, like most scientists starting out on a path of fresh discovery and stumbling upon a new mission in life, had been something of an idealist. In later years this idealism had turned into more a pragmatic drive geared entirely toward positive proof of his theories. No doubt his introduction to Thrush's goals, something that came out of the never-ending search for money to continue his research, had been at least partially responsible for this manifest change in personality. What Niles did know without the slightest doubt is that anyone would have been hard-pressed to describe as any sort of idealist the Reikedahl he had himself first met in 1972. That scientist had seemed totally focused on achievement for achievement's sake. Sort of like the mountaineer who, when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, replied: "Because it's there."

Yet this particular idealistically musing page was dog-eared, as if returned to often. And the ink on the margin-written comments was much smudged, as if a finger had traveled across it many times. Had old idealism remained hidden in the driven scientist Niles had come to know?

Niles leafed through the remainder of the first journal, pausing here and there to read a notation or two, but nothing further captured his attention. He picked up the next notebook and under an entry dated during the spring of 1966, he found something to again pique his interest.

Proposed specimen pool subject: U-s2#1

Base data: Male. Age 33. General physical and mental health excellent. No congenital conditions.

Reasons for proposal of subject: Intense appreciation of the pleasures of the senses suggests vigorous development and fine attunement of the polar regularities within bio-magnetic sensory pathways. Highly intelligent with a creatively resourceful turn of mind; thus overall brain synapses potentially as equally honed.

Idealism-generated self-discipline should provide for the exclusion of sensory input becoming dangerously unmanageable.

The supposedly blind-code for the candidate did not blind Osprey to that candidate's identity. The code itself was actually a Thrush convention signifying U.N.C.L.E. Section 2 Number 1, i.e., Napoleon Solo at that point in time.

What wasn't mentioned in the official notes was that, from Thrush's viewpoint, the proposed subject had possessed the additional qualifications of being CEA of U.N.C.L.E.'s North American division with the likely prospect of becoming chief of that division in time. (Assuming of course he survived long enough to be promoted into any such position.) The possibility of having in future some tool or contrivance to use against a highly placed enemy had been something of which Thrush had heartily approved.

What also wouldn't be found in these notes was how vehemently Reikedahl had pressed to have Solo accepted as the subject for those experiments. Thrush had forwarded about a dozen candidates, all with an eye toward providing the organization some underlying benefit. Reikedahl had personally pegged Solo from that group and been doggedly insistent on that selection. The scientist's persistence in being absolutely guaranteed his own way in this had been mildly surprising, but the members of the Thrush hierarchy hadn't pondered overmuch on it. Napoleon Solo as the specimen pool subject had suited their designs admirably.

Niles relinquished his perusal of this journal and started on another. Under the year 1971 was logged the first entry regarding what was referenced as the "transformation subject".

Transformation subject: T-Sf#0

Base data: Female. Age 11. General physical and mental health excellent. Severe congenital form of oculocutaneous albinism resulting in lack of pigmentation to skin, eyes and all bodily hair. However, no significant loss of vision due to condition.

Comments: Initial experimentation will concentrate on skin and eye pigmentation alterations through biochemical, bioelectric and bio-magnetic means using base components from the specimen pool in conjunction with natural uses of these means in the onset of puberty. Sensory synaptic amplification expected as auxiliary to these alterations, with that amplification background linking specifically to the specimen pool subject.

Heavily circled text of a less technical nature stood out on an otherwise clear portion of the page.

U-s2#1: Charming. Sociable. Empathetic. Uncharacteristically optimistic for one in his profession.

Why should these personality traits of Solo be of any importance in the realm of experimentation with regard to sensory amplification and interconnection? These were not quantifiable scientific factors. What purpose could they serve?

Niles swallowed hard as his mind grasped the truth. These traits would serve to make it a more pleasurable experience for the transformation subject to sensorially link with the specimen pool subject. That in turn ensuring the transformation subject didn't pull away from that link, but rather would allow herself to connect strongly with the specimen pool subject. And that transformation subject, T-Sf#0, i.e., Thrush Scientific Force No Numeric Designation, of course decoded to none other than Delphina Reikedahl.

Harrumphing a bit noisily, Niles rummaged through more pages in the leather-bound volume before him. His attention was captured by an entry dated early in the year 1972.

Having considered all angles of the proposed sensory connection between transformation subject and specimen pool subject, I have ascertained that training in strict mental discipline would be beneficial to the transformation subject. While connecting to another's sensory input through a shifting paradigm should not cloud the brain, the possibility of an actual blending of such input could render such impulses confusingly intense and thus over-stimulate the sensory synapses resulting in psychological, psychiatric or even physical debilitation.

Mental barriers could provide resistance to such blending when necessary. Thus will I commence training the transformation subject in disciplined cerebral control to circumvent any possible vulnerability.

Initial exercises in such techniques of mind management will focus on the achievement of concerted physical dexterity. Tricks of sleight-of-hand, as they are known, pinpoint concentration with regard not only to necessary bodily movements and associated sensory input, but as well in maintaining a general attitude that "fools" others so that those bodily movements go both sensorially and mentally unobserved.

Delphina had surely learned all those lessons well. She could school her face and body to leave unexpressed whatever she would. She could perform minute manual actions with completely undetected subtlety. And she could control her mental and emotional reactions seemingly at will. It was a facet of his søte prøveversjon that Niles had to admit disconcerted and fascinated him in equal measure.

Glancing down at the journal once more, Niles espied a very faded note written sideways along the inner binding between the two pages where the book was currently open; thus all but merging blindly into the crease.

For jeg vil gi deg en ny verden, ikke stjele den gamle fra deg.

Niles blinked. The Norwegian words reached across the years to him, like a hand attempting to twist his heart into a different shape.

With arrant Thrush single-mindedness, he resisted the claim of those words as he continued through the remaining notebooks, reading passages of uncomfortably detailed description involving the scores of medical procedures Delphina had undergone over the years.

Transformation was indeed an adequate summation of that to which she had been subjected in her father's quest for... For what exactly? An enlightened dream? Or a re-imagined nightmare?

In the end, after all his determined searching for surety that he – and Thrush – could in fact trust Delphina Reikedahl when she was in close contact with Napoleon Solo, all that stayed with Niles Ospreye were those long-faded and all-but-hidden words...

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For I would gift you with a new world, not steal from you the old.

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The main warehouse was neat as the proverbial pin, its cavernous interior efficiently divided into multiple storage areas separated by temporary metal walls that slid into place on wheeled tracks. Sealed crates of merchandise were piled high in most of the areas, while several of the smaller sectioned spaces were being used for more administrative purposes, evidenced by a few desks setup with phone and computer hook-ups. The place was obviously well maintained, the air fresh and the floors swept.

Nikolaevna Anuchin had already decided she did not like the persnickety little man in charge of the arms delivery side of this operation. Thus, after taking in the cleanly atmosphere of the workplace, she commented snidely to Gennadiy Yunusov, "I must compliment the housekeeping skills of your merry band of followers."

Gena turned to face the woman, a sour expression leaving no uncertainty as to his own opinion of her. She may have possessed myriad skills in the workings of numerous armaments, but he had always found such excessively confident, exaggeratedly independent, exceedingly outspoken and exhibitionist sensual women annoying in the extreme.

"I suppose in your line of work you are more accustomed to working out of hidden haylofts in grimy barns," he baited with a wolfish smile.

Nikolaevna leaned in close to the slight man, her height overtopping his by a couple of inches.

"I am accustomed to the best of everything," she insinuated, pointedly letting her eyes glance over at Ceallach MacGonigle where he stood not far from the pair engaged in this sarcasm-coated conversation.

Gena's wolfish grin morphed into a smug smirk. Of course he had taken immediate notice of the magnificently muscled Irishman employed by the Russian arms expert as her bodyguard. And just as immediately the woman had taken notice of his notice. And it irked her. It obviously irked her. And that got Gena to thinking that she had less intimacy with the physically tempting Ceallach than she would ever willingly admit. In fact, Gena was himself willing to bet there was no sexual intimacy whatsoever between the two, something which buoyed his own confidence in assuming he could and would corral the Irishman's "corporal charms" for himself.

"Which is why I'm sure you'll appreciate your association with my organization," put in David Islenleque, in an attempt to defuse the situation. Though he found completely amusing the idea of the Russian antithetical pair competing, like dogs over a particularly choice bone, for the private attentions of the blasé Irishman, he – and Thrush – had no time for such sexually instigated attempts at one-upmanship.

Nikolaevna set her ice-blue gaze coolly upon David.

“We shall see, Monsieur, we shall see,” she flatly countered his statement.

She and Jack had spent three nights and two days ensconced in the luxurious confines of a spacious home in what had remained an undefined location, though it definitely had been within the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut tri-state area. This morning they had been driven, housed the entire trip within the back interior of a closed van, to this warehouse complex. Security had been tight and, if it wasn't for the fact the disguised agents already knew the location of this warehouse from U.N.C.L.E intelligence, Natasha had to admit she would have been hard-pressed to pinpoint that location by simple extrapolation alone.

Among the ranks of Yunusov's purportedly non-English speaking henchmen that provided discreet security throughout the warehouse grounds, Natasha had already recognized both U.N.C.L.E. agents Kyle Walters and Alfred Van Niels. One of the laborers lugging crates into the specific areas being designated by a supervisor was unquestionably Pedro Arquas. The sole member of the infiltration team she hadn't yet spotted was Laura Beckstein.

Natasha knew Jack would have made all these same observations, most likely before she herself had.

“You employ many a tough-looking boyo,” remarked Ceallach casually to Gena. “I am assuming one would find them all armed?”

Gena smiled warmly upon the Irishman. “All but the day laborers,” he acknowledged. “We like to ensure our privacy.”

“Privacy has its merits,” agreed Ceallach readily, perhaps purposely letting a hint of innuendo inhabit the words.

“And speaking of privacy,” Nikolaevna huffed her way back into the conversation, “there is a place nearby for myself and my bodyguard to stay, da? A daily trip, such as that this morning from our current accommodations to this place, would prove most frustrating in very short order.”

“There are temporary living quarters in an adjacent building on the grounds,” supplied a woman who had made her way into the area just in time to catch the ending query. “They are generally used by whichever of our watchmen we assign for the duration of a merchandise transport scenario.”

Nikolaevna Anuchin nodded to this woman that, as Natasha Kuryakin, she recognized as Laura Beckstein.

“I want to speak to you, Mr. Yunusov,” Laura focused her attention squarely on the Russian Mafia boss, “about dismissing our watchmen for a week and instead installing your own security force. This isn't standard procedure and...”

“Mademoiselle,” interrupted Islenleque with smooth charm, “this is a government-related shipment. So you understand the need for absolute secrecy, n'est-ce pas?”

“Perhaps, but...” Laura re-commenced her protest, her attention now focused on Islenleque.

“I’m sure I can explain it all to your satisfaction, Mademoiselle...?” David paused with his voice held on an upward intonation, thus emphasizing its inquiring note.

“Drexler, Eloise Drexler,” obligingly supplied the woman who was Laura to that non-verbal query. “I’m the security administrator for the property management company that owns this warehouse.”

“Ah, a very important position, pour être sûr,” complimented the Frenchman, “and one which definitely guarantees you the right to full explanations. Please allow me the private pleasure of supplying those explanations to a woman as efficient in business details as she is eye-appealing in those of a more sensory nature.”

Islenleque smoothly took hold of Eloise’s arm and led her away, speaking to her in seemingly earnest and undeniably complimentary tones the entire time.

Ceallach smirked. “I’d wager that Frenchie has kissed the blarney stone more than once,” broached the Irishman with a bold wink.

“I wouldn’t take that bet,” countered Gena with a bold wink of his own.

“Nekotoryye pari nadyozhneye, chem drugiye<sup>14</sup>,” spoke out Nikolaevna with a dangerous glitter in her eye as she grasped Ceallach proprietarily by the arm.

“Indeed,” granted Gena with an equally dangerous return glitter in his own eye.

“I should begin at once my work in the assessment of the stored arms, Mr. Yunusov,” Nikolaevna re-directed the discussion with saccharin sweetness.

“Oh course, Ms. Anuchin,” responded Gena in a voice as equally and falsely honeyed. “I will show you the firing range where you may perform any necessary testing on the equipment. But you, and your bodyguard as well,” Gena suggested as his eyes returned to Ceallach, “must call me Gena.”

“I suppose it would do no harm to permit you to call me Nalya,” uttered Nikolaevna with a selectively odd turn of phrase.

Gena raised an inquisitive eyebrow in Ceallach’s direction.

“Ceallach,” replied the man in question. “Never Kelly if you want to keep your liver safe and sound.”

“I am rather fond of my liver, though I admit to viewing with more affection certain other portions of my anatomy,” joked Gena with a mischievous smile that caused Nikolaevna to roll her eyes most melodramatically.

“Conduct us to the range, Gena,” she pressed. “I want Ceallach to perform a safety sweep of the area before I start testing.”

“That really isn’t necessary,” Gena informed her.

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<sup>14</sup> Some bets are surer than others.

Nikolaevna shrugged.

“He will do it anyway,” she defied coolly. “It is what I pay him to do.”

“Is that all you have to pay him to do?” bantered back Gena suggestively.

“Mind your manners, Gena,” chastened Ceallach in a nonetheless amused tone.

“Do not take offense moj dorogoj Ceallach,” apologized Gena. “I just wanted to be sure.”

“Don’t get too sure, moj dorogoj Gena,” Nikolaevna made a point of warning the man.

“Don’t you get too sure either, moya dorogaya Nalya,” Ceallach made a subsequent point of cautioning the woman.

This left Nikolaevna to bite her lip in anger while Gena pulled his into another smirk as he guided the jealous arms expert and her hunky bodyguard to the firing range.

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Napoleon Solo was dressed and ready for the New Year’s Eve bash he would be attending this evening. Of course he would be obliged to leave the festivities early since the Summit Five conference call he had asked Jenny to arrange was set to begin at 2:00 a.m. New York time. Yet would he still be able to enjoy dinner and some dancing, as well as a midnight toast to the New Year, before needing to cut short a late night of celebration for an early morning of business.

Ostensibly double-checking with Jenny regarding all the security protocols for the Summit Five is what brought him back to HQ before picking up his date for the party. Yet somehow while there he decided upon a short visit to Delphina’s security holding cell.

From an iPod one of the guards in the monitoring station was playing rather loudly, the twangy notes of a country tune drifted down the cellblock as Napoleon walked through the secured area. A pleasant smile curved the mouth of the Thrush technological residual as he made his approach.

“You look quite dashing, Napoleon,” she complimented the man decked out in formal tuxedo who entered her cell.

“There was a time,” responded Napoleon with a ready smile of his own. “Now, however, I believe I have to be content with looking well-groomed.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she admonished him gently. “Prerequisite attire for a New Year’s Eve fete I take it?”

“You take it correctly,” he affirmed, amazed at how easy it seemed to talk to her about the innocuous minutiae of his life.

“What are you doing here then?” Delphina questioned with amusement. “Surely some lucky lady is anxiously awaiting your escort?”

Napoleon chuckled gamely.

“Lucky, I don’t know,” he bantered back. “And anxiously awaiting, I rather doubt. But then I am quite a good dancer if I do say so myself, and the lady in question does very much enjoy dancing.”

For a moment, no longer than the briefest of breaths, Delphina’s eyes gained a faraway look of longing. That longing flared and then was extinguished in a flash, but not before it had registered fully with Napoleon.

The music from down the hallway had shifted into the tones of the Johnny Rodriguez song “Dance with Me Just One More Time”.

Napoleon smiled.

“Well, it’s an old chestnut,” he joked in reference to the tune, “but then so am I. May this old chestnut have the honor of a dance, Ms. Reikedahl?” he furthered with an elegantly polished bow to Delphina.

Delphina’s face hardened.

“I can’t,” she brusquely reminded him. “It’s nothing more than noise to me. I can’t put the rhythm together.”

“It’s just a waltz beat, Delphina,” Napoleon reassured her soothingly, “slow and steady. Let me put it together for you.”

And with that he tapped his left ear meaningfully.

Delphina blinked, moving her hand to her own left ear in confusion. Then understanding filled her eyes as his meaning became clear to her. She removed her earcuff, dropping it softly on the bed before she moved into his arms for the dance. Deaf to world around her, her aural nerves connected with his and suddenly she was hearing the music through his ears. And she was dancing! No, **they** were dancing, hearing as one.

Within a sea of shared sound, they floated upon a wave of sensory communion, the feeling as strongly intoxicating as the taste of effervescent champagne and as sweetly calming as the tenderest of touches.

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One was never sure as an U.N.C.L.E. Enforcement Agent how exactly you would wind up spending New Year’s Eve. Still, sitting in the utilitarian living room of a warehouse complex’s watchman living quarters sharing out of cheap acrylic flutes an outrageously expensive bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne with a high-ranking member of Thrush New York was certainly not a situation in which Natasha Kuryakin had ever imagined finding herself. But then of course at this moment she was not U.N.C.L.E. Enforcement Agent Natasha Kuryakin, but rather independent arms expert Nikolaevna Anuchin, contract hire of Thrush.

“More champagne, Mlle. Anuchin?” questioned David Islenleque with smooth politeness.

*“Bastard Thrushie Frenchman is trying to get me drunk,”* Natasha mentally cautioned herself.

“You may as well call me Nalya,” Nikolaevna verbally corrected his address of her. “Since I am allowing that *izvorotlivomu russkomu podlyetsu*<sup>15</sup> to so refer to me, I see no reason I should not allow the same privilege to one with your gracious manners, Monsieur. And yes, I believe I will have more champagne,” she finally answered his actual question as she extended toward him her all-but-empty plastic glass.

“I consider it a privilege that you should allow me to call you by your nickname, Nalya,” he eased into this new familiarity between them as he poured more sparkling wine into her synthetic goblet. “And you must call me David.”

“David,” she acknowledged as she raised her now full glass to him before drinking readily from it.

“I also consider it a privilege that you acquiesced to sharing this impromptu New Year’s libation with me,” David remarked with his most charming smile.

“A toast to usher in the New Year should always be shared with a pleasant companion,” she returned his smile with equal charm.

“Je suis d'accord<sup>16</sup>,” he assured her. “However, I had thought your preference for such a companion would be your bodyguard.”

Nikolaevna shrugged expressively.

“He preferred to usher in his New Year in the company of a different companion,” she admitted ruefully.

“Then he is a fool, to forego the company of a lovely woman for *un tout autre genre de compagnie*,” David complimented her as he brought all his practiced suavity to the fore.

“I remain unconvinced as to his actual preference for ‘*un tout autre genre de compagnie*’,” she noted coolly, “and become more and more certain he merely wishes to remind me I am nothing to him but an employer. *Ceallach* is a very independent man.”

“How long has he been in your employ?” probed David.

“*Ah, now we get to the heart of the matter*,” Natasha’s private thought shot readily into her mind as she took what appeared to be a very healthy swallow of the wine.

“I hired him but a few weeks prior to my Venezuelan endeavor,” Nikolaevna answered straightforwardly. “But he came well recommended, and I’ve had no reason to quibble with his actions. His professional actions, that is,” she clarified bluntly.

“By whom did he come so well recommended?” pressed David with practiced nonchalance.

Nikolaevna permitted herself to eye him disapprovingly.

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<sup>15</sup> slick Russian lowlife

<sup>16</sup> I agree

“Come now, David,” she lightly chastised him. “We are neither of us innocent to the ways of the backstreet milieu in which we operate. I could well ask by whom was I well recommended to your organization, but we both know that would be a foolhardy and rather perilous question. Those who serve as guaranty in such matters have no names and no faces; yet are we sure enough in their whispered grapevine to seek out none.”

“There are times when it is more foolhardy and even more perilous not to seek out those names and those faces,” David counseled, “as possible insurance against all those whispered ‘recommendations’.”

Nikolaevna quirked one blond eyebrow at him.

“You are attempting to forward in a not very subtle way that I should be leery of Ceallach?” she cornered him.

Now it was David who shrugged.

“Few in our world are as they appear to be,” he responded less than straightforwardly.

“I know he has a somewhat impressive history of impulsive violence, if that is where you are heading with this, David,” returned Nikolaevna. “And that his intensely opinionated persuasions have often overridden all other aspects of his life.”

“His association with the more rabid underground sects of Sinn Fein is of no particular moment,” David concurred. “Though you may find, Nalya, that a man with strong emotional ties of one kind or another can seldom be counted on beyond the limits of those ties. Still, where I am heading is in another direction entirely.”

“And what direction would that be?” queried Nikolaevna with seemingly only mild interest.

David sipped intently from his wine before providing any reply.

“Have you ever considered that perhaps his whole purpose in accepting the post as your bodyguard was to bring certain doings to the attention of a law enforcement group?”

Nikolaevna snickered. “As if he would want any such group on his own tail.”

David shrugged again.

“He might be in a position of immunity, as it were,” the Frenchman further suggested.

“Immunity?” questioned Nikolaevna with another raised eyebrow.

“If he was part of the group in question,” David ventured further.

At this particular suggestion however, Nikolaevna only threw back her head and laughed openly and fully.

“Oh David, you play with me,” she accused him once she had gained control of her mirth. “You suspect my wayward and strong-willed Irish rebel of being a dutiful and obedient enforcer of law and order? I would more suspect the man of being a goat.”

“Ah, but in folklore, my dear Nalya, the devil is often portrayed with the horns and hoofs of a goat,” David reminded her sagely.

“And Ceallach is the devil?” she teased, having seemingly abandoned all seriousness in this conversation as she again drank deeply of her champagne. “Well, I do agree he sometimes presents about as much politesse as the devil.”

David’s grin, charming as it was, was nevertheless filled with dangerous teeth.

“Such loyalty is to be commended,” he noted simply.

Nikolaevna’s facial expression became blank and distant.

“My father was, by the accounts of all who knew him, an extraordinary man,” she veered the exchange off in what might be characterized on the face of it as an unrelated course. “When the Soviet Union was pulled to pieces by the forces of politics and necessity, he remained what most would reckon as commendably loyal to those government politicians he was sure could fit the pieces back together again. It garnered him nothing but a dishonorable dismissal from his military post and years of hopeless dreaming from the depths of poverty. Thus myself, I do not believe in loyalty, to anyone or to anything,” she enunciated her own position clearly.

“Then it seems when the time comes that I fully make my case against Monsieur MacGonigle,” David finalized smoothly, “he will not be assured of your personal intervention in his behalf.”

“I owe him nothing but the money I pay him for his services,” Nikolaevna put the matter bluntly.

“A most sensible way to look at things,” David commended.

“I am always a most sensible woman,” confirmed Nikolaevna with a devastating smile. “And, since I am so, I will remind you that I owe you nothing other than the services I myself monetarily contracted with your employer to provide your organization.”

David smiled that charming and dangerously-toothed smile again.

“I do believe we understand each other very well, Nalya,” he declared as he raised his plastic glass to her in mock salute.

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Natasha heard Jack noisily enter the watchman’s quarters they were sharing. Recognizing the uncharacteristic racket as a signal her partner had something he wished to communicate to her, she got up out of bed and made her way into the living room, pointedly clicking on the overhead light. They were both keenly aware they were under constant surveillance and thus knew any mission conversation between them had to be concealed by whatever means the moment provided. Those means at this moment apparently consisted of Jack as Ceallach pretending to be very, very drunk.

“Well, if it isn’t the Czarina herself,” slurred out Ceallach upon seeing her. “Waiting up with green-eyed tension, my Ruskie muirín<sup>17</sup>?”

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<sup>17</sup> darling

“Most certainly not,” she, as Nikolaevna, corrected him sternly. “Your drunken ruckus stirred me out of a sound sleep.”

“I don’t believe you, mo beach banríon éilitheach<sup>18</sup>,” he challenged as he got up very close to her, speaking right into her face. “Jealousy reeks like a cheap perfume from all your pores.”

“Still a more subtle fragrance than the eau de whiskey that reeks from yours,” bantered back Nikolaevna as she pointedly waved one hand before her face to clear away the odor of Ceallach’s alcohol-soaked breath and body.

“A scent you would nonetheless very much like me to smear into yours by every intimate method possible,” he countered as he pinned her against a nearby wall, brazenly nuzzling her neck and thus placing his lips close to one of her ears.

“Something more going on with this shipment,” Jack whispered clandestinely into Natasha’s right ear. “Yunusov complained about being saddled with an unwanted responsibility this time around.”

“Islenleque’s pegged you,” Natasha took advantage of their relative positions to quickly whisper back into Jack’s own right ear before Nikolaevna firmly pushed at Ceallach’s shoulders with the heels of her hands, thus forcibly moving his swaying body away from her own.

“Approach me again when you’re sober and less inclined toward crudity, Ceallach,” she drily admonished her bodyguard with truly regal aplomb. “Until you can do that, I’ll go to my bed without your intoxicating company.”

And with that, Nikolaevna stormed off to the first of the three bedrooms, slamming the door solidly behind her. Since it meant finding the dexterity to turn a doorknob and push open a shut barrier, Ceallach abandoned any attempt to propel his unsteady body either after her into that first bedroom or into another of the bedrooms. Instead he wove his way on unsteady legs toward the sofa and collapsed there in a seemingly inebriated sleep.

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[\*...continued in Act IV of Part 2...\*](#)



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<sup>18</sup> my demanding queen bee