



What a chimera then is man! What a novelty!
What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy!

Blaise Pascal

CHIMERA

BY [LAH](#)

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Napoleon Solo watched absently as his partner Illya Kuryakin rubbed his right thumb against the inner tips of the other fingers of that hand. It was a habit Solo had noticed the Russian, who had just been named by Mr. Waverly as Number 2 in Section II and his own permanent field partner, perform on more than one occasion.

“You nervous or something?” asked Napoleon of the other man.

Kuryakin set his blue gaze decisively upon the countenance of the Number 1 in Section II.

"I'm bored," admitted Illya succinctly. "We've been left here chilling our toes for over two hours now."

Solo chuckled softly. "That's cooling our heels, oh man of action."

"Forced into inaction at the moment," noted Illya with a frustrated sigh.

Napoleon couldn't blame his partner for that frustration. He was feeling a good deal of it himself, though he hid it better. But truthfully neither of them was any too pleased with this assignment. Yet Mr. Waverly had said "Go and do" and thus here they were, waiting upon a "limited demonstration" by a supposedly defecting Thrush scientist of the latest threat to humanity. The man had come to U.N.C.L.E. because he thought this current menace too dangerous for even Thrush to play at controlling. However, he wouldn't name that menace, just insisted the North American Continental Chief send a team of top agents to assess it firsthand.

Now Alexander Waverly was far from the gullible type, so both Solo and Kuryakin believed whatever they were about to witness had to encompass quite an element of danger. Still, danger was nothing new to either of them in their line of work. So they had come into this private lab of the scientist-in-question suitably wary and ready for anything. Yet waiting so long for anything to happen had somewhat taken the edge off their trained vigilance. Definitely not a good turn in events.

"Gentlemen," came a voice over a loudspeaker system, causing both U.N.C.L.E. agents to lean forward in their chairs, each hovering a hand over the holstered weapon hidden under his suit jacket. "I am sorry to have kept you at bay for such a time, but insuring that this display would remain contained within the confines of this room was a priority that took me longer to guarantee than expected."

"And U.N.C.L.E. does appreciate that you made that a priority, Doctor, all things considered," answered Napoleon diplomatically.

"I take it you will not be joining us for this 'contained display'?" questioned Illya, with perhaps more than a bit of suspicion in his vocal tone.

"You will not be physically harmed, gentlemen," the scientist's words assured them over the loudspeaker. "I pledge that on my own life. But I'm afraid my presence during the demonstration might prove something of a distraction."

"A distraction?" Napoleon asked with the quirk of an eyebrow.

"A distraction to whom?" Illya furthered his partner's query.

"To the threat, the peril, the... whatever you want to call it," responded the scientist. "To the chimera."

Napoleon and Illya passed a look between themselves.

"Thrush has created some kind of multi-characteristic beast?" Illya demanded with obvious distaste.

“Some things simply must be experienced rather than explained,” forwarded the scientist. “Therefore, I will leave you to that experience.”

With that the loudspeaker crackled into silence as a wall at the back of the lab opened to reveal a glass enclosure within which stood a young girl of perhaps 12 or 13 years of age. She was slight and thin with long pale-brown hair and enormous golden-hued eyes. But there was absolutely nothing horrific about her. In fact she appeared rather forlorn and sad as she pressed herself against the glass, gazing at them intently.

“Jesus,” muttered Napoleon under his breath.

“It’s a child,” huffed out Illya unhappily.

“Well, Thrush has never been known to be exactly circumspect about who they choose to use in their experiments.”

Illya cocked his head at the girl as she pressed herself even closer against the glass, looking for all the world as if she wanted nothing more than to make physical contact with the two men beyond the confines of her invisible cage. Her skinny limbs struck him as all bony elbows and knobby knees. “She looks hungry,” he said glumly. Childhood hunger was something he knew intimately from personal experience.

Napoleon also tilted his head at the young girl, focusing his own scrutiny on her soulful eyes. “She looks lonely,” he offered his own assessment. Childhood loneliness was something he knew intimately from personal experience.

“Hello, honey,” Napoleon made a gentle attempt to communicate with the girl.

Now the girl cocked her head at him and made shapes with her mouth seemingly imitating his words. But all that came out was a kind of cheeping sound, like the baleful chirps of a baby bird.

“Prokl'atyj!¹” came Illya’s much disgruntled exclamation.

Solo knew exactly how the other man felt. That Thrush would perform their abominable research on a child in this way... It made him sick to his stomach.

The girl raised one hand and pressed its palm flat against the glass. Instinctively Napoleon pressed the palm of one of his own hands to the glass to mirror hers...

Where was he? He couldn’t remember and he wasn’t sure how he had even gotten wherever he was. He did know his head was throbbing.

“Bad headache, Napoleon?” questioned a familiar soft female voice with real concern.

Napoleon turned his head on the pillow to face Clara lying in bed beside him. “Excruciating,” he admitted.

Pleasantly cool hands massaged his brow. “You let them crack you on the head too often.”

¹ Damn!

Napoleon laughed a bit uncomfortably. *“Well, it isn’t by choice you know.”*

“Yes, it is by choice, Napoleon. You decided on this career and thus on all that goes with it.”

“That’s kind of an unfair statement, Clara. I chose U.N.C.L.E.: yes. But I chose it because I believe in what it stands for. It makes me realize I can make a difference for the better in this world, even if that does entail enduring occasional hard knocks on the head, amongst other painful experiences.”

“But I didn’t choose that lifestyle, Napoleon, and I don’t want to be dragged into it.”

“You’re not—”

“I am, Napoleon,” interrupted Clara sternly. “Every day I have to wait and worry whether I’ll ever see you again. I can’t plan anything special for us, not even a simple dinner, with any guarantee you will actually be there to share it. And if you do manage to show up, you likely will be bruised and battered, giving me yet more cause for anxiety. That’s not even mentioning all the times I’m left with nothing but prayer to hold my heart together as I wonder whether you’ll live through some serious injury or other.”

“I’m sorry, Clara,” apologized Napoleon sincerely. “I understand it’s difficult for you, but—”

“No, you don’t understand, Napoleon. You really haven’t a clue. You are too devoted to your deeds of daring derring-do, too involved with saving the world to really be involved with me and my singular life.”

Napoleon eyed with some alarm the woman he loved more than he had ever expected to love anyone in his always secretly isolated existence. “What exactly are you saying, Clara?”

“I’m saying I can’t do this anymore, Napoleon. I’m saying it has to be me or U.N.C.L.E. You can’t have us both.”

“Clara, don’t make me choose,” he pleaded with heartbreak clearly evident in his voice.

“It seems you’ve already chosen,” Clara forestalled any further beseeching of his case. “Have a good life, Napoleon,” she finalized as she got up out of their shared bed for the last time. “And I do genuinely mean that, though I doubt you currently realize how lonely that life will likely turn out to be.” ...

“Hello, honey,” Napoleon made a gentle attempt to communicate with the girl.

Now the girl cocked her head at his partner and made shapes with her mouth seemingly imitating Solo’s words. But all that came out was a kind of cheeping sound, like the baleful chirps of a baby bird.

“Prokl’atyj!” came Illya’s much disgruntled exclamation.

Illya Kuryakin was angry; so angry he wanted to punch through the glass imprisoning the pale little girl who looked so hungry, starving in every way humanly possible.

He mashed his closed fist against that glass and the girl pressed her own forehead to where his fist pushed against her closed world. ...

Where was he? He couldn't remember and he wasn't sure how he had even gotten wherever he was. He did know his head was throbbing.

The ear-splitting barking of the dog pack was all but splitting his head. But that pain was still secondary to his gnawing hunger.

Backing into a small crevice in a nearby wall, he cowered away from the angry mongrels. They had stolen his dinner, what little he had managed to scavenge. A turnip, just a wild turnip. Small and hard, but food nonetheless.

He had visualized in his mind's eye roasting it over an open fire, or perhaps boiling it to provide a fine soup beyond the cooked flesh of the vegetable. It had been his unexpected prize, finding it in an abandoned field where no other form of food crop yet evidenced itself.

And then the dog pack had appeared from nowhere, sniffing for his prize, knocking him down. It had rolled from his pocket, away from his reach and into the snapping jaws of one of the canines. Now the various animals of the pack were fighting amongst themselves for final possession of that prize. While he had been left to crawl into the crevice to protect his life, left to watch the chance assuagement to his overpowering hunger being devoured by another starving species.

Likely they would leave the leafy tops. He could use the turnip greens to make broth. It wouldn't be much, but if he could salvage even so much, he wouldn't have to sleep another night with nothing in his belly. He didn't have any salt or pepper or other seasonings to flavor it, but that didn't matter. Thin turnip-green broth would be better than nothing.

He stayed crouched on his haunches, ready to spring; ready to grab the turnip leaves and run like all of the hated German Army of the Third Reich was after him. He wouldn't be deterred by those fierce canine teeth or those sharp-nailed paws. He was too hungry...

There was an arc of electricity that lit the interior of the lab like the sparkling shower blaze of a roman candle. Lightning? Could lightning strike like that in a room with no windows?

No matter, no more time to ponder, as the lights went out in both the lab and the minds of both U.N.C.L.E. agents.

"When we came to, sir," explained Napoleon Solo to Alexander Waverly, "the room was just as empty as it had been prior to that lightning strike."

"There never was any kind of demonstration, sir," elaborated Illya Kuryakin, "unless the lightning arc was supposed to be that. Perhaps the mechanism malfunctioned when Dr. Rimheac attempted to begin the trial?"

"In all likelihood, Mr. Kuryakin, in all likelihood," agreed Mr. Waverly between puffs on his favorite briar pipe. "In any case, the body of the doctor himself was discovered floating under a pier in the Hudson River a few hours ago, so we shan't be getting any further information from him on this supposed project."

“Thrush’s handiwork?” Napoleon inquired.

“Apparently, Mr. Solo, but not for his seeming defection to our side. Our sources have informed me that Thrush was very unhappy with Dr. Rimheac’s work, whatever it was, and considered it a waste of resources.”

Now it was Illya who posed the question. “So he came to us because he foresaw Thrush getting rid of him?”

“Perhaps, Mr. Kuryakin, but I do pride myself on being a somewhat astute reader of character, and the man did not strike me as being deceitful in his earnest wish to have us neutralize the threat he believed his project posed to the world at large.”

“Self-delusion perhaps?” suggested Napoleon.

Mr. Waverly nodded. “Again perhaps.”

“Did the search of the lab reveal any possible clues?” Illya pressed.

Waverly shook his head. “There was a private journal, but it didn’t seem to be anything more than strictly personal entries. The last one was some kind of anecdote regarding how to hold something as insubstantial as air.”

Both Napoleon and Illya looked questioningly at each other. It all seemed rather confusing to them.

Two weeks later

“Hey Illya, you want to take in that magic show that is taping at the Ed Sullivan Theatre this evening? An acquaintance gave me a couple of tickets.”

“Magic show? Surely you jest?”

“Could be fun. Watching objects disappear, seeing handkerchiefs turn into doves, rabbits hopping out of top hats.”

“Nothing but illusions, Napoleon, as insubstantial as air.”

Strange how out-of-nowhere his last intimate encounter with Clara came into Napoleon’s mind. He always pushed the memory of that emotionally painful parting into the very back of his consciousness. Suddenly he felt very lonely.

Strange how out-of-nowhere an event in his childhood involving a lost turnip supper and a pack of prowling dogs came into Illya’s mind. He always purposely pushed that kind of upsettingly harsh memory into the very back of his consciousness. Suddenly he felt very hungry.

“Come on, Illya,” wheedled Napoleon. Somehow he desperately wanted the comfort of his friend’s company tonight. “We deserve a night of delightfully nonsensical entertainment.”

Illya nodded. “I’ll go if you agree to buy dinner first.” Somehow he really needed the comfort of a fine meal tonight.

Napoleon nodded his agreement to the plan and both men subsequently broke out in broad grins at the prospect of a night of good companionship and good food.

—THE END—

