

Napoleon: Do you know where you are?
Mara: Nowhere.
Napoleon: You know who I am?
Mara: Yes.
Napoleon: You remember anything else?
Mara: No.
Napoleon: Then you're somewhere.

THE NOWHERE AFFAIR

COMING BACK FROM SOMEWHERE

BY [LAH](#)

Spring 1966...

Sociologists say our “moral compass” is set early on in life, and that – like any compass – it will always point true north. True north in this case being where it is set for us, either intentionally or unintentionally, in childhood. I don’t know if I believe that to be absolute truth, but I do know many educated people who have studied these things for decades account it so. And who am I to argue?

Still, the optimist in me wanted from the beginning to believe that Mara’s case was different. Wanted to believe that her transformation into someone who would see the world much as I did would be fully functional. That nothing Thrush had impressed upon her mind in childhood would stay as part of her innermost being. More fool I. Or rather a romantic fool. You see, I wanted Capsule B to somehow provide magic; but in the end it was just a drug.

Let me clarify immediately that Mara did not turn into some sort of Thrush nightingale, singing a sweet siren song to lull me into complacency as she attempted to turn the tide of my being toward a different moral compass. That is not what happened. That is not who she was. She honestly loved me. And I honestly loved her. We both wanted desperately for our separate lives to become one. We both wanted desperately to be free of loneliness at last. The rub was that somehow we never could make our moral compasses point to the same north.

“Do they really need to debrief me, Napoleon?” Mara asked, eyes round with worry. “I don’t remember much. Nothing specific about what happened at all.”

“It’s just routine, Mara,” I tried to reassure her. “Don’t be nervous.”

It was two days after she had taken that large dosage of Capsule B. We were in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York City. She couldn’t remember what U.N.C.L.E. was. She couldn’t even remember what Thrush was. She knew me and trusted me, so she accepted that U.N.C.L.E. was the “good guys”. But she was scared down to her toenails to be in this “chrome and gunmetal madhouse”.

I earnestly wished I had been able to talk Mr. Waverly out of this medically-enhanced debriefing, but he had been adamant. U.N.C.L.E. had to be sure about her memories... or rather the lack

of them. The organization could not afford to have a still-ensconced Thrush operative slyly attaching herself to its North American Chief Enforcement Agent, and Mr. Waverly was well aware this CEA had no intention of leaving the assumedly memory-disoriented Mara alone in her hopefully new life.

“Will you stay with me?” she inquired anxiously.

“I’m afraid not, sweetheart,” I had to tell her outright. “The doctors don’t believe that’s wise. They think you need to be clear of my influence to answer their questions to the best of your ability.”

“I’m scared, Napoleon!”

Of course she was. I remembered all too clearly the effects of Capsule B: the uncertainty, the separation from self, the sense of being completely lost and utterly alone.

“I know,” I comforted her as best I could, “but no one here is out to hurt you, Mara. Please believe me.”

“If, as you say, I was one of the enemy before, why wouldn’t they want to hurt me?”

I sighed. “Just trust me, okay?” was all I could offer by way of guarantee.

She came into my ready embrace and buried her head against my shoulder. “Be here when I get back? Please?”

“Of course,” I pledged as I wrapped my arms more protectively about her, for this was a guarantee I could wholeheartedly offer.

The pneumatic door to my office opened at that moment and Illya entered its inner precincts.

“The doctors are ready for you, Miss Bergand,” my partner stated succinctly.

With a wary look from Illya to me and then back to Illya again, Mara finally nodded shortly and walked uneasily toward my partner. He waved her toward the two Section V men standing just beyond the still open pneumatic door and she passed out into the hall and into the care of the security people.

“That was rather unnecessarily cavalier, don’t you think?” I reproached Illya a bit indignantly as he came further into the precincts of my office, thus allowing the automatic door to slide shut behind him and leaving us in privacy.

Illya shrugged. “I didn’t say or do anything unkind.”

“You just didn’t say or do anything kind,” I shot back. Illya’s attitude toward Mara had been eating at me for the past two days.

“She’s Thrush and I do not owe her any kindness.”

“She **was** Thrush, and what about what you owe me?”

Illya looked me square in the eye as he demanded, “When did you become so naïve, Napoleon?”

I blinked, confused by his comment and atypically unable to hide it.

“If you are insinuating that she is pretending—”

“No, Napoleon,” said Illya in what I recognized as obvious frustration, frustration it would seem with me. “I am not in any way insinuating that she is faking amnesia, or that her feelings for you are not – in some manner at least – genuine.”

“Then why do you think I am being naïve?” I demanded in my turn.

He sighed, obviously discontent with having to explain this to me. “Why would Mr. Waverly offer Capsule B to her without first ascertaining she had no worthwhile intelligence to provide U.N.C.L.E. regarding Thrush?”

“She was only a medium-level scientist, Illya.”

“Who had complete knowledge of Dr. Tertunian’s computer program and truth drug, since she had worked with him as his second.”

“But we have Tertunian himself. Why seek from Mara information the inventor could and did give us willingly?”

“Think, Napoleon!” Illya all but shouted at me. “Her testimony would provide corroboration. Leave nothing in doubt. But Mr. Waverly forewent that insurance. Don’t you understand why?”

“I guess I don’t,” I admitted, letting the words come out just one side of my mouth.

“You don’t?” pressed Illya. “Or you just don’t want to acknowledge it?”

“Illya...” I began in warning. For my temper was rising, though I was making a noble effort to keep it in check.

“Come on, Napoleon! The Old Man was determined he absolutely was not going to lose you to some Thrush regurgitated version of apple pie and a house with a white picket fence. So he took a calculated risk. You know that’s the truth.”

“And what if it is?” I found myself now shouting at Illya, though shouting in anger is something I rarely do and I couldn’t remember the last time – if ever – I had done that at my partner. “Am I not entitled to a chance for something more than weekend trysts and one-night stands?”

Illya’s face softened. Uncharacteristically for my touch-reluctant partner, he placed an empathetic hand on my shoulder.

“You are entitled, my friend,” he agreed, “but this is not that chance.”

He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze before exiting through the pneumatic door, leaving me standing alone to ponder all he had said.

I don't know exactly what happened during Mara's medically-enhanced debriefing. Surely though Mr. Waverly was satisfied that she remembered nothing Thrush-related, and thus considered it "safe enough" for me to be around her. In truth I doubt he was much pleased with the idea of me continuing any sort of romantic involvement with Mara, but at least he didn't authoritatively bid me to stay away from her. I had known from the beginning this compromise on his part was the best for which I could hope.

Seated in the Old Man's office with Illya, I listened as Mr. Waverly went over the next steps in Mara's new life.

"U.N.C.L.E. has arranged for an apartment for her and will pay the necessary upkeep for her living in that establishment until she is at a point where she can manage financially on her own. And don't even suggest that she stay at your apartment in that meanwhile, Mr. Solo," Mr. Waverly admonished me sternly. "That is not an option.

"However, the apartment we have procured for Miss Bergand's use is in the same building as your own. That is a concession I am making in consideration of her current emotional insecurity due to the extent of her amnesia, as well as the possibility that Thrush might send an execution squad after her. It is not a concession I am entirely happy with making as I believe she would benefit most from some independence of her association with you, Mr. Solo. Still, I have made this concession because it seems the kindest thing to do at present, and I have no wish to be unkind to the young woman."

I bit my lower lip to remain silent. Independence of her association with me? Damn, the woman was in love with me. She had abandoned Thrush for that love. She had taken Capsule B in the hopes of somehow being able to retain that love. She had done these things for me. Didn't that depth of sacrifice of self count for anything in the Old Man's estimation? I know it definitely counted for much in mine.

"I take it then, sir, that some standard security measures are to be installed in Miss Bergand's flat?" questioned Illya in a level tone of voice.

Mr. Waverly nodded. "Mid-level Section II security is what seems warranted in this instance. I want you to see to it, Mr. Kuryakin, that Section V expedites the timeframe of the installation procedures of same. And you are to perform the final checks on that installation yourself."

Now it was Illya who nodded.

"Mid-level Section II security," came my unspoken thought. *"She would definitely be safer in my apartment with its highest level Section II security devices."*

"She seems to have retained her scientific acumen, so U.N.C.L.E. will orchestrate a teaching position for Miss Bergand at one of the local institutions of higher learning. After having constructed suitable educational credentials for her of course," Mr. Waverly continued as he glanced at a confidential report on Mara's debriefing that lay open on his desk.

That was a report I dearly wished to read, but which I knew instinctively would be security-coded as inaccessible to me.

"She is quite spectacularly versed in neuroscience and control systems theory," the Old Man noted. "Thus this should prove an easy enough forgery for Section IV to get done quickly. Of

course no part of her qualifications will specifically reference the broader field of cybernetics that so interests Thrush.”

Mara would probably do well as a teacher, and at least she would be able to cultivate the scientific aptitude that was about all left to her with regard to self after the introduction of the chemical in Capsule B to her brain makeup. I was glad she would at least be allowed that and not be forced to ignore the sciences altogether in favor of some “safer” occupation from U.N.C.L.E.’s standpoint.

“That’s all for the present, gentlemen. You are dismissed, but I will expect your individual reports on this affair on my desk no later than tomorrow morning. And Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly felt it necessary to remind me, “you are to check in with Medical for a final determination as to your physical and mental fitness for return to full field duty.”

“Yes sir,” I answered mechanically, my mouth suddenly dry. Though I never looked forward to the mandatory psychiatric/psychological evaluations required after any bout in Thrush captivity, I was particularly dreading them this time around. The mind doctors would of course want to know about everything I had experienced – mentally and emotionally – while under the influence of Capsule B, and honestly I didn’t want to rehash any of that. In truth I really wanted to forget it all ...except for what I felt for Mara.

“Don’t look so downhearted,” Illya tried to buoy my spirits once we had escaped the Old Man’s eyes out in the corridor. “The shrinks won’t find your mental prowess wanting, even if they sometimes do think you rather devil-may-care with regard to taking risks.”

“What would you know about it?” I snapped at him unnecessarily, but I was very much on edge. “You’ve never had them mess with your brain the way they did with mine via Capsule B.”

“It was your choice to take it,” Illya forwarded.

“Now who is being naïve?” I countered him. “I was told in no uncertain terms by Mr. Waverly himself that I was to take Capsule B if Thrush managed to get their hands on me. There was no choice involved in the decision.”

I think that frank assertion shocked Illya, though I can’t be certain.

“It is what kept you alive, Napoleon,” he responded in a very quiet voice.

“It kept me scared and uncertain and half-insane with self-doubt,” I responded harshly.

“And Mara was the only anchor you had,” he said still in that very quiet voice, only now it was laced with a new undercurrent of understanding.

“And now I’m the only anchor she has,” I voiced the reality of the situation. “And I’ll be damned if I’ll abandon her because the Old Man thinks she would do better ‘independent of an association’ with me. He doesn’t know what it’s like: floundering around with only partial memories and half a personality after taking Capsule B. He wants to be clinical and professional and provide for the basics of physical survival with his oh-so-ready accommodations for shelter and food and clothing and what-have-you. But human beings in that situation need more than that. They need some inner security, some personal warmth, some decent human contact...”

“Are you forgetting that Mara provided you those things, at least initially, only because she herself was told in no uncertain terms to do so by Thrush?” broke in Illya.

“But it wound up going beyond that for her,” I reminded him.

Illya sighed. “I do realize that, Napoleon, but I still think you are negating pieces of reality in this scenario. She was Thrush; she was doing what Thrush commanded. I admit complex emotions overwhelmed simple orders in the long-run. Still, that doesn’t make the first two pieces of the situation illusory or unimportant.”

“It does to me.”

Illya shook his head. “You are too much the romantic, my friend. It has gotten you into trouble before and I fear this time it will again.”

I shrugged. “I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”

Illya’s lips curved into a thin ghost of a smile at those words, as if my declaration frankly amused him.

“I remember Terbuf,” he stated directly to the point. “How you were used and then blithely tossed aside for a second time by a woman you obviously still loved. The pain in your heart I could see clearly reflected on your face. So let me warn you about something, Napoleon: If this pretty little ex-Thrushbird threatens in any way to do the same, she will answer to me. And, unlike Mr. Waverly, I am not the accommodating sort.”

With that my partner walked away, leaving me with my jaw dropped halfway to the floor.

Despite my misgivings, as it turned out Mara was thrilled with the apartment U.N.C.L.E. provided her in my building. It was a one-bedroom unit with a decent-sized living room and a small eat-in kitchen. Mara was pleased to find it had a bath and a half: one full-sized off the bedroom and a two-piece job off the living room for guests. Why this so much appealed to her I don’t know, but she seemed to consider it a great luxury. There was no balcony or terrace as there was in my larger two bedroom, two full-sized bath unit on a much higher floor, but the lack of outdoor space seemed of no importance to her.

“It’s lovely, Napoleon!” she all but cooed as she toured the not-large space for at least the half-dozen time. “And it’s really mine?”

“All yours,” I assured her.

She walked to the sofa, picked up one of the throw pillows and hugged it tight against her abdomen as she happily surveyed her domain. “All mine!” she enthused contentedly.

“Of course you might want to change out some of the furnishings eventually,” I remarked as I took note of the outlandish and definitely bold upholstery on one of the end chairs. U.N.C.L.E. likely had got most of the pieces at a good price from a these-haven’t-sold-because-they’re-too-crazy-for-most-folks’-taste warehouse sale.

“Oh no,” Mara stated decisively. “It’s perfect just as it is!”

I chuckled. Couldn't help myself. She was just so enthusiastic about it all.

"Bet your answer is different after living with this stuff for six months," I teased.

Her brow furrowed. "Is it not to my taste, Napoleon?" she questioned, suddenly very serious. "I mean what my taste was?"

I felt a chill crawl down my spine at her question. How could I answer that? Honestly I had no clue what her taste had once been. She had been playing a role for my benefit in the Thrush satrapy. Whether how she dressed for me was how she normally dressed for herself I really had no idea.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that, Mara," I settled on the most diplomatic response.

"I understand," she acknowledged with a sigh. And I realized she thought I couldn't answer because I had been told not to influence her post-Capsule-B self. I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth was I couldn't answer because I honestly didn't know.

"Mara," I ventured as I moved nearer to her and placed an arm about her waist, "don't dwell on what is gone from the past. It isn't important."

Her large blue eyes gazed up into my face.

"I think I know that," she acquiesced. "I honestly think I do. It's just..."

I grasped the pillow she yet held against her middle and tossed it onto the sofa so that I could bring both my arms around her and hold her close.

"I know it's difficult. Believe me I do," I tried to soothe her. "But I'm here for you, Mara, and I'm not going away."

She relaxed in my arms, resting her body completely against mine.

"Then you'll stay the night and help me break in that new bed?" she teasingly invited after a few moments of mutual and contented quiet between us.

"Even though it is sporting that awful passion purple bedspread," I teased back.

"There's something to be said for purple passion," she noted gamely just before she drew my head down to hers and our lips connected in a soul-searing kiss.

It's a funny thing. Back in that Thrush satrapy in the Nevada desert whenever I had kissed Mara, my brain fogged by Capsule B, I felt as if I was losing myself utterly in her kiss. And that was truly wonderful because it made me feel momentarily safe. Now I could sense Mara losing herself utterly in my kiss, and I hoped I was making her somehow feel just as safe in the moment. I owed that to her.

Her lips broke slowly from mine. Her eyes were shining with an almost incandescent light. Yes, I suppose I could congratulate myself that I had made and did make her feel safe.

"I think," she regarded me in a playfully assessing manner, "I shall very much like seeing you spread out before me on that passion purple bedspread like a veritable buffet of delights. Yet

incongruously,” she switched conversational gears, “that mental image only serves to remind me at this precise moment that I’m starving.”

I gave her a mischievous wink. “And here I thought I was feast enough for all the senses. All right then: For what type of cuisine are you hankering, dear lady? New York has a plethora of tastes ready to thrill your palate.”

“My palate isn’t particular, but my mood is. I would prefer to stay here away from crowds with you alone for company.”

“I imagine I can order in whatever you desire.”

“Whatever I desire?” she playfully batted her eyelashes at me.

“I should think,” I pledged as I found myself instinctively wetting my lips.

“I’ve been told you have quite the reputation, Mr. Solo. Is that true?”

“I am a lover to my bones.”

She laughed again. “I meant quite a reputation as a more than fair cook.”

“Now who would have told you something like that?”

“I like to keep my sources secret.”

“So I suppose my secret is uncovered,” I relented with an exaggerated sigh.

“Oh, I intend to uncover all your secrets, Mr. Solo,” she intimated with a sly smile as she pushed her body breath-close against mine once more.

I knew she was just flirting. I knew the remark had been uttered tongue-in-cheek. Still, it rattled me. And I am not a man easily rattled. Somehow that comment served to remind me she had once been Thrush, and had been very recently employed as a weapon against me. Yet I hid my disquiet with all my usual aplomb; thus I am absolutely certain she had no inkling of it.

I gently freed myself from her embrace as I suggested, “Let’s see with what edibles U.N.C.L.E. has stocked your larder.” At that precise moment, though I would never have admitted it to anyone – truthfully not even to myself, I wanted nothing more than to put a bit of physical distance between us. The memory of Thrush’s plan to use her as bait to lure my own Capsule-B-suppressed memories back out into the open was still too vivid in my mind.

I rummaged through her cupboards, small pantry and refrigerator and found U.N.C.L.E. had done a rather good job of providing her with most foodstuff essentials, as well as some decent cold cuts and a variety of farm-fresh produce. I settled on making a pair of Western omelets for dinner with a tossed green salad on the side.

Mara watched with undisguised interest as I went about the process of cooking the egg dish. “They say the sign of a true cook is the ability to make a good omelet,” she forwarded with another playful smile.

“Guess you’ll soon be able to judge the true nature of my culinary talents for yourself then,” I kept the conversation light. My mind was still more ill-at-ease than I really thought warranted by her previous casual assertion. Yet it continued to haunt me.

We ate our meal at her tiny two-seater dinette, but had to settle for lemonade as a beverage since U.N.C.L.E. had of course not considered wine of any sort as a necessary provision. The talk was good-naturedly coy, proving equally as enjoyable as the meal as I purposely buried my nagging and wholly irrational sense of uneasiness for the duration.

Afterwards events heated up, as they are wont to do between a man and a woman physically and emotionally attracted to one another, and it wasn’t long before we were “breaking in” that new mattress bought through the auspices of U.N.C.L.E. Mara lay comfortably in my arms once the lovemaking had settled down into sleeping, her body warm and soft and totally familiar.

I don’t know the why of that feeling of familiarity; we hadn’t known each other all that long and had never actually slept together prior to that moment. Oh, we had made love, but it had been necessary in the satrapy for me to leave her room while still under the cover of darkness. And, after the destruction of the Thrush stronghold, the two nights of travel from Nevada to New York had both been spent in the company of others: Mr. Waverly and his regular bodyguards, Illya, Dr. Tertunian, and several Section III operatives seconded as an additional protection unit from the small Las Vegas field office.

I had to admit I liked the feel of her sleeping beside me. I liked the clean, sweet scents of her hair and skin deeply filling my nostrils as I dozed. I liked the idea of waking up to her smile.

All this was flitting through my sleep-fogged brain when an all-too-familiar sound pulled me back to full consciousness: the insistent two-tone of my communicator.

“Solo here,” I answered routinely once having activated the instrument that I grabbed from the bedside table. I had placed it there just prior to the more intimate events unfolding earlier in the evening.

“You are not to sleep there,” came the voice over the communicator’s speaker.

“What?” I questioned in some bewilderment.

“I waited as long as seemed discreet,” responded Illya’s voice, “but the orders Mr. Waverly gave me were all too clear, so I dared not wait any longer.”

“What orders?” I demanded. “What the heck are you babbling about, Illya?”

“You are not to spend the night in Miss Bergand’s apartment under any circumstances, Napoleon,” Illya informed me. “Those are Mr. Waverly’s orders.”

“Illya, have you gone crazy?” I inquired of my partner. “Since when has Mr. Waverly ever cared where I bedded down for the night?”

“Apparently since now,” Illya noted, a hint of exasperation filtering into his voice. Just as apparently, this was not something he wanted to debate with me. “I am waiting upstairs in your apartment, Napoleon, and if you are not up here in ten minutes, I will come down there and physically drag you from her bed. Kuryakin out.”

The communication clicked off from Illya's end and I was left sitting there, angry and completely befuddled. Nevertheless I knew my partner and his Slavic determination, so I crossly snapped shut my communicator and set about retrieving my clothes and getting dressed with a minimum of fuss. Once that was done, I knelt down next to the side of the bed where Mara was so peacefully sleeping and gently kissed her forehead. Her eyelids fluttered partially open and she smiled up at me.

"I have to go, sweetheart," I told her simply.

Her brow furrowed. "Do you really have to, Napoleon?"

Her eyes seemed to silently ask whether it was really something I had to do, or just something I wanted to do. Her uncertainty touched my heart and at that moment I think I honestly could have slammed my fist into the Old Man's face without one iota of regret. But I am an U.N.C.L.E. agent first and foremost. So I put on a calm front and let none of my internal turmoil show on the outside.

"fraid so, darling," I drawled out easily, being careful to keep my lips curved in a nonchalant smile. "Duty calls."

She sighed. "I know I can't keep you from that," she conceded, "but I did so hope to share my first night and the morning after with you here in my new home."

"I know, Mara," I spoke evenly, my mind all the while churning with rage as to why the Old Man suddenly was seeing fit to interfere in my personal life, "and I am truly sorry. But I really don't have a choice."

She reached up and touched my face, gently running her fingers along one side of my jaw. "Well, maybe tomorrow night and the following morning then?" she asked hopefully.

"Maybe," was all the answer I could give as I brought her fingers to my lips and kissed them lightly. "Sleep well, sweetheart," I bid as I rose and made my way from the bedroom and then out of her apartment, using my communicator to reset from the outside the standard security locks for her door.

During the short ride in the elevator to the upper floor of the building, my anger gained an ever surer foothold amongst my warring emotions. Thus I will admit I was livid by the time I reached my own apartment and made my way inside. Illya was seated on the sofa in the living room, his stocking feet tucked up beside him on the cushions and his overnight bag clearly in evidence beside his discarded shoes on the floor near the couch. As I turned back to reset my security alarms, I stated sarcastically over my shoulder to him, "Make yourself comfortable. Never let it be said I am less than a considerate host, even when the guest is uninvited."

"Don't take it out on the messenger, Napoleon," he snapped back as he moved his feet to the floor and took up a less relaxed position on the sofa. "This isn't my idea. I would personally prefer to be spending the night in my own bed rather than in your guest room serving as a combination chaperone and night watchman."

"Go home, Illya," I made my point bluntly.

He sighed. "I report to Mr. Waverly same as you, Napoleon. He gave me orders and I'm following through with them."

"Technically you report to me," I peevishly reminded him, "and I'm ordering you to go home."

"And just as technically Waverly's orders override yours," he reminded me just as peevishly. "So I'm afraid I can't oblige you."

"Why?" I verbally rounded on him.

"I told you; it's orders," reiterated Illya in a noticeably clipped cadence of speech.

"I mean why is he doing this? I'm not an adolescent to whom he can assign a curfew like some over-protective parent!"

"He's hardly treating you like an adolescent," rejoined Illya with acid-edged irony. "After all, he's not demanding you forego having sex with the woman; rather that you just forego the more mundane pleasures of remaining overnight in her company. Surely the first non-verboden activity is sufficient to meet your usual needs."

I stared at him. "If I didn't know you are currently too annoyed with Mr. Waverly forcing you into the middle of this to monitor what you are saying to me, I would loosen a couple of your teeth with my fist for that remark, Kuryakin. Mara isn't a weekend dalliance."

"And I suspect that is the problem," Illya cooled down the acerbic bite in his tone.

I laughed: a hard, brittle laugh. I couldn't help it.

"In other words: It's just fine with the Old Man if I screw half the females in the world, as long as I don't form any emotional attachment to one of them."

"You said it; I didn't," Illya responded in a quick-fire manner.

I let my anger subside as I rubbed the back of my hand against one side of my jaw, remembering as I did so the recent touch of Mara's soft fingers there.

"Does he expect you to board in my guest room indefinitely?" I questioned Illya.

"He only mentioned the next few days and that is all I am staying."

"He doesn't want her getting too dependent on me," I ventured.

"More like he doesn't want you getting too dependent on her."

I gazed at Illya in some confusion.

"Look Napoleon, he doesn't want you thinking of being with her as being home. He doesn't want you thinking of her as..." He hesitated.

"As a wife?" I guessed.

"As a wife, as family, as anything in that vein."

“I’m not going to marry her, Illya. I’m not even contemplating asking her. Not now anyhow. Not with her life still in limbo.”

“And Mr. Waverly seems to want to insure your mindset stays that way... for the present at least.”

“U.N.C.L.E. doesn’t own me,” I declared, my chin jutting forward defiantly.

Illya snorted in amusement.

“Oh my friend, your soul is so tied to U.N.C.L.E., you no longer even feel the tight grip of the knots in the ropes.”

“That’s unfair, Illya.”

“That’s truth, whether you want to acknowledge it or not. But that is also a large part of what makes you who you are, and honestly I rather like who you are, Napoleon. Fool that I am, I find that idealism and optimism and intense desire to keep humanity and the world safe that binds you so tightly to U.N.C.L.E. quite endearing.”

“You talk like I am some kind of Don Quixote,” I crankily criticized.

His lips curved in that ghost of a smile of his. “Despite your conscientious self-promotion of a more Don Juan image, that of Don Quixote is surely apt with regard to your inner self. I will admit you are more connected to reality and much more effective in finding concrete ways to forward your ethics than Quixote ever was,” he furthered. “And as well there is more than occasionally a Machiavellian quality to your turn of mind, a personality quirk that certainly didn’t manifest itself in Quixote. Still, if the lance fits to hand...” He finished off his summation with a shrug as he rose to his feet.

“That’s crazy talk,” I protested without much confidence.

“That’s honest talk from he who will ever be your faithful Sancho, my friend,” he countered as he moved to retrieve his bag. “Such is our joint destiny, a destiny designed by our mutual – if differently evolved – dedication to U.N.C.L.E.”

I just stared at him. I couldn’t think of a thing to say in return to that.

He stopped dead and looked me straight in the eye as he noted, “But as to whether Mara is truly your Dulcinea, Napoleon, of that I am afraid I remain as much in doubt as Mr. Waverly.”

Did I have any doubt of that myself? I let the question shift back-and-forth in my mind as I recalled the uncomfortable feeling that had caught me by surprise with Mara’s offhand remark about learning all my secrets. And I found I had no real answer to that question.

“Goodnight, Napoleon,” Illya ended the awkward moment as he grabbed his bag and made his way toward my guest bedroom with rather abrupt alacrity. I suspect he was regretting stating outright, with no rambling obscuring of the verbal edges, as much of the sharp truth as he had.

The next morning I of course made my complaint to Mr. Waverly, though very cautiously. It was an attempt doomed to failure from the onset. Mr. Waverly’s position was firm: Miss Bergand

had to learn to function independent of me. Unspoken was the reality that he wanted me to continue to function independent of her.

Two days later Illya and I were off to London on a mission and ultimately wound up in the Brazilian jungle chasing diamond smugglers. Well, to be honest I was carted there in a wooden crate by the thieves themselves, though I did have a very charming lady for company in those cramped quarters. I admit I flirted with said charming lady, but it was never more than that. Flirting is simply in my blood. However, I also have to admit that, after all was said and done, going home to Mara's arms held a definite appeal. The prospect of having all your body parts scattered along the Amazon by a cannon, a fate that was very nearly mine, can grant a fresh perspective to any randomness in your personal life.

I arrived in New York exhausted from the near-death experience, the humid Brazilian weather and the long journey home. Despite the pleasant possibility of Mara's company, the first thing I wanted to do when I hit my apartment was take a nice long shower and follow it up with a nice long nap. That agenda was not to be. Mara was waiting for me at the door to my unit and immediately threw herself bodily into my arms, causing me rather abruptly to drop my overnight bag from the sheer impact of her frame connecting with mine.

"Nice to see you too, sweetheart," I teased her regarding the effusive welcome.

"Napoleon, it's been so awful without you here!" she voiced her feelings almost frantically.

"I'm sure it was a bit lonely for you, Mara," I teasingly tempered her overwrought statement as I gently drew her arms from about me, "but surely not awful."

She of course had no inkling how close I had come to messily dying in Brazil; thus I saw no real reason for all this angst on her part.

Her eyes focused on mine. "When you're not here," she tried to explain her emotions, "I feel... abandoned. No one cares if I live or die except you, Napoleon."

I swallowed hard. I could understand her fears. My own experiences while under the influence of Capsule B had been disconcerting. And I had been under that influence for less than 72 hours, while Mara... Her life would always be this way: never remembering, never being quite sure of anything or anybody.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," I apologized earnestly. But I knew I was apologizing not for being away from her, but rather for what she was enduring and would always have to endure regarding the effects of Capsule B.

She buried her head against my shoulder. "You're here now;" she said, relief painfully evident in her tone, "that's all that matters."

I held her close, my mind a whirl of rational views and irrational impressions. I looked up and noticed Illya leaning against the railing of the stairwell, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I thought we might go to dinner, Napoleon," my partner said simply, leaving the censure I saw in his posture entirely out of his spoken words. "However, I see that is not a likely scenario this evening. Have a good night."

He turned to leave by the stairs, which is the way I assumed he had come since I had not encountered him in the elevator on my own way up to this floor.

“Illya, wait,” I entreated him. He did, turning back to face me once more. I drew Mara’s body somewhat apart from mine as I asked, “Have you had dinner yet, sweetheart? If not, perhaps the three of us could make a night out of it.”

“Dinner alone doesn’t hold any charms for me tonight,” Illya voiced his acceptance of the plan without any coaxing from me. “So I’d readily agree to that.”

Mara looked a bit hesitant but finally conceded with an “If that’s what you want, Napoleon.”

My mind unwound into the inviting blanket of this secret reprieve. I would never admit that the idea of having to deal with Mara’s cloying insecurities, knowing as I did their damnable Capsule B source, was something that put my every nerve on edge. I don’t know why. I understood those insecurities; I had dealt with my own version of them not so long ago. Still, they seemed too intensely clingy and guilt-inducing at this moment for me to endure alone, and I was grateful to Illya for somehow understanding that without any actual explanation being needed on my part.

We had dinner at a casual Italian restaurant that was a favorite after-mission haunt of both Illya and myself. The food was delicious, the wine flowed freely, and the conversation was pleasant.

Mara informed us that Waverly had secured a temporary position for her at Rutgers University in New Jersey as a replacement for a professor of neurobiology who was taking a planned sabbatical a bit earlier than originally scheduled. She was to start the following week. Internally I exhaled at this information, knowing that at least the next time I was off on a mission Mara would have much to occupy her mind and thus was unlikely to brood on her own isolation in my absence.

Mara kept in some type of constant contact with me during the entirety of the outing: a hand placed lightly on my arm, the gentle press of a shoulder against mine, fingers slipping into a shirt cuff to stroke my wrist. None of these simple touches were overtly sexual nor were they intended to be. And I have to admit, being a tactile person myself, they barely registered in my consciousness. But I mention them here because Illya later pointed out how Mara seemed noticeably reluctant to be without physical assurance of my presence beside her.

During the course of the evening Mara and Illya got into an intense but definitely friendly discussion about various theories on the origins of certain neurological disorders, not a topic in which I ever realized my partner took such an active interest. But then again it was likely he was simply utilizing his own scientific background to provide a counterpoint to Mara’s during that discussion, so that the dialogue during the evening didn’t wind up focused on topics that excluded her. I was more than grateful to my partner for that consideration of her. However it was during this discourse that an odd topic led to an odd revelation.

Somehow the subject veered toward a psychological disorder with which the nature of our jobs brought Illya and me into all too frequent association: megalomania. Mara forwarded a theory that perhaps there was some physicality within the brain and nervous system that manifested in the disorder. Yet she shied away from labeling any such configuration of brain synapses as defective or abnormal.

“Perhaps,” she presented a rather frightening hypothesis, “it is merely nature’s way of choosing leaders. Of insuring that one particular being rises above others; a peculiar form of natural evolution.”

I turned to her with wide eyes.

“You don’t really believe that, do you Mara?” I inquired of her in real astonishment.

She shrugged slightly as her fingers delicately traced the map of veins on the inside of the wrist on the hand I currently had resting sideways on the table.

“Let us just say I am open to the possibility,” she replied evenly, “but beyond that I have no particular belief.”

Shortly afterwards, as Mara left us for a visit to the restroom, I stated to Illya, “Now that was a bolt from the blue.”

Illya immediately knew what I was referencing as he noted bluntly, “Was it? She was educated by Thrush after all.”

“But she was never really one of their power-mad hoard, Illya,” I countered him.

“She was nevertheless brought up an elitist immersed in a Thrush vision of the world, schooled from an early age in Thrush ideals.”

“Well, she doesn’t have that value system anymore.”

“Doesn’t she?” Illya challenged. “It’s difficult to reverse the principles learned in childhood, Napoleon. Don’t ignore that truth.”

“She said she had no particular belief in that quarter,” I protested.

“And I would venture to say she said that because she saw what she suggested had shocked you. There is no doubt that, right now at least, she would do anything to insure you don’t get upset with her. She can’t even bear not being close enough to physically touch you. To lose emotional connection with you is beyond her ability to so much as contemplate right now.”

“Illya,” I began, “you don’t know what it’s like taking Capsule B. How it eats at your self-confidence—”

“I’m not criticizing her, Napoleon,” he interrupted. “I’m just putting forth things straight as I see them, things you are likely too close to the situation to see without personally rounding off the corners.”

There was no further chance for debate between us on this score as Mara returned to the table and we three entered into more innocuous topics of conversation once more.

The weeks passed. Madmen drilling for earthquakes, the plight of a small extradition-free European nation and radar-enhanced bats: my U.N.C.L.E. missions kept me hopping from one place to another, from one threat to humanity to the next. Meanwhile Mara settled nicely in her professorial position at Rutgers and, though she still was happiest when I was in her company,

she gained measure upon steady measure in self-assurance. Thus was she far from desolate or desperate when I was off saving the world.

I was definitely keeping up my part of the relationship, curtailing my “extracurricular activities” to only what was required during that bat mission with the Ozark clairvoyant involved in the affair. That gal seemed dead-set on capturing my sexual attention and nearly left U.N.C.L.E.’s protection when I came off as less than intensely interested. So I put forth my most charismatic approach and utilized my best seduction technique and had her cooing like a dove tethered to an U.N.C.L.E.-maintained perch in no time at all. It was necessary; it was part of the job; thus I didn’t overstress about it. I didn’t tell Mara of course, but then I never told her about any U.N.C.L.E. missions. That was a part of my life to which she could never be privy.

As for Mara, she stopped asking me to stay the night after our sessions of lovemaking. She also never questioned why I wouldn’t stay. She seemed to accept that this level of separateness must remain between us. What she thought of that, I can’t say I truly know. For me Waverly’s decree in this regard still chafed, but my anger had seeped away, replaced with a begrudging recognition it was probably safer for Mara in the long-run for things to be as they were.

On a fine spring day during this timeframe – a day when I was newly returned from a mission abroad (in Transylvania no less) to my home-base in New York – I received a surprising message from a certain enemy to meet in Central Park. I was well aware it could be a trap, but I knew this Thrush well. I didn’t trust her at all of course, but I also knew she really wasn’t into being used as bait by her own organization. So whatever had initiated this request on her part, it likely wasn’t some inane plot to have a bunch of Thrush muscle ambush me.

I found her sitting on a park bench, ostensibly feeding the birds breadcrumbs from a paper bag in which she delved a hand sparkling with a multitude of diamond rings. Dressed in slender black pants that elongated the line of her slim legs, a creamy silk blouse that showed a good deal of tempting cleavage, a matching-hued soft cashmere cardigan draped with seeming carelessness over her shoulders, and stiletto heels thin enough to give the impression they would snap like a twig if she stood up on them, she appeared less than a normal part of the scene. But then New York is a place where people deal with the unexpected on a regular basis. An obviously wealthy socialite making an elegant display of herself in the park was hardly something that would register very high in any city dweller’s perception of the unusual.

I came up and sat down beside her on the bench, lightly pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“You are always so nicely punctual, darling,” she purred in her affected accent.

“Natural anticipation at the prospect of seeing you again, my sweet,” I responded easily, full charm arsenal at the ready as my senses stayed on high alert.

“Oh?” she questioned with the subtle raise of a very blond eyebrow. “And what does your live-in passionné think of that?”

“I have no live-in passionné, Angelique,” I assured her with an amused smile.

“Downstairs passionné then,” she pressed.

I gave her a noncommittal sideways tilt of the head.

“Oh come, darling, don’t try and play coy,” she prickled with indignation. “All of Thrush knows about the dewy-eyed little defector U.N.C.L.E. has taken under its wing and you have – most gallantly all in the line of duty I’m sure – taken into your bed on a more than casual basis.”

I wondered in secret if this was why Angelique had made this contact with me, to warn me of some impending threat to Mara.

“Jealous? It really doesn’t suit you, my sweet. And maybe Thrush doesn’t know everything,” I ventured.

“You mean that her memory of the organization that nurtured her from near infancy is now conveniently misplaced thanks to an U.N.C.L.E. drug?” Angelique taunted. “Yes, we know that too, darling. It’s the only reason she is still alive. That and because those at Central are intrigued with watching you and your organization try so diligently to retrain one taken as an eyas.”

I quirked one eyebrow in her direction.

“Are you familiar at all with the kingly sport of falconry, Napoleon?” she queried somewhat smugly.

“I can’t say it’s a sport in which I lettered at my alma mater,” I bantered back.

“An eyas is a nestling hawk stolen from its mother and trained to respond to the voice of a single human owner. Such birds are really not fit for the wild once trained to hand, though they hunt beautifully upon command,” Angelique made free with her knowledge. “Your Mara is an eyas, and the voice and hand to which she was trained was Thrush. You’ll never fully break her from that training, darling. It is far too inbred.”

“I’m not trying to ‘break’ her from anything, darling,” I drawled back in my turn, purposely imitating her exaggerated way of enunciating that form of address.

“That explains it then,” she declared in a totally self-satisfied manner.

“I’m sure it does,” I retorted. I was not going to let her know I had no idea what was explaining what in her estimation.

“She is getting quite the reputation in her little academic community, isn’t she?” Angelique pushed on. “Very magnanimous of U.N.C.L.E. to be so virtuously tolerant in that regard. I guess you all really are just too good to be true.”

She laughed delightedly, as I silently catalogued everything in my brain for later interpretation.

“Perhaps in the end we’ll just recruit her back into the fold,” she forwarded with far too much confidence.

My senses were more than simply on the alert now; they were buzzing with an all-out danger signal.

A group of elementary school girls had picked a spot quite near to us to engage in a game of double-dutch jump rope. Their melodically high voices called out one of those insistent singsong rhymes as several turned and several skipped the ropes:

The sweet lady of his dreams,
Softly fair of face,
Brought forth in him feelings
He found he could not erase.

He did kiss her and keep her
Close in his embrace;
Then wed her and bed her
Between satin and white lace.

Angelique gazed toward the group, a crooked little smile turning up one side of her mouth. “So very romantic, don’t you think?” she gushed with a feigned theatrical sigh. “Likely that is how you see your own future with Mara, isn’t it, Napoleon? You will protect her and give her your heart, though not your soul since U.N.C.L.E. already thoroughly owns that. In return you expect she will always need you and always adore you and of course have a conception of the world completely in synch with yours.”

I thought it wisest to say nothing.

“Yet even the most optimistic of beings eventually give up on romance,” Angelique made her final point. “You will too, darling, at least in this case.”

With that she rose to her stiletto-heeled feet, pushing the still half-full sack of torn bread into my hands.

“Go ahead and feed the birds the rest of the crumbs, darling. It’s only fair after all the times you’ve steadfastly refused to supply Thrush any choice tidbits of information.”

“Usually under torture,” I reminded her.

She laughed lightly. “Still, we can’t have it said that someone with your noble turn of mind hates all feathered creatures, Napoleon. And as to the other...” She leaned down and kissed me briefly on the forehead. “We’ll just have to come up with something more inventive next time,” she promised.

Then she walked off down the cement walkway, her hips swinging seductively as she expertly balanced on the tall spikes of her shoes.

The verbal exchange with Angelique stubbornly stayed with me after I returned to headquarters and tried, admittedly unsuccessfully, to concentrate on finishing my part of the report on THE BAT CAVE AFFAIR. After forty-five minutes or so, during which time I wrote no more than one complete sentence on that mission summary, I restlessly got up from my desk and made my way across the hall to Illya’s office. As always my partner’s workspace, smaller than mine to begin with, was cluttered with the detritus of reports-in-progress, background research on suspected Thrush projects, stacks of technical journals, various munitions diagrams and blueprints, and current newspapers in a variety of languages.

Not all Section II agents stationed out of New York HQ have their own offices. Having a private office is a privilege of rank granted only the top dozen Section II operatives, with of course the CEA being the only one of those provided an office of decent size as well as a personal secretary. Most members of Section II hang out in what is playfully known as the Enforcement Bullpen. Desks in that area are usually shared by more than one agent and thus require discipline in keeping one's files and such in a much confined workspace. With all the various forms of paper that become part of my partner's natural work environment whenever he is not in the field, it was a definite boost to the overall morale of the entire section when Illya's rank escalated his HQ home out of that communal area.

Carefully moving a clutch of newspapers to a conveniently vacant spot on the floor (one learns quickly not to actually disturb – or question – my friend's personal filing system), I seated myself in the "guest chair" in Illya's small office.

"I had a meeting with Angelique a little while ago," I told him.

Illya raised his gaze from whatever paperwork – on his very crowded but meticulously arranged desktop – was currently occupying his attention.

"Do I need to check the pockets of your clothing for the hidden presence of poisonous arachnids?"

I smirked. Illya never hid his absolute detest for and comprehensive distrust of Angelique.

"Not this time. Her poison of choice today was raising suspicions regarding Mara."

Illya's eyes caught and held mine.

"What kind of suspicions?" he demanded.

"Apparently that all Thrush is aware she was taken into U.N.C.L.E.'s protective custody."

"Not unexpected."

"That she and I are – shall we say – more than friends."

Illya smirked. "Also not unexpected."

"That the relationship between us is more than one of my usual casual flings."

"I'll let that one pass," Illya declared noncommittally.

"That she lost all memory of her Thrush background because of Capsule B."

"Damn efficient of them to find that out, but again not unexpected."

"That the amnesia is the main reason Thrush is currently satisfied to let her live, content for the moment to merely monitor her adjustments to a life under the influence of said Capsule B."

"Trust Thrush to see every human activity as the result of an experiment to be chronicled."

“And that, because she is what Angelique describes as a Thrush eyes, both U.N.C.L.E. and me in particular will find she can’t be – as it was inelegantly broached – trained to another hand.”

At this last Illya remained significantly silent.

After several very long minutes had passed, I burst out rather anxiously, “Don’t you have anything to say to that?”

“What would you have me say?” he inquired in a perfectly even tone of voice.

“Damn it, Illya, people **can** change! People **do** change!”

“All the time,” he agreed.

“Then why the implication that such is not possible in Mara’s case?”

Illya leaned back in his chair as he exhaled one long breath. “Napoleon, you are reading something into my silence that I never put there. Perhaps you are projecting some feelings of your own into the vacuum?”

“Don’t try that tack with me, Kuryakin. I can play the manipulation game far better than you.”

“That you can,” he acknowledged with just the ghost of a smile, “when it’s your head and not your heart in the game.”

“Don’t chivvy me for loving someone,” I bounced back at him, angrier that I would ever confess.

“As the poets say: Love is blind.”

“You are really trying my patience, tovarisch.”

“I just happen to be of the opinion that it is much more likely a person will change when they know from what they are changing.”

There it was, the elephant in the room: Capsule B and Waverly’s suggestion for Mara to take that drug to conveniently clear away her past with Thrush.

“She was never a bad person, Illya,” I assured him.

“Of course she wasn’t. I know you well enough to realize you would never have fallen for a full-steam-ahead, let’s-conquer-the-world-and-damn-those-caught-in-the-crossfire Thrush. Seduce such, play sexual cat-and-mouse with such, establish a laissez-faire quid pro quo relationship with such: yes. But love such? Never. But she still was Thrush, Napoleon. She had been purposely raised in a certain mindset.”

“I know that,” I reminded him with some irritation. “She knew that too. It’s exactly why she agreed to Waverly’s proposition regarding Capsule B.”

“But there’s the rub, Napoleon: She **knew** that. She doesn’t know it anymore. She has no memory of that part of her past.”

“I don’t see where you are heading with this, Illya.”

“Let me pose a question to you: If, during the time your memory was compromised because of Capsule B, you were told that U.N.C.L.E. was a mercenary organization with no higher goals, would you have believed it? Believed even what might seem to be incontrovertible evidence to prove same?”

“Of course not,” I batted back.

“Why not?” prompted Illya.

“Because it was constantly being hammered at me that I was a significant part of U.N.C.L.E. and I...” My sentence faded into nothingness as Illya’s point became clear.

“And you knew inside yourself that wasn’t who you were,” my partner completed my unspoken thought. “Your inner value system was still part of you, Capsule B or no Capsule B.”

“But Mara’s ‘value system’, as you call it, doesn’t include conquering the world at whatever cost that is a hallmark of idiosyncratic Thrush-centric philosophy.”

“But it does include believing there are scientific truths behind certain forms of elitism, those forms routinely espoused by Thrush as the reasoning for why they should be the masters and the rest of the world the slaves.”

That silenced my adamant protestations as I recalled Mara’s words regarding megalomania stemming from a possible sidetrack of human evolution to create natural leaders for mankind. Those were words that had shocked me at the time and now, on hindsight, totally gave credence to Illya’s supposition.

“I can’t dispute everything you’re saying, Illya,” I conceded. “Still, I can’t believe the Old Man would have been completely ignorant of such a possibility.”

“Mr. Waverly is never ignorant of possibilities,” Illya stated bluntly, “but he is not incapable of cavalierly ignoring those possibilities when it suits his immediate purpose.”

“Meaning keeping my life as he wants it,” I noted with a small sigh.

“Meaning keeping you where he needs you to be,” Illya reconstructed that statement. “You can at least take comfort in the fact that the Old Man currently values you much too highly to risk losing you to anything less than the result of a save-the-world, mission-specific obligation.”

“Cold comfort,” I groused.

“Don’t be too hard on him either, Napoleon,” warned Illya. “Mr. Waverly has his own value system as well. And in his the concerns of U.N.C.L.E. will always come before the personal concerns – or hopes – of any one agent.”

“But Mara was an innocent and—”

“Mara,” Illya interrupted to correct me, “was a Thrush. Mr. Waverly really did not owe her any special sympathy.”

It was often easy for me to forget that neither Mr. Waverly nor Illya had been granted any significant contact with Mara before she had so fatefully swallowed that large dose of Capsule

B. She was a Thrush for whom I had a soft spot, who had kept me from feeling too isolated during my bout of induced amnesia: that was really all they knew of her. They had no reason to feel as I did with regard to her: that she had in many ways kept me sane during that timeframe, as well as shown a real regard for me that precluded her from simply obeying orders when told to shoot me even though she had to be aware such lack of action cast her in the role of traitor amongst her own. She had come to selflessly love me, and love selflessly given is always precious. Something to be cherished, not condescendingly dismissed for the sake of supposedly more important concerns.

“Angelique also mentioned,” I ventured cautiously, truly unhappy with the downward angle this exchange with my friend had pitched my seesawing emotions, “that Mara is gaining quite a reputation amongst those in her academic setting.”

At this Illya took another long breath, but I could tell this one was born solely of regret.

Shuffling through the many folders on his desk, he finally located a specific one and retrieved it from the pile. Then he stood, walked to where I sat and handed that folder to me without a single word. Empathetically he squeezed my shoulder (a gesture that seemed to have become second nature for him when the conversation between us turned to Mara) before exiting his office and leaving me in private to read what I recognized immediately as a Section III target surveillance dossier.

The dossier was significantly marked as being not for my personal inspection, a branding that – while I knew of its procedural existence – I had never known Mr. Waverly to purposely employ on a Section II or Section III initiated document during my tenure as Chief of Enforcement. Illya thus was taking a personal career risk in providing me with the report, and I much appreciated and was sincerely touched by my friend’s loyalty so unpretentiously yet eloquently bespoken in that gesture. Accordingly I took the precaution of activating the security lock on the door to his office as I delved into the contents of the contraband file.

There was nothing explosive or earth-shattering in those contents. Mara was not going off and secretly using students as guinea pigs in neurological experiments or anything so outwardly Thrush-like in design. However, it was specifically highlighted that she had entered into the company of several academics who shared her willingness to view certain psychological disorders as perhaps neurological evolutionary permutations. I imagine most of these intellectual types just liked to explore the possibility for sheer argument’s sake, but Mara – according to the report – seemed to regard such theories much more seriously.

Her hypotheses of such “natural development of the brain” signaling an upward slide on the scale in human neurobiology intrigued her colleagues and fascinated her students. All of whom could of course have no way of knowing such ideas were part and parcel of her Thrush upbringing, especially since Mara no longer even knew this herself.

Yet her stance, now that she was no longer cognizant of that upbringing, made her a natural recruit for Thrush. Should that organization decide to twit U.N.C.L.E. by using such a ploy, there was a good chance she would be swayed by the pull of the supra-nation since many of her root beliefs were already theirs. The report made no bones about this unpalatable risk, and thus recommended I be “weaned away from her continued companionship”.

It all came as an unwelcome shock to me: Mara’s core beliefs, the assumption that she would eventually freely choose to align herself with Thrush, the whole intricate setup by Waverly and

God knew how many other “powers-that-be” within U.N.C.L.E. to “protect” me from her for such reasons. Mara and I were, as Mr. Waverly framed it, to be kept independent of one another.

My head was reeling. Mr. Waverly had proposed Capsule B as a means for Mara to disassociate herself from her Thrush past. Mara had accepted that proposal, and in so doing had indeed lost the direct association with Thrush but retained an internal moral code implanted by that organization, a moral code she now had no inkling was anything other than completely her own. And that moral code might in the end lead her directly back to Thrush... and away from me because my moral code would always clash with that one in Mara.

I closed the file with shaking hands. From upset, from anger, from hurt: I really couldn't say. Everything inside me was crashing together. My head and my heart were at war. Through the internal sounds of battle within my brain I couldn't help but realize Mr. Waverly had known from the onset this could well be the result of his proposal. He had known and he hadn't clued in either Mara or me. He had known and had kept purposefully silent. He had callously chosen the means which best satisfied his own concerns regarding U.N.C.L.E., no matter that such means could act as a shroud of barbed wire around the hearts of both Mara and myself.

I wanted to scream in frustration and anguish. I wanted to pound on the walls until my fists bled and broke. I wanted to keel in agony like a helpless animal caught firmly in the steel teeth of a hunter's trap.

Instead I rose steadily to my feet and shuffled the file back into the middle of the pile on Illya's desk. Then I released the security lock and made my way out the pneumatic door.

I passed Illya in the hallway and he caught my arm tentatively within his fingers, halting my immediate solo progress down the corridor.

“Napoleon?” he began in a questioning tone.

“I need a drink, Illya,” I stated bluntly. “And I need to be alone.”

He nodded, far from happily, but he did release his hold and let me make my way toward the elevator bank independently. I imagined Mr. Waverly would heartily approve of that.

I had more than one drink. Hell, I had a **lot** more than one drink. I got stupendously – and very independently I might add – roaring drunk. Such is a dangerous pastime for a secret agent, but honestly at that precise moment I didn't care. Every bit of caution in me, both inborn and trained, was thrown to the four winds without a second's hesitation. I didn't want to think. Hell, I didn't even want to feel. I just wanted to... disconnect.

I wanted to float in a valley of being where nothing existed beyond the glass in my hand and the hard liquor within that glass. I wanted to feel only the dull burn in my throat and not that in my heart. I wanted to know only that I could procure another drink after this one and not process the reality of being pushed to “procure” another woman to love other than Mara. I was more alone than I had ever been in my entire life, yet I would never admit that to anyone... not even Illya.

I made it home courtesy of at least retaining the common sense necessary to ask the bartender to call me a cab from a certain company, one that recognized an innocuous-to-outsiders keyword as requiring U.N.C.L.E. security protocol. Once inside my building I made my decision.

To hell with Waverly's orders: I was going to stay the night in Mara's apartment, to sleep with her in both senses of that concept. In fact, to hell with Mr. Waverly himself and U.N.C.L.E. and saving the world and all of it. I wasn't a puppet on a string to be mechanically manipulated toward the requirements of an organization I had **chosen** to join. I had rights... and needs... as a human being.

I knocked out "shave and a haircut" on Mara's door. Don't ask me why I did that. I don't have a clue. It just amused me and I wanted to be amused, wanted to push beyond the boundaries of caution and hurt and confusion and every other negative thought and feeling taking root in my brain and my heart at that moment.

Mara opened the door to me I assume after checking the peephole as to who was beyond her front portal. "Napoleon," she greeted me with a bright smile.

"Evening, sweetheart," I greeted her in turn while swaying quite noticeably on my feet.

I grabbed hold of the doorframe for support as Mara, no doubt mentally postulating on the possible causes of my liquid lunch, asked with obvious concern, "Something happen at work, Napoleon?"

"All kinds of things are always happening at work," I countered, "but that's not what I want to think about at the moment. I only want to think about burying myself as deep inside you as I can go."

She laughed lightly. "I don't have a problem with that thought of yours, but right now my thought is that you should come in and sit down before you fall down."

Finding the doorframe not as stable a means of physical support as I had hoped, I responded readily, "I happily accept that invitation."

She grasped my right arm under the elbow and guided me into her apartment and then steered me toward the sofa. I plopped down rather inelegantly on the cushions and she left me for a moment to close the front door and reset her security alarms. Never let it be said U.N.C.L.E. paranoia about locking everything up tight and secure didn't affect those innocents whose lives were at some point touched by the organization.

Mara returned to the living room and stood looking down at me weaving even as I sat there on her couch. She fought the small smile that was threatening to erupt into an all-out grin on her face. "Oh Napoleon, you look so... un-Napoleon-like," she declared as she reached down and made an affectionate try at brushing back into place my wayward forelock.

I suppose my disheveled self did create quite the comical picture: Tie loosened and askew, half my shirt buttons and both my cuffs undone with the shirt itself tucked into only one side of the waistband of my trousers, suit coat fastened lopsidedly in my inebriated attempt at keeping my holster properly concealed from ready sight.

"My usual run of sartorial splendor seems to have run out," I commented with wide-eyed wonder at the sorry state of my attire.

"Yet are you still my beautiful, beautiful Napoleon," Mara cooed appreciatively as she knelt on the floor before me and lengthened the trail of her fingers down to my cheek.

“Men are handsome,” I reminded her with drunken conviction.

“A man like you is thoroughly beautiful inside and out,” she assured me with sober conviction.

“This man,” I announced as I prodded my own chest with an unsteady finger, “is thoroughly intoxicated inside and out.”

“No?” she teased with pretend surprise. “I would never have guessed if you hadn’t told me.”

“I’m a spy,” I declared, punctuating the observation with a manifest hiccup. “I can hide any impairment to my physical condition extremely well.”

“You’re my heart,” she stated with a loving smile. “Thus you can’t hide any impairment to your emotional condition from me,” she furthered as she drew her face close and tilted her head forward slightly so to touch her forehead to mine.

My own heart was throbbing painfully: with uncertainty, with anguish, but mostly with love.

“I’m going to stay the night with you, Mara,” I pledged her earnestly, letting the sincerely serious timbre of my tone convey the fullness of meaning within that simple statement.

“Are you, my love?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Yes,” I answered strongly, willing every errant second-guess within me into complete submission, “tonight and every night from now on.”

“And I would welcome you tonight and every night from now into eternity,” she pledged in an aching tender voice, “if I honestly thought that course of action didn’t threaten to lose you something you hold much dearer than you do me.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. The words seemed ominous somehow.

“Nothing is dearer to me than you,” I protested.

“U.N.C.L.E. is,” she pointed out without anger. She just knew me too well... and loved me too much... not to recognize this as truth.

“I’m tired of always doing what U.N.C.L.E. wants,” I complained peevishly, like a child who, upon being informed it was time to go to bed, rebelled not because he wasn’t sleepy, but simply because he was being told rather than asked.

“Of course you are, darling,” she agreed. “You’re very tired and very drunk and you need to rest awhile.”

With that said, she repositioned me on the sofa so that I could stretch out, placing one of the throw pillows under my head as she guided me down flat on the cushions. Then she removed my shoes and settled my legs more comfortably before bending down to place an indulgent kiss on my forehead and moving away to make a phone call. I closed my eyes, hearing her one side of the conversation through the languid haze of fatigue that was descending slowly over me and insistently drawing me down into slumber.

“Illya? This is Mara... Napoleon’s here, somewhat the worse for wear – or rather alcohol... He’s been making some rather ill-considered declarations... Yes, I think it best you come and retrieve him for safe and sound delivery to his apartment...”

My mind was shouting “Why are you doing this? He’ll just take me away from you. They all want to take me away from you!” but verbally I made no objection to Mara’s summoning of my partner. I simply lay there letting my exhaustion and my drunkenness wash over me like high tide over shoreline sand and waited silently for Illya to come and pull me away from Mara and back toward U.N.C.L.E.

A little more than a week later Illya and I were looking down through a glass pane at one of our own who had apparently been used by Thrush as a guinea pig for a drug that increased sensory abilities to an unnaturally high level. That effect had driven the agent near the precipice of complete insanity and he was holding on by his fingernails. He didn’t seem to remember Illya or me, though we had been casual friends of his for years. He couldn’t even recall our superior, Mr. Waverly. He could identify the composition of the paint on the walls of his cell by smell; he could see from more than twenty feet away a thin blond hair on my coat leftover from a previous visit to Mara; the touch of a medical orderly sent him into hysterics seemingly from physical pain. I didn’t know what to make of any of it, but I knew it left me... distinctly uncomfortable.

On the trail of discovering what Thrush had used on our agent (and to what purpose), we were dispatched to the lab facilities of a Dr. Lillian Stemmler. She was the inventor of a formula, called Plus-X, intended to enhance the sensory abilities and, through such means, the mental capacity of those with brain abnormalities. The scenario reminded me unnervingly of Mara’s espoused theories on evolutionary brain development being inclusive of certain psychological disorders. Being a professional, however, I didn’t let the association rattle me. Still, that association was definitely there, in the back of my mind, like the shadow of a persistent cloud on an otherwise sunny day.

Things went as they are wont to go when Thrush is involved, and I was assigned to protect Dr. Stemmler while Illya was sent to Mexico to do the same for her daughter. Since the lab was in the immediate vicinity of Manhattan, I was permitted to go home for a few hours of sleep when my relief took over the late-night shift.

Mara was at the door of my apartment almost immediately when I got home. She was carrying some brown bags that were wafting a totally wonderful set of aromas.

“I’m making dinner for you tonight, Napoleon,” she said as she brushed past me into the confines of my apartment. “Or rather serving you a dinner that was made in a local eatery to my specifications.”

“Mara, that’s not necessary. I had a sandwich while on location at the assignment. I just need to sleep for a while before I have to go back on duty.”

She turned to face me once more and looked me thoroughly up and down. “You look all done in, Napoleon.”

“Yes, being hit by a truck will do that to you,” I acknowledged half in seriousness and half in jest. Earlier in the day I had indeed needed to dive into a cluster of trash barrels to avoid a moving truck aimed particularly in my direction. I wasn’t noticeably hurt, but my body was more than a bit aching and sore from the encounter.

“My poor Napoleon,” she sympathized. “You do have the most taxing of jobs, don’t you? I agree you need sleep, but you also need something hot in your stomach first, and I don’t mean more coffee.”

I smirked. Of course she knew I had been swigging that caffeinated beverage by the gallon for the past few hours. Somehow she could tell things like that just by looking at me.

“You win,” I conceded to her feminine wisdom... and the tantalizing scents dispersing through the air from the hidden contents of those discreet brown bags.

“Of course I do,” she teased as she walked directly up to me and kissed me lightly on the nose. “You are always ready to accommodate the whims of any pretty woman, my love.”

“Of a certain pretty woman anyway,” I countered.

She laughed lightly. “Of **any** pretty woman,” she reiterated, “but I can hold my own amidst all the female competitors for your attention.”

“That you can,” I agreed with a ready smile.

“Kitchen,” she then ordered as she crooked a finger in my direction, indicating I was to follow her to that location. I obeyed eagerly as my stomach, enticed by the tempting odors of hot food, was beginning to growl in a rather demanding fashion.

I sat at my small (perfect for two) dining table and watched hungrily as she removed a large covered plastic container of chicken and dumplings from one bag.

“That smells heavenly,” I enthused as she detached the cover from the dish.

“Nothing fancy, just good stick-to-your-ribs fare to adequately cushion any physical dings from that truck.” She gave me a mischievous wink and I found myself grinning from ear-to-ear.

“You know just how to pamper a mission-battered secret agent, my dear,” I complimented her as I reached out, took one of her hands briefly in mine and kissed that hand of hers I held.

From another bag she retrieved a smaller covered container of mixed salad greens and a tin-foil wrapped loaf of warm buttered bread. Finally she freed a bottle of wine from the confines of the last grocery bag.

I shook my head pointedly. “No wine for me, Mara. I’m technically still on duty and have to report back to the assignment location, if I’m not summoned in before that, in...” I glanced at my watch. “Less than five hours.”

She sighed unhappily. “Ah well. We’ll save it for another occasion then.” With that decided, she transferred the bottle of Voigner wine to the sideboard across from the table.

I have to admit I was impressed with Mara’s choice of pairing for the creamy chicken stew. Knowing I was something of a wine connoisseur (Illya preferred to label me a wine snob), I imagine she had spent some time with the local liquor store owner learning about the vintages and the best matches for particular food choices. I felt humbled that she would go through so much trouble just to please me, just to become more integral to my personal world.

As she retrieved plates from the cabinet above the sideboard, her back thus turned to me, I ventured into territory we purposely hadn't broached since that night more than a week before when I had showed up drunk and disheartened on her doorstep.

"Mara, why didn't you just let me stay with you? That night..." My voice trailed off.

She paused in what she was doing but didn't turn to face me.

"You were hurting, Napoleon," she began cautiously. "Not physically, but in your heart. And thus you were lashing out at what had, I suspect, hurt you."

"U.N.C.L.E.," I stated in a tight voice.

She nodded, her back still turned to me.

"I couldn't take advantage of that. Couldn't let you so cavalierly choose between me and U.N.C.L.E. It's too important a decision to rest on a drunken promise. And U.N.C.L.E. means too much to you for me to let you put yourself in that position." She turned to me at last, her eyes wide and amazingly soulful. "I'm not trying to change you, Napoleon, to make you into someone other than yourself. I would never let you make that kind of sacrifice for me."

My mouth went dry as my heart squeezed painfully in my chest.

"You made that sacrifice for me," I reminded her quietly.

"It was **my** choice, Napoleon," she stated firmly. "I don't regret that choice, so don't force me to deal with your forever feeling guilty about it."

I wasn't sure what I should say to that and found the only words I could manage were a hesitant "All right."

Suddenly she was at my side, kneeling next to my chair, her arms thrown around my neck.

"I love you, Napoleon," she declared bluntly, "so much it hurts. You are my heaven and my earth. You are all I remember of my past and all I need to remember. I don't ever want to be without you, but what I want most of all is for my love never to hurt you. Never ever, Napoleon."

What could I say to that? I swallowed convulsively, wrapped my arms about her and drew her close, resting my head on hers. I pressed my silent lips to her hair, knowing that, for one of the very few times in my life, I had no smoothly facile words to offer.

The rest of that affair went far from smoothly as we were to discover Dr. Stemmler was herself Thrush and that she had created, as a companion to Plus-X, a Minus-X formula that decreased the processing of sensory input and thus reduced brain function back to an early childhood level. Both drugs were intended for use in a raid on a U.S. military facility producing synthetic plutonium: Plus-X to enhance the abilities of the Thrush invaders and Minus-X to diminish the abilities of the personnel stationed at the plant.

In the end we got things sorted out satisfactorily, with the Thrush captain for the operation winding up dead. However, Dr. Stemmler, who actually helped me infiltrate the military facility because she wanted to save the life of her daughter – not only in the physical sense but also in

the mental sense – from Thrush, wound up dead as well. She was shot by the Thrush captain before his own more, shall we say, spectacular demise at the hands of her daughter, who pushed the man into the path of a flux of high-voltage electrical current.

Yet what affected me most about the mission wasn't this rather sad conclusion, but the entire idea of Thrush's planned use for the two drugs in question. Plus-X was like the culmination of some Supreme Council member's wet dream, providing as it did the physical evidence – however temporary – to prove Thrush's mental superiority. And how easily could any resistors or dissenters to that notion be neutralized with a dose of Minus-X, reduced to seeming mental inferiority in the eyes of all those around them.

Having succeeded in preventing Thrush's initial strategy for the drugs, the plant where the formulas had been created was put under strict lockdown. Remaining samples were destroyed and technical notes sealed under the highest security protocol in U.N.C.L.E.'s own research files. Still, the very concept of those drugs haunted me. Their design seemed to me tightly inter-related with the ideas Mara espoused about "brain evolution", ideas founded on Thrush elitist principles.

Illya and I stayed in Connecticut, where the lab was located, for several days supervising the initial phases of the lockdown. My mood during this timeframe fluctuated from coolly detached to snappishly authoritative and my partner of course noticed. It wasn't my usual modus operandi and there was no denying that, but I did my utmost to ignore Illya's quizzical glances. The last night of our stay Illya corralled me into going to dinner with him, something I admit I had been steadfastly avoiding because I didn't want to face my partner's questions about the ultimate source of my uncharacteristic behavior.

"All right, out with it," Illya broached the topic without prologue as soon as we were seated in the homey little restaurant one of the locals at our bed-and-breakfast had recommended to us.

"With what?" I pretended ignorance.

"In case you are entertaining the misconception it has not been universally noticed that you have been the past few days far from your usual amiable self, Napoleon, let me dissuade you of that misguided belief. Every U.N.C.L.E. Section III and Section VIII involved in this clean-up has not only noticed, but made mention of it directly to me."

"I'm just tired," I hedged.

"No doubt, but that isn't the crux of the issue," Illya refused to be put off. "So out with it: What is bothering you?"

I was saved for the meanwhile from answering as a pretty waitress came to take our order and I made a particular point to flirt charmingly with her for nearly ten minutes, asking her about various items on the menu and offering with a smile in return to her detailed descriptions subtle innuendos that made her blush softly with pleasure. Once she had retreated to pass our order onto the kitchen however, Illya was immediately on my case once more.

"You can drop the charismatic mask now, Napoleon. Unlike our attractive waitress, I am not in the least taken in by it. I want an answer to my question: What is bothering you?"

"I..." I began; then halted. "I want to stop by the sanitarium on our way back to the city and visit Louis," I blurted out, though I hadn't been thinking about doing that previously. Louis was our Section II agent upon whose senses such havoc had been wreaked by an unrefined version of Plus-X. "As Chief of Enforcement, I owe that to him."

"I don't think such a visit would be wise in your current emotional state," Illya asserted straightforwardly.

"Stop trying to psychoanalyze me, Kuryakin," I spat out hostilely.

"Then stop being such a blockhead, Solo, and talk to me," he countered.

I didn't want to have this discussion with Illya or anybody else, but I was at a loss as to how to get around doing so with my determined partner.

"I just need to get my mind wrapped around a few things, that's all," I made an attempt at keeping everything vague and thus distant from Illya's scrutiny.

"Not enough of an answer."

I sighed in frustration. "Please don't dog me on this, Illya."

"If I don't, who will?"

"Can't you just let me handle it in my own way?" I all but pleaded.

He stared at me for a long moment, his eyes taking in everything. "No," he finally replied in a perfectly even and extremely matter-of-fact tone, a tone that brooked no further argument.

"Fine; dandy," I retorted bitterly. "I keep imagining how easily Mara could fit into Dr. Stemmler's place. How, under the right circumstances, she might be willing to consider the use of something like Plus-X a privilege rightly reserved for those who understood its vast possibilities. In short for those of Thrush. I keep imagining myself..."

I stopped speaking abruptly but I know what I hadn't said was plainly displayed on my face, knowledge Illya confirmed as he continued my thought flawlessly.

"Imagining yourself in Louis' place, as a guinea pig for the experimental drug, only with Mara as the scientist in charge."

"It's unfair of me to even imagine that," I chastised myself. "Mara loves me."

"Napoleon, you cannot continually castigate yourself for seeing something in your mind's eye that could be accounted well within the realm of possibility. It could have happened that way."

"But it didn't," I felt it necessary to remind Illya. "Mara chose me over Thrush."

"Yes, she did," agreed Illya, "but a certain situation led to that choice. Had that situation been otherwise, it might not have been a choice she would even have considered making."

"Things are as they are, Illya. You're the one who so often points that out."

“That’s absolutely true,” he acknowledged. “Yet the things that are also include Mara retaining a value system very much foreign to yours. You have to face that, Napoleon, and deal with it, not ignore it. Whatever path you choose – with Mara, without Mara, with U.N.C.L.E., without U.N.C.L.E. – know I will always have your back, my friend. That too is something that simply is.”

The pretty waitress brought our food at that point and we settled into wordlessly partaking of a good meal. But toward the end of that meal, as we were lingering over an after-dinner coffee, I said very quietly, “I can’t give up U.N.C.L.E., Illya. It’s something inside me.”

Illya exhaled, I believe in relief. I don’t want to assess too highly my significance to him as a field partner; still I am sure I did not imagine that quiet reaction on his part.

“It’s your soul, Napoleon,” he then said in a somehow completely non-dramatic fashion considering the somewhat stagey contents of that statement.

“And I don’t want to give up Mara,” I put into words the other side of the equation. “She’s my heart, Illya.”

Illya smiled faintly. “You’ve opened your heart to her, Napoleon, and warmly welcomed her inside. Yet even she cannot claim to own that heart of yours, my friend. It’s much too large to be fenced in by any single individual.”

I let out a brief laugh at that. Not because I found Illya’s remarks in any way funny, but simply because it made me outrageously happy to envision myself even for an instant as worthy of the sincere if backhanded compliment just voiced by my dearest friend.

In the end I had to admit Illya was probably right. I shouldn’t have gone to the sanitarium to see Louis. He didn’t really know me and he was still in so much sensory overload, I had to remember to keep my voice pitched low and not to fidget too much. My aftershave, of which I was honestly wearing little, gave him coughing fits. The brief touch of my fingers on his arm (I’m a tactile person and it was thus almost an automatic reflex on my part to reach out and pat his arm in reassurance) sent him into muscle spasms of pure agony. All-in-all my well-intentioned goodwill visit to Louis left him shaking in visible distress and me intensely disquieted, my nerves raw and on edge. And that was not a good way to return home... to Mara.

I also probably should have kept to my own company that night. Foolishly I didn’t. I phoned Mara and asked her to come over for Chinese take-out. Afterwards we snuggled on my sofa while watching the evening news. Everything seemed so natural, so good. I felt the tension easing out of my very bones as my arm encircled Mara’s shoulders. We both leaned comfortably into the couch cushions, eyes and ears fixed on the images and sounds being electronically projected into the room while our bodies nestled familiarly together.

And then the first shoe dropped.

The news commentator onscreen was talking about the death of one Dr. Lillian Stemmler, revered neural biologist and research scientist. The story reported the cause of that death as a sudden massive coronary. Well, I guess a bullet to the heart can be euphemized that way. The television journalist went on to speak of the doctor’s various laurels and mentioned that she had been working on the Plus-X formula to aid those with brain “inefficiency”. I couldn’t help smirking at the ill-conceived use of that particular term.

"I've read a bit recently about her research," Mara spoke up. "Such amazing possibilities for that Plus-X formula."

"Amazing," I agreed in an unmistakably sarcastic tone.

Mara turned her face toward me, confusion at my obvious bitterness plainly sketched on that countenance.

"You don't understand what it could possibly do," she sought to enlighten me.

"I understand," I rejected her assumption, my tone losing none of its derision.

"Napoleon, Dr. Stemmler's formula—"

"Could make mental giants," I interrupted contemptuously.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Mara chivvied me in a frustrated voice. "No, it isn't about making mental giants, it could potentially—"

"Forward the evolutionary scale of the human brain?" I made this next remark a question. Oh but such an incendiary question.

I was being viciously unfair and I knew it. Mara didn't know about Louis. She didn't know I had seen Plus-X in action. She didn't know a thing about the existence of Minus-X. Hell, she didn't know **anything** about what my last affair for U.N.C.L.E. had entailed. Still, I just couldn't seem to stop the malicious words spouting from my lips like a fountain of bile.

"Napoleon, whatever is wrong with you?" Mara demanded as she reached out a hand to place over the one of mine that rested on my knee.

"I don't know," I retorted, still belligerent, still cynical, pulling my hand from under hers as if her flesh had burned mine. "Maybe my brain is just not evolved enough to understand? Maybe you would like to do something about that?"

Her complexion paled noticeably and her eyes suddenly looked huge: as wide and round as china-blue saucers set in her face.

"Stop it this instant!" she demanded in a voice tinged as much with upset as with irritation.

"And if I don't?" I baited.

God! What was wrong with me? Why was I purposely hurting her like that? Would it always be like this inside me? That little seed of nasty uncertainty sowed because I saw in her soul the grassroots of Thrush ideology? That seed growing and spreading like a pesky dandelion I couldn't seem to successfully weed out of my mind?

"Please stop!" she vulnerably pleaded now as she took my face between both her hands and pulled it abruptly toward her own.

Her eyes scoured mine, and immediately guilt washed over me in a tsunami wave. "I'm sorry," I whispered with real regret as I pressed my face against the soft skin at the side of her throat, my

cheeks flaming with the heat of my shame as I tried to calm myself by pulling the sweet scent of her deep into my nostrils.

She reached up and gently stroked my hair. “Do I really make it that difficult for you?” she asked in a very strained voice.

The ungodly noise echoing in my brain was that of the other shoe dropping.

“No!” I protested, my head shooting back up so I could look into her eyes once more. “No, you don’t! I was being... disdainfully maudlin. It’s just the unwelcome aftermath of my last mission. I’m sorry. I really am so sorry, Mara.”

“I don’t know what you want me to be, Napoleon,” she stated still in that strained voice. “I don’t know how to make you happy.”

“You do make me happy, Mara,” I tried to reassure her.

“No, I don’t,” she disputed my knee-jerk assertion. “Something in me disappoints you or disconcerts you or disturbs you. I’m not sure exactly which, but it’s just as likely that all those emotions fit your reaction as any one alone. And something in you distrusts me, though I don’t know why. I would do anything for you, Napoleon.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” I lied.

“Please don’t do that:” Mara begged, “Make those oh-so-gallant statements that gloss over reality like it doesn’t exist. You don’t owe me anything, Napoleon, and it scares me to think that all you might wind up feeling for me is obligation.”

“Obligation has its place,” I said I don’t know why. It was definitely the wrong thing to say and frankly I knew it even before I said it. Still, I said it.

“Obligation might have its place in your stalwart dedication to U.N.C.L.E.,” she spat back now in a definitely angry tone, “but not in your love for me! I am not some responsibility you’re heroically shouldering like the perfect white knight! You have to love me for me, for what is inside me even if it isn’t exactly what you want it to be!” Her voice was desperate now, beseeching with aching hurt and confusion. “Can’t you do that, Napoleon? Can’t you truly love me for what is within me?”

I didn’t know what to say. The truth was there were so many things within her I did love: her selflessness, her courage, her shyly sweet temperament, her willingness to work through the pitfalls of being forever without a cohesive past. Yet I couldn’t deny there were also things inside her I not only couldn’t love but couldn’t understand and found it all but impossible to accept.

How could I tell her that? I didn’t want to cut into her heart with such precisely sharp facts. I just didn’t know how to make it all right. So I did the first thing my most basic of instincts pushed me to do: I pulled her head strongly to mine and kissed her. Deeply; passionately; with every ounce of emotion in my heart and desire in my body. My soul for the moment would have to keep its own counsel.

Mara returned the kiss just as deeply, just as passionately, and with an inner desolation it pained me to recognize. She was so alone. Capsule B had isolated her even from her own self. I was all she had of any sort of past and I was failing her miserably because my expectations of her would always be of someone she just wasn't.

Mara's lips broke from mine just long enough for her to whisper in my ear with all her inner anguish and despair evident in the words, "Make love to me, Napoleon. Just make love to me."

And I did because there at least truth had always lay like an open book between us, the synergy and understanding unconsciously existing within our bodies something our minds were still trying hard to fruitfully seek within the very disparate souls of one other.

Compromise, they say, is in many ways the very essence of all human life. Circumstances and situations are never exactly as we would have them. People are never all they should be. Fantasies fade like morning mists, and realities are never without hard edges. I got the chance to ponder on this truth clear of Mara's proximity for the two weeks Illya and I worked on another case, one incongruously combining the kidnapping of an American Indian chief by Thrush with that organization's setup to bring together a nuclear device from pieces built separately but to one set of specifications at various locations around the world.

At the end of those two weeks I was left wondering what I had expected of my relationship with Mara. Had I imagined that, simply because I had found someone who loved me and who I could love in return, fragrant flowers would suddenly sprout up from the sidewalks around us and porcelain hearts replace the drink coasters in my apartment? Did I believe that making things work out in any real life situation entailed no especial effort? Was I, as Illya had ventured to suggest, truly naïve with regard to some aspects of existence at least? Or so much the romantic, as Angelique had not hesitated to name me, that I envisioned positive emotion as encompassing nothing aside from ultimate harmony? In short, why did I think that, unlike everything else in life, commitment of any kind – whether to an ideal or to another person – should require no compromise?

I realized, only too sadly, that I was fostering a life for Mara that would mirror my own when what she wanted might be something quite different. And so I made arrangements to meet Angelique in private immediately upon my return to New York, going straight from reporting to Waverly at U.N.C.L.E. HQ to that secret rendezvous in Central Park with the Thrush femme fatale.

"I thought you would send for me, darling," she stated smugly, "eventually."

"You know why I sent for you?"

"Of course I do, darling," she forwarded, making me more uncomfortable than I would ever admit. "You want the little eyes to have a chance to be taken back in hand."

"**Only** if she wants it," I stipulated quite bluntly.

"My ever gallant Napoleon," teased Angelique. "You must love the woman very much."

"That's entirely my affair," I warned Angelique off the scent. "But I'll have your promise that she'll undergo no retributive punishment for her past actions **if** such a scenario were ever to play out."

“I am flattered you believe I have such power, darling.”

“I know you, my sweet. You have a way of winding any man around your little finger, including those of the Supreme Council if need be.”

A light laugh escaped through her blood-red rouged lips before she conceded, “And I will not be so foolishly humble as to deny the truth of that assumption. Yet I caution you: Should I need to employ my wiles in this pursuit, I will insist upon a favor in return.”

I nodded shortly. “You know my limits, Angelique. But within those I will grant you that favor **if** in the end you should need to employ those wiles of yours at my behest.”

Angelique pouted oh-so-prettilly. “How gauche of you to remind me of your ever-present do-gooder conscience, Napoleon, and to force my proffered reward to remain within such restrictive boundaries. Still, the prospect of being owed even such an imperfect recompense by you is, I do confess, thrillingly titillating.”

And so the farthest boundaries of my compromise were set, boundaries I most earnestly hoped would never need to be tested.

Thus I came back from that INDIAN AFFAIRS assignment ready to knit together my relationship with Mara and my relationship with U.N.C.L.E. and work at making that interlacing stay neat and tidy. However some decisions do wind up being taken out of our hands... for I also came back to Mara packing.

“I’m glad you’re back, Napoleon,” she said with an open smile as I entered her apartment and found her sorting through items laid out on the sofa in the living room with others already deposited in a couple of open suitcases on the floor. “I did so want to say goodbye in person.”

“Going on a trip?” I asked as I drew closer.

“I’ve been offered a professorship at Newcastle University in England and I’m taking it. I’ve already spoken with Mr. Waverly and he agrees it is likely the best thing for all concerned.”

Is there such a thing as a third dropped shoe? Or maybe I could more accurately describe this revelation as an exploding bombshell.

“What?” was all I could offer by way of shocked comment.

“My plane leaves tonight.”

“What?” I repeated rather inanely, my eyes in all likelihood as glazed as those of the victim of a hit-and-run accident.

She sighed gently, her expression as she looked at me both commiserating and compassionate. “We don’t mesh, Napoleon. I love you so much, and I really believe you love me, but somehow together we just don’t work.”

My heart went into wild protest mode while my head was advising me not to protest at all.

“Have you really been all that unhappy, Mara?” was the only inquiry that in the end fell from my lips.

“Oh darling, no!” she responded as she dropped the garment she was holding back onto the couch, walked to where I stood and wrapped her arms about my neck. “You guided me from nowhere toward somewhere, Napoleon, and I will always be grateful for that. Yet we both know that the time has come for me to be somewhere else.”

A wise man once said: If you cannot choose between the knowledge in your head and the feeling in your heart, let the strength of your soul cast the deciding vote. And my soul was strongly bound to U.N.C.L.E. and the ideals it espoused. Making a compromise on that had never been something I could honestly do. I faced that truth at last without any hesitation.

Maybe I am naïve in some ways. Certainly I am a romantic. I just know I really didn’t want to have to constantly school myself not to feel disoriented by the reverse pull of Mara’s Thrush-implanted moral compass. I didn’t need that kind of private mental torture in my personal life; I already had all of any kind of torture I could handle in my professional life. And Mara, God bless her, had realized that before I had and made the hard choice I didn’t want to have to make.

“I’ll miss you,” I told her in a resigned voice.

“And I’ll miss you, Napoleon,” she acknowledged in an equally subdued tone, “every single day for the rest of my life.”

We kissed: a tender, passionate, all-encompassing kiss of farewell, and we made love there on the rug for the very last time. That lovemaking was both scorchingly sensual and comfortingly caring for we both knew we would never in any way again touch.

Some weeks later Illya came into my office and plopped a surveillance dossier down on my desk. I picked it up with a inquiring look toward him.

“Better activate the security lock, Napoleon,” he advised me.

I didn’t question the request. After activating the lock, I opened the folder and saw it was the Section III ongoing report on Mara. The latest entry noted that she appeared to have been taken back into the fold of Thrush and also noted that her acceptance had apparently been championed by none other than Angelique.

I sighed in resignation. I had hoped against hope that this would not be the final outcome of Mara’s saga, but in my heart I suppose I had always felt this would be the inevitable ending.

“Angelique speaking up for her: Don’t you find that odd, Napoleon?” prompted Illya.

I purposely said nothing for I harbored no doubt that Illya, who knew me better almost than I knew myself, had unerringly surmised the truth. Thus what honestly was there for me to say?

“You loved her very much, my friend,” Illya stated matter-of-factly as he whisked the report from my hands and deactivated the security lock. “And no one will ever get the chance to respect you less for that on my account.”

With that he made his way out of my office as quickly and quietly as he had come and I knew the matter would never again be mentioned between us.

We all want to believe that love is made up forever of pure porcelain hearts and pleasantly perfumed flowers. But held too tightly, such hearts can crack and those flowers will wilt. So we need to loosen the hold to keep the love, and sometimes we have to release it altogether. I know a lot about that. It seems I've had to do that far too many times in my life.

Mara, my darling, there is a part of me that will always love you, as I am sure there is a part of you that will always love me. Yet love is so often not enough to make for the life we unconsciously seek through the needle of our moral compass. Sometimes one has to let go of love to do that. Still, my heart misses you and will miss you all the days of my life, just as it misses and will always miss Clara.

My heart aches from these losses, yet remains intact. The flowers of my memories remain alive and fragrant. Yet being me I will always take love wherever I can find it in the hope that someday I will find a love where I don't have to release my hold altogether in order to keep my heart whole and my memories from turning into nothing but dead and therefore rancid blooms.

—THE END—

