



There are, of course, all sorts of other unpleasant regimes outside the walls as well - the military dictators of Latin America and the apartheid regime of South Africa.

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VIBRATIONS THROUGH THE WALL

BY [LAH](#)

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The man suspended by his cuffed wrists from a chain draped over a low beam of the ceiling in the pharmaceutical warehouse “cool” room groaned uncomfortably. He hurt. God, how he hurt. He was cold as well, his shirt and undershirt having been stripped from him, leaving him clad only in his trousers and underlying shorts. His shoes and socks were gone too, and the soles of his chained-at-the-ankles bare feet had been subjected to sporadic burning with lit cigarettes by his captors. If he somehow managed to find a way free from his current incarceration, he really didn’t know if he would be able to run very far at all.

“*All I want for Christmas is my two good feet,*” Napoleon Solo thought ironically, the silly take on the classic holiday song causing him to grin inanely.

“Think you have something to smile about?” demanded the Thrush interrogator of his U.N.C.L.E. prisoner. The man followed that question with another ham-fisted punch to the torso of the hanging agent.

Napoleon grunted at the delivered blow. He was too exhausted to do anything more.

“Think again,” the interrogator threateningly counseled.

“I want the name,” demanded the other Thrush in the room, the one who would be labeled as ‘in charge’. “The name of the contact who tipped you off on our underground chemical transport operation.”

“Santa Claus,” responded Napoleon with stubborn bravado. “He slipped a holiday card with the name prettily printed inside into my Christmas stocking for being a good little U.N.C.L.E. agent this year.”

Another blow to the body was the Thrush reaction to this tenacious bluster.

“Better talk, U.N.C.L.E., if you want to survive till Christmas,” spoke the leader.

“’Twas some days before Christmas and all through Cape Town, U.N.C.L.E. was secretly working to bring Thrush down,” baited Napoleon, following the rhyme with a wildly misplaced giggle. He knew his brain was now deliriously disconnecting from the pain of the continuing physical punishment, and he was uncertain if he should struggle to combat the increasing sway of this dissociative mental coping mechanism.

“What a mouth on this one,” disgruntledly noted the muscleman after landing a hard hit to Napoleon’s jaw, one solid enough to forcibly turn Solo’s head to the side and split his lower lip. “It seems increasingly unlikely though the facile tongue in that smart mouth of his will provide us the information we’re seeking.”

The main man shrugged. “Our need for the black market chemical pipeline is over for this operation,” he reminded his cohort. “So we can permanently eliminate all our direct contacts and be done with it. The stool pigeon’s identity won’t matter when they’re all buried six feet under.”

“Central will still want this ‘good little U.N.C.L.E. agent’ slipped into their Christmas stocking.”

The lead Thrush shrugged yet again. “The only good U.N.C.L.E. agent is a dead U.N.C.L.E. agent. But we’ll nonetheless gift him to Central festively festooned in bloody red ribbons to show our proper contriteness for offing his buddy without their explicit consent.”

Buddy? Napoleon’s mental focus returned in force. These Thrush had killed Illya?

“Though the Council should be pleased the life of the Commie U.N.C.L.E. wound up serving, shall we say, a higher Thrush scientific purpose,” further declared the head villain with a truly unpleasant smile.

Scientific purpose? Napoleon tried to piece together what he was hearing. Was this warehouse then more than a storage/distribution point for the chemicals used in the unknown drug production? Was it as well the actual Thrush drug production lab facility?

“True enough,” the Thrush interrogator heartily agreed with his boss. “The infiltrating mouse taking on the final ‘undercover role’ of lab rat: indeed a fitting end for one of U.N.C.L.E.’s finest.”

“Score one billion for our side. Never let it be said Thrush does not find a valuable use for every creature stirring in its house,” the main man gloated. And that gloating over Illya’s ultimate sacrifice in a seemingly unsuccessful mission pushed away all of Napoleon’s exhausted and pain-induced torpor and filled him with renewed fury-fueled energy.

“Like hell!” thought Solo with every ounce of stubborn determination within him. *“I am not going to let Illya’s death have been for nothing!”* The stakes had now been raised to the highest level and Napoleon Solo was never one to back away from a challenge at those odds.

Making a pretense of at last falling into unconsciousness from this most recent beating, Napoleon slumped limply from his chains. The Thrush in charge shrugged dismissively and left the prisoner he would ultimately surrender to Central suspended in his bonds, calling in two underling guards to provide security.

Napoleon waited in feigned unconsciousness for that moment in time when one guard or the other would leave for whatever reason: dinner break or coffee break or bathroom break. His luck held and this occurred after about an hour. He prayed for the remaining guard to get close enough and that bit of good fortune happened as well, the Thrush minion coming forward and roughly grabbing hold of Solo’s forelock and raising his head to check if he was alive or dead. Continuing his possum ploy, Napoleon mentally held his breath as he kept his eyes steadfastly shut and his muscles flaccid. Then as the guard moved far enough away, he shot forward his legs and managed to throw his bound ankles over the man’s head.

He honestly didn’t know how he accomplished the feat, but he pulled backwards with all his might, his arms straining against the pressure of the suspended handcuffs as the chain about his ankles effectively strangled the guard. But he didn’t let the man’s body drop; instead he swung forward on the handcuff chains, his shoulder muscles vehemently protesting the motion. He was thus able to pull the man’s body back toward his position and then twist it until the keys to the handcuffs fell from the guard’s pocket to the floor. Finally he released the non-moving guard (dead or unconscious he didn’t know and didn’t care), rotating the body away from the fallen keys.

With a bare foot he was just able, by stretching and straining with incredibly excruciating grit, to grasp the key-ring on one of his exposed middle toes. How he flipped his lower body upward to grasp the key in a cuffed hand he would never precisely remember, but a monster surge of adrenaline often allows for seemingly impossible physical feats. It was no less a miracle that he got the cuffs unlocked just as the other guard returned to his post, two cups of coffee in hand, and was greeted by a totally unexpected head-butt and then a devastating double-fisted karate chop to the chest. The man dropped like a stone, splattering coffee in every direction in lieu of blood.

Panting from the exertion, exhausted, hurting, and internally mourning the loss of his best friend, Napoleon grabbed the weapons of the two downed guards. He had no real place to stash the huge Thrush rifles on his person at the moment as the belt to his trousers had been previously removed by his captors. For some reason he found this incredibly frustrating.

He didn’t know how long he had before the main Thrush or his “interrogation expert” returned. He had no real clue how many Thrush inhabited the satrap. He did know that where he had

been chained was in actuality a volatile chemical containment storage room. And the goose bumps on his naked chest certainly confirmed that the temperature in this room was pretty damn low. He didn't have anywhere near as much ready knowledge as Ilyia about the properties of various chemicals, but he said a little prayer that there was something stored here that could aid him in making history this Thrush facility that was at the very least a stockpile/distribution site and at the utmost the actual drug production lab.

Solo's luck held. As he rummaged amid the neatly stacked tanks and canisters in the room, thanking the heavens everything was so precisely labeled, he came across two substances that possessed properties he understood quite well: nitroglycerin and ethyl ether. So he had the means of blowing up the warehouse with the nitro, but first he needed to get it heated up. Bullets from the Thrush rifles might just be enough to ignite the flammable ether and provide that needed heat. The likelihood was that, once he started off an explosive chain reaction, he wouldn't himself make it out of the warehouse in time to actually avoid the volatile consequences. That was, however, par for the course. And Napoleon was more than willing to trust in his luck when honestly there wasn't any other viable alternative.

He pulled the smaller canister of ether from its shelf and then dragged it toward the larger tank of nitro on the opposite side of the room. This setup wouldn't provide him the best angle for taking aim at the canister, but he knew he currently didn't have the stamina to move the nitro tank itself. He would simply have to take his chances on accurately making the required shots.

Cautiously Napoleon moved to the door that the coffee-toting guard had never had a chance to close. Peering out, he saw no immediate traffic in the area. So he exited the room and, using the doorframe as a barrier, dropped one rifle at his feet and fired the other at the canister of ether as precisely as his somewhat shaky physical condition permitted.

The echoing sound of the rapid-fire shots as the bullets punctured the metal canister would surely send Thrush in this direction with all speed. He had little time. He emptied the full clip of the automatic rifle into the canister and then dropped the weapon. He grabbed the other gun as he took off running, unsure the flash ignition of the barrage of bullets had been enough to send the highly combustible chemical into open flames – flames required to get the refrigerated nearby nitro hot enough to explode.

Solo remembered little of his wild sprint through the maze that was the warehouse as he sought a way out. He did recall his burned feet protesting the pounding pace as well as the pivoting turns he had to make several times in order to shoot pursuing Thrush. Adrenaline alone was keeping him moving as the warehouse was violently rocked to its core, the ether and nitro both having done what Napoleon had desperately needed them to do. He was thrown to the floor by the initial surge of the explosion but recovered quickly, pushing himself onward as everything shook and surrendered stability around him. He had reached a door to what he hoped was the outside when a secondary blast again took him off his feet, propelling him face-first to the ground. As the concrete beneath him split, shifted and slanted, his body rolled sideways out the door that was swung open with sufficient force to partially rip the metal barrier off its hinges.

Momentarily dazed, Napoleon sat up and leaned against an outer wall of the building as he wiped plaster dust from his eyes and blinked at the unexpected nighttime darkness around him. Vibrations resonated against his back, vibrations reverberating ominously through the wall behind him. Staggering to his feet as he mentally reminded himself to KEEP MOVING, Napoleon Solo nevertheless stood stock-still and watched thunderstruck as that shuddering wall

collapsed away from him, revealing in a side area beyond its fallen substance none other than Illya Kuryakin bound to a gurney.

Launching his body forward despite the agony it caused him, Solo pushed his way through the debris into that now exposed room. Several Thrush lay dead or severely injured (and Napoleon again didn't care which) amongst the rubble. Napoleon's focus was solely on Illya. He made it to the gurney, its location in the center of the formerly enclosed space having saved it from much of the wreckage, and bent his head to his partner's chest. The sound of a very erratic heartbeat greeted his ears and he couldn't suppress a wide grin despite the direness of the situation. Illya was alive! Thank whatever magic of the season his star-and-sickle poster-boy partner would persistently not believe in, the stubborn Russian had again survived!

Solo unbound the unconscious man from the gurney and then considered how he could get him out of there. The warehouse was collapsing in fiery devastation all around them and, though a fireman's carry would have been the ticket in most circumstances, Napoleon knew his adrenaline-pumped energy was nearly at an end. He could barely breathe, his legs felt like jelly, the blisters on the bottoms of his feet stung and burst with every step, and his heart was pumping like an old-time blacksmith's bellows. Licking flames, like a starving horde, were quickly devouring the remaining standing walls of this chamber. Napoleon only had one choice and it wasn't one he favored, but there was nothing else to do.

Abandoning the Thrush rifle, Napoleon grabbed Illya by the shoulders and pulled him off the gurney and onto the floor. Grasping the smaller man under the armpits, he gave a mighty heave and bodily lugged Kuryakin out of the ruined lab barely ahead of the encroaching inferno.

"I'm sorry for the rough handling, Illya," he mentally apologized to his friend, *"but it's the best I can do under the circumstances."*

Yanking Illya through the decimated outer barricade over piles of broken concrete, smoldering dry-wall, twisted steel and who-knew-what-else, Napoleon somehow managed to get the other man beyond the immediate confines of the disintegrating structure. Mustering the last of his now all-but-depleted strength, he finally dragged his friend clear from the burning and rapidly crumbling warehouse to what he surmised a distance sufficiently out of harm's way.

A SLOW THROB...

The sound of fire-engine and ambulance sirens was like music to the ears of Napoleon Solo. His partner, Illya Kuryakin, needed medical attention and fast. The Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent was unconscious, his breathing irregular, and just placing a hand on the man's chest informed Solo that Kuryakin's heart was in distress, its beats wildly fluctuating in an uneven rhythm. Here in the open nighttime air, albeit air filled with smoke and reeking of the smell of various chemicals, Illya hadn't come around. He hadn't been beaten as Solo had been from what physical signs Napoleon could see. There were, however, dozens of needle tracks in both his arms, and Napoleon had no clue whatsoever what concoction had been introduced into the veins of his friend.

The paramedics were beside Solo now where he knelt near Illya. "He's been injected with something; I've no idea what or how much," Napoleon advised them.

One emergency medical technician nodded. “Gee vir ons ruimte om te werk aan hom,” he demanded in Afrikaans. Then repeated in English, which fortunately was one of the official languages in this country, “Give us room to work on him.”

Napoleon sat back on his haunches, the action causing much of his body weight to settle onto the blistered and now bleeding soles of his feet. Abruptly he fell onto one hip and elbow with an uncomfortable grunt. The other paramedic of the pair eyed him assessingly. “You don’t look in too good condition yourself, mister.”

“I’ll survive. Help Illya, will you?”

The paramedics set about stabilizing the unconscious man as best they could. All around the two medics and their patients squads of firefighters battled the raging conflagration that had been a large pharmaceutical warehouse. “What happened here?” the man who had spoken second of the medical team asked as they worked. It was apparent the other was the lead emergency tech and this man was there to assist only.

“Chemical explosion,” Solo kept the explanation as brief as possible. No need for these men to know the explosion had been purposeful. No need for them to know the pharmaceutical storage facility in question had been a Thrush satrap. No need for them to know what had been the intent of the now destroyed stock of chemicals.

“Convenient location to steal drugs. Your friend decide to shoot himself up with some of the booty as a personal holiday treat?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Napoleon stated in obvious frustration. “Look: there is an explanation for everything, but I doubt you’ll believe me at the moment. Suffice it to say whatever is now coursing through Illya’s bloodstream, he certainly didn’t put it there himself.”

The main paramedic eyed Solo suspiciously. “Jy doen dit?¹ Wind up shooting him up with too much? He then go on a drug-induced rampage, beating you up and setting the warehouse ablaze, before he collapsed?”

“Dammit, just help him!”

“Drug buddies on a spree,” murmured the secondary paramedic under his breath.

“We’re U.N.C.L.E. agents!” spat out Napoleon defensively.

The two emergency techs exchanged uncertain glances. They didn’t know if that meant anything, but they also didn’t know that it didn’t.

“Whatever,” the primary paramedic, who had never ceased his work on Illya – checking his vitals, setting up an I.V. line and slipping an oxygen mask over the nose and mouth of the unconscious man – dismissed Solo’s declaration. “You can explain it all to the authorities.”

The other medical technician brought out a collapsible gurney from the ambulance and helped the lead paramedic place Illya onto it. The two men moved in practiced tandem to arrange the I.V. bag as necessary and strap down the unconscious patient to ensure he didn’t roll off the

¹ You do it?

narrow pallet. As they worked, Napoleon struggled slowly to his physically protesting feet and then staggered against the assisting emergency tech.

“Too macho to be loaded onto a gurney yourself, heh?” questioned the paramedic as he steadied Napoleon.

“Listen, I—” Napoleon’s voice trailed off as a wave of dizziness almost threatened to take him face-first onto the adjacent asphalt.

The paramedic supported most of Napoleon’s weight as he guided him toward the ambulance. He then sat Solo down on the pavement with his back propped against the side of the truck. “Just sit here while we get your friend loaded in, all right?”

Napoleon nodded mutely.

The gurney carrying Illya was raised on its wheeled legs and finally loaded into the back of the ambulance as it was automatically thrust into a lowered position once more. With that done, the assisting tech returned to Napoleon and slipped an oxygen mask over his face. Napoleon didn’t resist the gesture. He was subsequently aided in regaining an upright posture and helped into the back of the ambulance, the doors finally firmly closed by that secondary paramedic.

The radio crackled in the front of the ambulance as the assistant technician returned to the driver’s seat. He took the radio mike in hand and depressed the transmit button.

“Pickup from Zonnebloem: two white males, early to mid-thirties. Apparent victims of pharmaceutical warehouse explosion and fire. One unconscious from drug injection: drug unknown. Other in severely battered physical condition with some second-degree burns on the soles of his feet, but conscious and coherent. On route to Kingsbury.

“Negative on destination,” came the dispatcher’s voice. “Proceed to Groote Schuur.”

The paramedic blinked and his colleague in the back tending to Kuryakin glanced up toward him. “Herhaal bestemming?” he suggested.

“Repeat destination?” the assisting paramedic relayed the lead’s question in English into the microphone.

“Proceed Groote Schuur.”

“Copy that,” acknowledged the secondary emergency tech. “Looks like it’s your friend’s lucky day,” he remarked offhandedly over his shoulder to an uncomprehending Solo. Then he hung the mike back in position on the dashboard and started up the engine and sirens of the ambulance.

“Of selfs meer ongelukkig²,” murmured the principal paramedic under his breath as he slipped back into Afrikaans.

Curiosity regarding the two emergency medics’ reaction to the altered destination got the better of Solo. He pulled down his oxygen mask to speak. Immediately the senior paramedic, without

² Or even more unlucky.

so much as even glancing in his direction, stated, "Better keep that on. We don't know what kind of fumes you were exposed to in the warehouse when it went up."

Napoleon ignored the caution and asked bluntly, "Why were you and your partner surprised about the change of hospital?"

The man gazed directly at Napoleon now. "Groote Schuur is a tertiary facility. Patients only come there through referral from a primary or secondary medical facility or care physician."

"I see."

"I doubt you do."

"My Afrikaans might be all but nonexistent, but I have a passable knowledge of Dutch, my friend," Solo assured the med tech, "and the two are fairly similar. Certainly similar enough that I caught the fact you thought the choice of hospital might be in some way unlucky."

The paramedic stared long and hard at Solo and then queried pointedly, "Do you not watch the news then? Do you not know what took place in Groote Schuur not three weeks ago?"

"The first human heart transplant," supplied Solo. "What has that to do with it?"

"Perhaps you did not know that transplant patient died yesterday."

"I didn't," admitted Solo. "I haven't gotten a chance to watch any newscasts recently," he lightly glossed over the fact his last twenty-four hours had been spent 'enjoying' Thrush 'hospitality', a state of affairs that definitely didn't include television privileges.

"Rumor being what it is, there is persistent talk that Dr. Barnard is seeking another heart to transplant into another patient. I thought perhaps, since your friend is a sudden accident victim, it might be that he is being brought to Groote Schuur in case his death should prove useful in achieving that goal."

Napoleon was completely taken aback by this line of conjecture. "Illya isn't going to die!" he exclaimed rather emphatically. Fate, after all, could never be so cruel. Not after it had so unexpectedly allowed him to find Illya alive, if not in any condition that could be described as 'well'.

The paramedic shrugged. "I have no means to know that with any form of certainty. But you needn't worry," he furthered as he pressed a stethoscope again to Kuryakin's chest. "Your friend's heartbeat is too arrhythmic to be considered for such purpose, even should he die."

"Illya does not have a heart arrhythmia."

"He certainly does at the moment," noted the paramedic as he continued to listen to Kuryakin's heartbeat through the stethoscope, "and a rather severe one at that."

That ipso-facto declaration raised tenfold Solo's own anxiety level regarding his friend's condition. Silence made the atmosphere in the ambulance even more uncomfortable as the truck sped through Cape Town evening traffic toward its final destination.

Without warning, Illya's eyes popped open and he struggled against the straps securing him to the gurney.

"Easy," Napoleon verbally soothed his partner as he placed a steadying hand on the arm of the other man. "We're taking you for medical treatment, Illya. It's all right."

Unable to pull the oxygen mask from his own face because of the hindrance of the gurney straps, Illya violently shook his head from side-to-side in an attempt to move askew the speech-inhibiting device. He needed to talk to Napoleon... now... before he passed out once more.

Napoleon understood his partner's physical signal and, over the protests of the paramedic, gently pulled the mask down off Illya's face.

"Napoleon," Illya wheezed out painfully. "Not one... drug... Many." Solo nodded his understanding. "But one... catalyst. Same... catalyst. Ask... Waverly."

"I will, Illya. Soon as we get to the hospital, I'll contact him," promised Napoleon as he slipped the oxygen mask back over Illya's nose and mouth. Solo no longer had his communicator in his possession, nor did Illya, but at the hospital the senior agent would be able to speak by phone to U.N.C.L.E.'s North American Continental Chief.

Illya nodded slowly. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed once again into a state of unconsciousness.

Seated in a wheelchair, a lightweight robe covering the standard hospital gown he wore, Napoleon Solo listened intently to the somewhat tinny sound of Alexander Waverly's voice as it was broadcast over the ultra-modern Magna-Phone Speaker system in the chief administrator's office of Groote Schuur Hospital. Napoleon had allowed the emergency physicians to do a cursory examination on him and submitted to having his ribs taped, his cuts sutured as needed, and his feet treated with salve and protectively bandaged. But, because it might require more than a local form of anesthesia, he wouldn't allow the doctors to probe fully into the nature and seriousness of any internal organ trauma he might have sustained. Not yet anyway. Not till after he finished this tête-à-tête with Mr. Waverly.

The background on this mission had been straightforward enough: Solo and Kuryakin were to work from two separate angles, an approach not in the least unusual with regard to any assignment. While Napoleon was put on the trail of various black-market sources providing Thrush with needed chemicals for their latest endeavor, Illya was delegated to investigate where those substances were being combined in the manufacture of the supra-nation's newest pharmacological brainchild. The problem was neither agent, nor indeed any U.N.C.L.E. source, knew exactly what that drug was intended to do. They knew Thrush's plan was to incapacitate important world leaders in a way that superseded any clear-cut evidence of one overriding plot. But how could one drug do that? And how could it be hidden from ready medical detection?

These questions had needed immediate answers, answers both Napoleon and Illya had pursued different paths to find. That those different paths had wound up in the end leading them to the same location was also not out-of-the-ordinary. From there though things got particularly murky. Neither man had been aware of where the other's undertaking had led him. Each had been captured separately, unaware of the other's fate. And both had suffered "coercive" interrogation at the hands of Thrush: Napoleon's entirely physical in nature and Illya's apparently attempted completely through chemical intervention.

Why two different questioning techniques had been utilized with no crossover in method between the grilling sessions for each man was a puzzle of sorts, but truthfully not a very important one to solve. Either way both men were in less than pristine shape: Napoleon's catalogue of injuries including several cracked ribs, the burns on his feet, and both external and internal bruising the full extent of which was still unknown, while Illya was in serious medical distress from a drug... or drugs... that had yet to be identified.

"Fortunately about a week ago," Waverly continued his exposition, "Mr. Kuryakin, while undercover as a low-level lab tech, was able to procure a sample of what he heard the Thrush in charge describe as 'the magic bullet'. As you are aware, Mr. Solo, U.N.C.L.E. has no chartered presence in Cape Town, or indeed in any of South Africa."

"Yes sir," acknowledged Napoleon. "I know pivotal members of the South African government question our hiring policies in particular for Section II, thinking those policies too open with regard to race."

"Indeed, Mr. Solo. They believe such positions should be racially restricted to guarantee a uniform level of... field resourcefulness."

Napoleon harrumphed. "Showing they have no understanding of what goes into actually ensuring the 'field resourcefulness' of a Section II U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"Unfortunately. And we have to date been unable to convince them otherwise or dissuade them of their stubbornness in this regard. Therefore it was necessary to smuggle the sample out of South Africa into a country with full-scale U.N.C.L.E. representation. The nearest Command lab facility with the proper advanced technological equipment to perform optimal experimentation on the sample is in Cairo. And that's where that sample, what Mr. Kuryakin described to you as the catalyst, is currently."

"What exactly is the nature of this catalyst, Mr. Waverly? Illya spoke of there being 'many drugs' but 'one catalyst', the 'same' catalyst."

"And that is the genius of the substance, Mr. Solo. It isn't itself a drug in the conventional sense. Rather it is a manufactured reagent that can combine with many standard drugs, both prescription and non-prescription, to produce chain reactions that result in the release of a poisonous toxin in the bloodstream. The undeniable brilliance of the design is that the interaction with any drug does not produce the same signature toxin every time, but rather many different and entirely unique variations. Thus the catalyst leaves no easily identifiable footprint."

This news heightened Napoleon's already intense concern for his friend and partner. Knowing the gesture unseen by his boss, Napoleon exhibited his personal angst regarding Illya's tenuous situation with a fretful if brief facepalm.

"I sent Dr. Isis to Cairo to oversee research on the properties of the catalyst," Waverly informed Solo.

Napoleon heartily approved of that decision on the Old Man's part. Nen Isis was an extremely skilled lab tech with plenty of experience in the sometimes weird world of Thrush chemical innovations.

"I bet Nen wasn't any too pleased to return to Cairo," Napoleon made an offhand observation.

Nen Isis was an Egyptian by nationality. However, his harsh childhood in the streets of Egypt's capital city and the somewhat involuntary nature of his adolescence in the home of a wealthy socialite there had left him with little fondness for his country of birth.

"Dr. Isis is first and foremost an employee of U.N.C.L.E. Thus he goes where his superiors determine necessary to benefit the needs of the Command," the North American Continental Chief reminded his Chief of Enforcement in no uncertain terms.

"Of course, sir," agreed Napoleon with all due respect. "Has he had any success in determining the properties of the catalyst?"

"Quite a good deal of success in that regard. Thus I am confident he can find a way to identify and counteract whatever toxin... or toxins... the interaction of the reagent with a drug or drugs has created in Mr. Kuryakin's blood."

"That is encouraging to hear."

"Indeed," conceded Waverly. "And fundamentally important in that his research into Mr. Kuryakin's condition could well provide us a viable means to readily detect the reagent in the bloodstream, and thus stem Thrush's successful employment of it as a means of getting rid of persons standing in the way of their plans in certain countries."

"But we do have a critical problem in this regard, Mr. Solo," Waverly tempered the optimistic quality of his previous statements.

"Sir?" questioned Napoleon.

"Dr. Isis will need access to samples of Mr. Kuryakin's blood, samples that must be gathered over a period of hours at the very least. Sending such samples to Cairo for examination isn't practical, I'm sure you understand."

"So he has to work in Cape Town."

"Precisely, Mr. Solo. And have access not only to such blood samples, but to sophisticated laboratory facilities to test them in context with the catalyst."

"And U.N.C.L.E. has no such facilities in South Africa available for him to use," extrapolated Napoleon.

"Unfortunately not. But several hospitals in Cape Town, most notably Groote Schuur, do have such facilities."

"However," Napoleon easily followed the direction of his superior's logic, "the government of South Africa has no charter agreement with U.N.C.L.E."

"And that is the crux of the matter," acknowledged Waverly. "That is why you, Mr. Solo, as U.N.C.L.E.'s representative onsite, must make a strong face-to-face case with the South African political powers-that-be in order to gain Dr. Isis access to such facilities."

Napoleon bit his lip in private consternation before he spoke again. "Mr. Waverly, you do realize the sheer magnitude of this task? Nen is what apartheid policy terms as 'coloured'."

“And Groote Schuur is a privileged ‘white’ hospital. I do realize the enormity of the charge I am giving you, Mr. Solo. Yet that you can handle this responsibility, I have not a doubt in the world. After all, Mr. Kuryakin’s life depends upon your success.”

“*Score one billion for Mr. Waverly,*” ruefully thought Napoleon in direct counterpoint to the Thrush boss’ gloating during his captivity. His own U.N.C.L.E. boss had never been beyond using motivations particular to the psyches of his agents. Thus that his friendship with Illya should be exploited by Waverly as this form of motivation was not in the least unexpected. The Old Man was indeed a sly old fox.

“You’ll arrange the necessary meetings for me, sir?” asked Napoleon, acknowledging his acceptance of this nearly impossible undertaking.

“Immediately, Mr. Solo. I understand that, due to your enforced stay in Thrush’s less than welcoming hands, your physical condition is somewhat the worse for wear. So I will request the meetings take place at the hospital for such reason.”

“Thank you, sir,” a somewhat weary Napoleon expressed his gratitude.

“The least I can do to ease your burden, Mr. Solo. But let me assure you that I have every faith in your abilities as a liaison in this pursuit.”

“I appreciate that, sir. I will certainly do my best.”

“Miss Rogers will contact you with the particulars of the arrangements, once they are finalized.”

“I don’t have a communicator at present.”

“One of our local undercover agents should be arriving at the hospital within the hour with that and a few other necessary devices, as well as a proper change of clothing. You must look the part of an U.N.C.L.E. Chief of Enforcement for these negotiations.”

“Of course,” acquiesced Napoleon. “I won’t disappoint you, sir.”

“I surely expect that you won’t, Mr. Solo. Carry on.” With that final admonition, the line was disconnected from Waverly’s side.

Napoleon listened for a full minute to the stark electronic drone of the dial tone as it hummed through the speaker phone, the sound dully vibrating with a slow throb through the wall against which the instrument rested. At last he leaned forward and pressed the button to turn off the machine. For the briefest moment he propped his elbows on the desk and cradled his head in his hands. Then he determinedly pushed the wheelchair in which he was sitting away from the desk with both those hands, turned the conveyance toward the door and guided himself out of the confines of the hospital administrator’s office.

He had an assignment to perform and it was one that held more personal consequences bound up in its successful completion than any with which he had ever before been commissioned.

A PERIODIC PULSE...

"I do appreciate your position, gentlemen," Napoleon Solo, in his most affable if serious tone of voice, assured the group gathered around the conference table. Each of these men, for male they all were much to Napoleon's consternation, was either a representative of the South African government or a prominent member of the hospital board. They also were all indisputably white.

"With all due respect, Mr. Solo, I don't think you do," one of the government men asserted strongly if politely. "Groote Schuur has recently been set directly before the eyes of the world. A break from our legislated policies coming to the attention of that on-looking world would be akin to saying those policies are less than optimal."

Resisting the urge to simply declare his own opinion downright that such was very much the case with regard to the apartheid laws, Napoleon kept his focus on achieving the current goal: getting Dr. Isis admittance to and full benefit of the hospital's state-of-the-art lab facilities. That was simply essential in the quest to determine how exactly the reagent was interacting with whatever drugs had been introduced into Illya's bloodstream and, by extension, any other possible drug interaction Thrush's more covert usage of the catalyst might produce in other human targets. "U.N.C.L.E. has no intention of making this venture any form of public knowledge," he guaranteed.

That initiated a scoffing harrumph from one of the less civil officials. "Mr. Solo, we all know that secrets seldom stay so where the world press is concerned. One chance view of your Dr. Isis entering the lab facilities here would be all it would take to expose the whole affair."

The last word the man chose to make his point stuck sideways in Napoleon's craw. He swallowed and attempted to remain calm. These men just didn't understand; they refused to believe in the magnitude of Thrush as a negative force set on the domination of humanity. Instead they were concerned with "keeping up appearances" with regard to the antiquated principles of their separatist social regime.

Napoleon purposely stared at the somewhat scraggly, by American standards, "Christmas fir" standing in one corner of the room. It was two days before the signature winter holiday, but here in South Africa it was full summer, the heat effusively reflecting that season. It felt unnatural somehow, that heat: as incongruous to Solo's body as the ideals of these men were incongruous to his soul. Dealing diplomatically with them was proving more of a challenge than even he had anticipated. And he knew his somewhat compromised physical condition left him with less positive energy to effectively channel into those dealings. Yet he had to make this work. Not only did the possible continuance of world balance depend upon him doing so, but Illya's life as well.

Routinely counting off in his head the number of traditional bell and star ornaments hanging from the thin branches of the bedecked evergreen provided Solo with a workable mind-occupying exercise to aid in fully regaining his self-control. "U.N.C.L.E. will take every precaution to guard against that happening," he then persisted with seemingly unperturbed equanimity.

"We cannot count on that. We have, after all, no charter of cooperation with the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Thus, if something unfortunate should happen in that regard, our position in holding U.N.C.L.E. accountable would be tenuous at best. We would

have no sure recourse to demand Waverly and the Command make true efforts to set all right in the public view.”

“U.N.C.L.E. does not abandon those who assist in endeavors against the manipulations of Thrush,” stated Napoleon a bit tersely.

“Still is it a more secure path for us to take no part whatsoever in such endeavors.”

At the far end of the table the renowned Dr. Christiaan Barnard kept silent. He simply listened as if none of this truly involved him, when in actuality the recent notoriety his heart transplant operation had afforded this hospital was at the core of the issue. Napoleon found he could not gauge the man at all, a very unusual situation for the U.N.C.L.E. agent whose “people intuition” had garnered him successful results in often quite negative circumstances. He had heard that Barnard was not a proponent of apartheid and thus Solo had hoped to gain the man’s support in his pursuit. Yet Barnard was proving particularly... well, one couldn’t say uncooperative exactly. It was more that he seemed to be maintaining a state of absolute neutrality in the matter. Yet at the moment Napoleon needed allies in his cause, not someone resolved on playing the personal role of Switzerland.

“Gentlemen, Thrush does not care that you have no charter of cooperation with U.N.C.L.E. That their lab facility for the creation and/or distribution of this hazardous reagent was housed here should apprise you of the danger posed even those who think to take no part in endeavors against this insidious organization,” Napoleon made his point bluntly.

Several of the officials did look thoughtful after hearing this. True, the Thrush lab had been operating here in Cape Town right under their noses. And, whether they believed Thrush a legitimate threat or not, there could be no question dangerous substances being manufactured or distributed from within South African borders was far from a politically acceptable situation.

Though dressed in a professional shirt-tie-and-suit manner, Napoleon was still seated in a wheelchair and wore slippers instead of shoes in deference to his badly injured and protectively bandaged feet. Beneath his crisp linen shirt, his ribs were heavily taped and his insides ached more than he would ever concede. He had refused painkillers. He needed all his wits about him to broker these delicate negotiations. Thus he was hurting and occasionally even he could not hide his physical discomfort. Such a moment occurred now as he shifted in his wheelchair, his face paling a good deal.

“Let us take a break, gentlemen,” proposed the heretofore notably silent Dr. Barnard.

Napoleon did not argue against the suggestion. Truth be told, he needed a short recess in the difficult parley to try and recoup his bodily as well as his mental composure.

As those in the room all dispersed into the hallway, Napoleon steered his wheelchair into the corner nearest the decorated Christmas fir, as it was referred to in this country. Not being particularly up on botany, Napoleon could only guess as to the actual species of the tree. The needles attested to its coniferous nature, but the foliage wasn’t anywhere near as dense as the usual pines or spruces used most often in North American or European holiday celebrations. To his American eyes the wide-spaced branches gave it a certain forlorn look, despite the shiny bells and glittering stars suspended from them.

“A *Charlie Brown tree*,” thought Napoleon with a small smirk, emotionally associating the fir with the honestly much punier evergreen in the popular Peanuts’ holiday cartoon first broadcast in the States a couple of years before. “*Most prosaically appropriate*,” he further mused as he reached out and touched a few of the particularly South African ornaments, letting one of the golden bells tinkle softly as he caressed it within his fingers.

Truth be told this wasn’t where he wanted to spend Christmas: in a country where the inhabitants regularly made beach picnics of their holiday dinners and full-blossomed flowers of every variety replaced strands of tinsel and strings of colored lights. Everything here for him was for the moment upside-down and wrong-end-up. It was not his idea of a festive celebration trying to convince a bunch of head-in-the-sand diplomats to take an open stand for what was right. And most definitely it was no kind of holiday contemplating the possibility of Illya slowly dying because of the image-bound pigheadedness of said diplomats.

For a moment Napoleon rubbed absentmindedly at his rather sore right shoulder. Then, resting his head against the steadiness of the wall behind him, he closed his eyes not only as a respite against weariness and pain, but against sheer frustration as well. Gentle, spasmodic vibrations played through his skull from its contact with that barrier: a subtle reminder of the life-saving energy constantly flowing through the corridors behind it. The conference room was disconnected from the systematic mayhem inherent in a busy hospital as people and machinery worked in consort toward the main goal of preserving life. Just as the men who had met with him in this room were disconnected from the controlled turmoil inherent in U.N.C.L.E.’s mix of personnel from many nations unified in the struggle toward the main goal of safeguarding humanity. And that disconnection was, he recognized, rather pitiable, if intensely exasperating.

With his head comfortably leaning against the wall, Napoleon allowed himself to be momentarily soothed by the heart-bound pulse-like cadence of continuing dedication toward life and humanity that surrounded the isolated conference room and his solitary mission. Sensing his wrist lifted within warm fingers, however, the fleetingly relaxed Solo pulled back his arm in sudden and aggressive readiness, his mind and body instantly alert.

“U.N.C.L.E. agent training I take it?” Dr. Christiaan Barnard surmised with a slight smile.

“I’m sorry, Doctor.”

“No, I’m sorry I didn’t warn you I was going to take your pulse.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

Napoleon gazed into the knowledgeable eyes of the other man. “All right, I’m not,” he admitted, albeit still reluctantly. “But I don’t have the luxury right now to worry about my little hurts.”

“Little hurts?” questioned Barnard with a lopsided grin. “The impression I have is that, under that impeccably tailored suit, your body at the moment is being held together by yards of tape and linen bandages, along with some precisely placed sutures.”

Napoleon shrugged. “It’s not exactly a condition foreign to me.”

Barnard chuckled softly. “Should I be impressed?”

Napoleon shrugged once more. "I'd rather you backed me up against those administrative mules."

Once more Barnard softly chuckled. "They are rather mulish in their adherence to their outdated philosophy, aren't they?"

Napoleon grunted his agreement.

"May I make another suggestion?"

"If it is as welcome as your last one, by all means do, Doctor."

"Perhaps you are trying too hard."

"Pardon?"

"Perhaps instead of trying to overturn the applecart, you need to just tip or jiggle it a bit to shake loose what apples you need."

"I'm not sure I understand," Napoleon noted in some confusion.

"Oh, I think you do, Mr. Solo. Disarm them with compromise. I have already observed you have the tact necessary to do exactly that."

"Sadly my tact is waning."

"I was called in to consult on your friend's condition," Barnard unexpectedly switched conversational gears. "His heart is under a lot of stress. I advised he be put into a medical coma to keep it from overworking."

Napoleon's brow furrowed in concern. Time was running out. Then he squinted and tilted his head as he stared up at the standing Barnard. "That intended as a motivational speech?"

"Seems to me you U.N.C.L.E. agents don't lack for positive motivation."

"It's a gift," quipped Napoleon drily.

"Or a burden."

"I don't feel burdened by doing what I believe is right."

Barnard gave Napoleon another lopsided grin. "I would say touché, Mr. Solo, but I prefer the restrained ingenuity of less obvious jabs."

"Have I been rude?" Napoleon apologized, but not quite.

Barnard slowly shook his head. "Try making a stir with less force. The smoother the rocking of the boat, the more likely it is to lull rather than upset."

"Calling Dr. Barnard; calling Dr. Christiaan Barnard," came a voice over the hospital speaker system. "Report to cardiac intensive care unit: stat."

Without another word, Dr. Barnard turned and started steadfastly on his way to attend to his chosen dedication, leaving Napoleon alone to consider exactly how best to attend to his.

A STEADY THRUM...

Christmas Eve in this year of 1967 dawned in Cape Town as sun-drenched with the “healing” winds of “die Kaapse dokter” blowing rather strongly through the city. The men gathered in the windowless conference room in Groote Schuur Hospital, however, noticed not at all. Yet was there a healing wind seemingly blowing strongly through that room as well.

“It is agreed then, gentlemen?” questioned Napoleon amiably.

The others in the room all nodded shortly. A compromise acceptable to both sides had finally been reached.

Wordlessly Napoleon acknowledged his gratitude to all the U.N.C.L.E. Section IV personnel he had kept busy most of night providing him necessary data to broker this deal. All the research had paid off and, though he was now utterly exhausted, Solo was as well completely content. He hoped Mr. Waverly would be as pleased with the finalized results as he was himself.

“Dr. Isis will have full access to the laboratory facilities at Somerset Hospital and whatever equipment lacking that is sufficiently portable in nature will be furrowed there from the lab facilities here at Groote Schuur.”

Somerset was the oldest hospital in Cape Town and had, before the construction of Groote Schuur, been the primary teaching hospital as well. It housed quite adequate lab facilities and was within near proximity to Groote Schuur. More importantly it was a “mixed race” hospital, tending in the main to non-whites. Thus Nen Isis’ status as “coloured” under apartheid law mattered not at all in that environment.

“A special medical courier service that will include an U.N.C.L.E. security detail will transport the blood samples needed on a bihourly basis between this hospital and Somerset,” Solo further summarized the approved plan. “And whatever strategy Dr. Isis details with regard to treatment of Mr. Kuryakin to counteract the reagent will be medically performed by predetermined specialists in their fields, a list of which I have included in my written proposal, here at Groote Schuur.”

Illya was, at present, in no condition to be ferried to the other hospital. And as well his “white” status under apartheid law would have made the doctors of Groote Schuur reluctant to move him to Somerset. But sending his blood samples over for examination at the other facility was something to which no objection would be raised.

U.N.C.L.E. was of course picking up the tab for all this, and Napoleon was sure the Old Man would grumble about that part of the bargain. Yet there could be little doubt Solo’s proposed arrangement was the best solution to be had in a difficult situation. And Waverly would definitely appreciate the precise balancing act his Chief of Enforcement had needed to perform to achieve accord on all sides.

“Additionally all medical information attained through Dr. Isis’ research will be shared by U.N.C.L.E. with appropriate foundations in South Africa.”

This too was not standard procedure for the Command, but it provided the carrot Napoleon had needed to dangle to make the transaction all but irresistible. Barter with governments was never without some unforeseen outlay, and this particular price Napoleon felt sure Waverly would find reasonable if atypical.

“All in all, a very suitable solution, Mr. Solo,” praised the previously less-than-civil civil servant at the table. “And one that, may I be so bold as to forward, grants the possibility of the South African government being painted in a very positive, humanitarian light by members of the world press.”

If Solo found it ironic that this particular official was now seemingly voicing favor with the idea of media exposure regarding the use of Groote Schuur as a base to identify and reverse the drug interactions of the Thrush reagent, the representative of U.N.C.L.E. certainly had no intention of making any open comment in that regard. It was, after all, only to be expected. Politicians were the same the world over: always looking for an angle to superimpose themselves into a favorable forefront position in the minds and hearts of the general public.

“All right then, gentlemen;” Solo finalized as he set his signature on behalf of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement upon the last page of the document open on the table in front of him, “the terms are now bindingly authorized as discussed.” And with the inking of that signature Napoleon felt an inner peace envelop him for he knew he had succeeded in giving Illya a true fighting chance at survival. In all honesty that was all for which any U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agent could ever hope to ask.

There was a ripple of quiet applause from the others gathered at the table, initiated by none other than “Switzerland” himself, Dr. Christiaan Barnard.

“Well, I’d blush,” thought Napoleon with a secret smile, *“but hell, I think I do deserve applause for pulling this off. And to think Mr. Waverly likely has to hammer out pacts like this every day,”* awe of the Old Man filled his consciousness.

Once the applause had faded, the government delegates and hospital administrators rose and began to file out of the conference room, each in turn taking a moment to stop by Napoleon’s wheelchair and shake his hand. The last to take his leave was Dr. Barnard.

“Applecart still upright, Doctor,” noted Napoleon with a wide grin as the other man shook his hand, none too discreetly letting his fingers slip to Solo’s wrist to check his pulse as he did so.

“And all needed apples shaken loose and diligently gathered,” Barnard noted in turn with an affirmative nod of his head as he let his fingers rest on Napoleon’s wrist a moment or two longer. “I am indeed impressed, Mr. Solo. Yet now I hope you will let the medical staff here fully tend to your ‘little hurts’?”

Napoleon chuckled. “I’m not a masochist, Doctor, no matter what you might think. I am, in fact, looking forward to a bit of tender loving medical care. Preferably involving a bevy of attractive female nurses,” he added with a ready wink.

Now it was Barnard who grinned widely. “I’ll see what can be arranged,” the ‘doctor of hearts’ stated with a ready wink of his own.

“But I do have to make my report to Mr. Waverly first.”

“Don’t take too long with that, Mr. Solo,” cautioned the doctor. “Your pulse is a bit faster than it should be.”

“Hey, I just pulled off quite the coup. Being excited is a natural reaction, no?”

Yet just at the moment Napoleon did feel a bit woozy. The moment passed quickly, however; thus he didn’t mention the occurrence to Barnard.

“Just get your report over and done and let the other professionals in this building do their particular kind of analysis and reconciliation, all right?”

Napoleon nodded. That action brought back on the wooziness, but he purposely ignored it. There would be time to deal with that, and all his other bodily ailments, soon enough. “Will do, Doctor,” he guaranteed his future cooperation with the medical staff.

Barnard briefly pressed a hand to Napoleon’s right shoulder. The gesture caused a painful spasm in that area as well as in the upper right side of his abdomen, but Napoleon gave no outward evidence of his discomfort. Satisfied, the surgeon made his way out of the room.

Napoleon wheeled his chair again near the location of the Christmas fir. He eyed the evergreen with new eyes, seeing in its traditional ornamental display the degree of care that had gone into its decoration. “*I never really thought it was such a bad little tree,*” he mentally conceded, his unspoken words purposely paraphrasing those of Linus in that holiday cartoon. For suddenly he very much felt like celebrating Christmas, even though it was summer here and beach picnics replaced more conventional feasts. Perhaps he would try, if the doctors would permit it, to get outside later and listen for a bit to the caroling by candlelight he knew was customary to the season here in Cape Town.

Unpocketing his communicator and flipping it into transmit mode, he spoke happily into the instrument. “Open Channel D. International relay. Solo to Waverly.”

“Geseënde Kersfees Eva³, Napoleon,” came the voice of Heather McNabb over the transmitter.

“Brushing up on Afrikaans, Heather?”

“Only enough to offer you season’s greetings. Have I impressed?”

“Heather, my sweet, you always impress. Speaking of the niceties of the season, I have an early Christmas gift to present to Mr. Waverly. So patch me in please, my impressive lovely?”

“I’m on the line, Mr. Solo,” Waverly interrupted. “Your report?”

“Send Dr. Isis over ASAP, sir. We have a deal with the South African government that will allow him to use the research facilities of Somerset Hospital as well as needed equipment and staff from Groote Schuur.”

“Dr. Isis is currently on a flight from Cairo to Cape Town and should be arriving within the hour.”

“Well, that’s a surprise!”

³ Merry Christmas Eve

“Why should it be, Mr. Solo? As I assured you when I gave you the assignment to work out an understanding with the South African government, I have every faith in your abilities.”

“I’m flattered, sir.”

“Having the expectation of my chief agent doing a thoroughly capable job isn’t extending flattery, Mr. Solo.” Yet both men knew it undoubtedly was, and that it was warmed Napoleon right down to his toes. “You may provide to Miss McNabb the details of the arrangement made with the South African government in this matter. Waverly out.”

“You hear that, Heather?”

“I hear everything, Napoleon.”

That made Solo chuckle, despite the fact he really was feeling a bit dizzy and a little faint. His right shoulder ached abominably and there was a tightness in the upper right side of his abdomen that he never remembered being associated with any of the cracked ribs he had previously suffered. The many hours of research and negotiation were evidently getting the best of him in his debilitated physical condition.

“I’ve no doubt of that, my little communications wizard,” he nonetheless kept up the breezy quality of the conversation as he playfully teased the female U.N.C.L.E. operative on the open channel. “But down to the business directly at hand.

“Beginning transmission of official agreement between United Network Command for Law and Enforcement and The Republic of South Africa with regard to current temporary access of U.N.C.L.E. personnel to specified South African government medical research facilities, equipment and personnel,” he therefore stated more seriously as he laid in his lap the document he had signed. Opening it to the first page, he launched into the task of verbally delivering that document’s entirety over the private channel for transcription at U.N.C.L.E. HQ in New York.

Napoleon had just finished up the verbal transmission of the contract between U.N.C.L.E. and the South African government and was engaging in a final bit of friendly flirting with Heather McNabb before signing off the channel when the communications operative interrupted him.

“Napoleon, hold on. Information is coming in from Dr. Isis on another channel.”

Solo waited patiently while Heather coordinated with the operative handling the other open line.

“Napoleon?”

“I can tell by the tone of your voice it isn’t good news. Spill it, Heather.”

“Dr. Isis’ flight has landed in Cape Town, but it seems that the custom authorities at the airport have informed him that, negotiated deal with U.N.C.L.E. or no, the samples of the reagent he brought with him from Cairo will, as a potentially hazardous substance, need to be kept in quarantine for twenty-four hours.”

“*Dammit!*” Napoleon mentally cursed, refraining from doing so aloud in deference to Heather’s gender. He had been strictly raised to consider it but common courtesy not to resort to ‘colorful’

language in mixed company. “I’m on it, Heather,” he assured the communications agent. “Solo out.”

Napoleon dropped his communicator pen in his lap and swung his wheelchair in a quick arc toward the door of the conference room. He never made it to that portal however, as the sudden motion sent his equilibrium wildly spinning out-of-control, blurring his vision and then filling his range of sight with eruptions of lightning-like shafts of illumination. He never even felt the collision his body made with the floor as he passed out, slipping fully unconscious from the confines of the wheelchair.

Napoleon awoke to the episodic beep-beep-beep of a heart monitor. For a brief moment he woozily thought he had fallen asleep sitting in Illya’s hospital room. Then memory returned in an abrupt flash, causing him to attempt to sit up just as abruptly in the bed on which he lay. A determined hand on his shoulder and a sturdy forearm across his chest deterred him in that objective, however.

“You have to stay put, Mr. Solo.” Napoleon recognized the voice as that of Dr. Christiaan Barnard. “You’ve sustained rather significant bruising to the liver along with a moderate laceration to that organ. That’s what caused your blood pressure to plummet and you to pass out.”

“I have a mission to complete!” insisted a definitely distressed Napoleon. “Illya—”

“Is much improved,” Barnard interjected. “We woke him from the induced coma about three hours ago.”

Napoleon blinked up at Barnard in surprise. Sensing Solo’s body relax, the doctor released his anchoring grip.

“May I compliment your organization on their scientific research staff?” continued the surgeon. “Dr. Isis is quite remarkable in that regard, quickly recognizing minute correlations that could have quite reasonably taken many days or even weeks to piece into any kind of coherent pattern. Instead it took him only hours to do so, once he had ready access to Mr. Kuryakin’s blood samples.”

“He did have about a week’s head start on deconstructing the catalyst back in the lab in Cairo,” clarified Solo. “So he has come up with an effective treatment for Illya?” he then queried with an obvious note of both hope and trepidation in his voice.

Barnard nodded, which quelled the last of Napoleon’s anxiety.

“I must say you U.N.C.L.E. agents do exhibit iron constitutions,” the cardiologist added with a small smirk.

Napoleon could not help but laugh at that, though doing so did result in pain both in his ribs and somewhere deeper internally. “That’s been said of Illya more than once,” he assured Barnard.

“And of you too, no doubt, Mr. Solo. Even when I pressed a hand to your shoulder looking to elicit a natural pain reflex, you stoically hid all outward signs of having suffered a bruised and lacerated liver until it knocked you right off your feet... or out of your chair, I should say.”

“I had—”

“A mission to complete,” Barnard finished off his statement. “Yes, I understand that such is of paramount importance to you all.”

“Well, in this case friendship played a good deal into the urgency, Doctor.”

Again Barnard nodded. “I understood that too.”

“But I’m confused,” submitted Napoleon. “Last thing I remember South African customs was making a case to have Dr. Isis’ reagent samples held in quarantine for twenty-four hours. Surely I haven’t been out for that long?”

Barnard chuckled. “Well, sedating the patient to keep him immobile during surgery is always recommendable, and your injury did require surgical intervention. But no, you haven’t been out for twenty-four hours. More like fifteen or so by my estimate.”

Napoleon furrowed his brow. “Then how...?” He trailed off, his eyes focused on those of Barnard as he awaited an answer to his half-formed but still fully graspable question.

Barnard’s lips curved in a very slow and somewhat roguish grin. “Notoriety does have its privileges, Mr. Solo.”

“You intervened in U.N.C.L.E.’s behalf?”

“Let’s just say I whispered a word or two in the right ear.”

“I’m extremely grateful, Doctor,” Napoleon sincerely thanked the man.

“You didn’t think I spoke of shaking the applecart from a purely impersonal standpoint, did you, Mr. Solo?”

Napoleon blushed slightly. After all he had mentally catalogued Barnard as a seemingly impartial but also clinically detached human version of Switzerland. “Well...”

Barnard only laughed at Napoleon’s obvious discomfort. “Don’t be embarrassed, Mr. Solo. No one accounts me as a truly giving personality. I don’t doubt you could find many who would label me as outright arrogant, and perhaps I am. I do prize my fame; yet more do I prize the leeway it grants me.”

“To whisper a word or two in the right ear?”

“Something like that.”

Remembering the “accusation” made by the paramedic who had brought him and Illya to Groote Schuur, Napoleon chuckled.

“Something you want to share?” inquired Barnard with a tilt of his head.

“The ambulance meds... well, one of them... on the ride here... He suggested Illya in particular was being brought to Groote Schuur because... Well, as a possible heart donor if he died.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Barnard dismissed that possibility. “Mr. Kuryakin had been heavily drugged and thus, even if he did die, was never really a candidate for such. However, if the surgical team that handled the operation on your liver hadn’t been completely proficient in their task, I might have requested of U.N.C.L.E. the donation of your heart,” he teased, giving Napoleon quite a long moment of speechless pause.

Then Barnard winked. “Rest properly, Mr. Solo, and don’t require me to contemplate such a possibility any time in the near future.”

“Scout’s honor, Doctor!” pledged Napoleon as he gave Barnard the three-fingered Boy Scout salute.

Barnard deftly grasped the wrist Napoleon had raised in that salute and counted out Solo’s pulse. As he glanced at his watch to perform that standard check, he noted in a very ordinary tone of voice, “It’s gone on midnight. Geseënde Kersfees, mnr. Solo. Mag jy hou die hart wat nodig is om baie meer te geniet.”⁴

The comforting pressure of those skilled fingers caused Napoleon to feel the steady thrum of his own blood as it flowed beneath the barrier of flesh in his wrist. He found that even rhythm both soothing and invigorating. Preserving life, safeguarding humanity: they were intimately interconnected and could each produce perceptible vibrations through even the densest of walls, whether those walls were built of stone and mortar, skin and bone, or institution and prejudice.

January 3, 1968
Cape Town, South Africa

“I don’t see why I can’t return today to New York on the U.N.C.L.E. private jet with you and Nen,” complained Napoleon rather grumpily.

“Because the results of your blood and liver enzyme tests have not been favorable for the past two days,” Illya supplied the rational explanation.

The Russian agent was fully dressed in white shirt, black suit and tie, but sat currently in a wheelchair within Solo’s hospital room. The American, on the other hand, was clothed in pajamas and was sitting up in his hospital bed, to which he was once more confined.

“But they are fine today!” Napoleon insisted in much the manner of a cranky child.

“And if they remain so for the next two days, you will be taken off complete bed rest and permitted to catch a commercial flight home.”

“I’ve had enough bed rest, complete or otherwise!”

“That more of it has been prescribed for you is your own fault, do remember, my friend. If you hadn’t decided to... What is the expression? Ah yes, ‘score’ with the night-duty nurse on New Year’s Eve—”

“Have a heart, Illya,” interjected Napoleon with just a bit of a whine in his tone.

⁴ Merry Christmas, Mr. Solo. May you keep the heart needed to enjoy many more.

"I still did, last I checked," deadpanned the Russian. "Are you privy to information I'm not?" he mock-questioned as he ran an exploratory hand over his chest.

"This hasn't exactly been a banner holiday season for me socially," Solo ignored Kuryakin's dry humor, focusing his response back on Illya's initial censure of his passionate encounter with the night-duty nurse. "I spent most of Christmas Eve sedated and Christmas Day flat on my back without the diversion of even your limited conversational companionship. Surely it isn't unreasonable that I sought some charmingly voluble female company with whom to ring in the New Year? Or that, after having been virtually immobile for such a long stretch, pleasurable action replaced charming chat as a release for all my pent-up collective energy?"

"For you, Napoleon, I will admit that quite a reasonable perspective," acceded Illya. "Especially when the female in question is very attractive and more than willing to sacrifice charming chat for pleasurable action." He was barely managing to keep his amusement in ready check. The situation was just so like his lady-loving partner. "But apparently you didn't take into account your body responding less than enthusiastically to the medically verboten rigorous exercise."

Napoleon only harrumphed at that assertion. He knew damn well his body's response to that "medically verboten rigorous exercise" had been thoroughly enthusiastic. Well, at least the response of the most directly involved part of his body, that is.

"In any case, you are back on the road to full recovery. The doctors have assured Mr. Waverly there is no permanent damage to your liver and that it is healing nicely, despite your interlude of... uh... overdoing. Both your cracked ribs and the burns on the soles of your feet are on the mend as well."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Solo only commented, "But I'm still stuck in a foreign hospital for another two days while you are winging your way homeward within just a few hours."

"Being deprived of your charmingly voluble company during the long and less-than-action-friendly flight I consider but another of those personal sacrifices we are constantly asked to make as U.N.C.L.E. enforcement agents," teased Illya with a very lopsided smirk.

Napoleon squinted ominously at his friend and partner. "Don't try my patience, Illya. You'll find I don't have much of that virtue to spare today."

"Then it's a good thing you're not being asked to negotiate the latest pact between U.N.C.L.E. and the South African government."

That drew Napoleon's attention completely away from discontent with his current predicament. "What pact?" he inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, didn't I mention that?" hedged Illya nonchalantly.

"No; no, you didn't. But you better spill it now, partner."

"Well, during my latest communicator conversation with Mr. Waverly, he informed me that the South African government had contacted him about opening discussions regarding coming to terms on an agreement of cooperation with the Command."

Napoleon blinked rapidly in surprise and then blinked again more slowly.

“It seems you very much impressed those governmental representatives with your committed willingness to search for an acceptable compromise solution, Napoleon,” congratulated Illya with a true smile now. “So much so, that the powers-that-be in this country now believe it possible they could work regularly with U.N.C.L.E. within the current constraints of their own political system.”

Instinctively Solo knew he was truly sensing them in the atmosphere then: those vibrations through the wall, that wall that separated the outdated societal aspects of apartheid from the more global perspectives of humanity. The possibly far-reaching reverberations of those seemingly insignificant vibrations beat like the controlled hits on a kettle drum through his heart and hummed like the insistent undercurrent of static electricity through his soul.

“I’m...” began Napoleon, “...stunned,” he finalized.

“And Mr. Waverly is, shall we say, more than pleased. So much so that I don’t think he’ll even reprimand you for your lack of sound judgment on New Year’s Eve.”

At that Napoleon chuckled. “Fat chance,” he countered.

Illya grinned. They both knew the Old Man too well to expect that kind of reprieve. “In any case, Napoleon, I’m sure Mr. Waverly’s bestowal of a commendation for your part in this international affair will at least lessen the sting of his lecture regarding the... uh... more personal matter.”

“One can only hope,” submitted Napoleon with a light laugh.

“But I must be going, my friend. The foul deeds of Thrush and the tight scheduling of the U.N.C.L.E. jet wait upon the convenience of no Section II operative.”

“Indeed, tovarisch, indeed. Tell the gals at HQ I’ll be home soon.”

“Ready to exploit your injuries to gain their cooing concern.”

“Illya, it wounds me to the quick that you should believe me so manipulative,” stated Napoleon as he melodramatically placed a hand over his heart.

“No doubt a pleasurable night in the company of a charmingly non-voluble Wanda will take care of that minor hurt.”

“I was thinking more of a pleasurable night in the company of a charmingly non-voluble Heather.”

“Perhaps on your behalf I’ll bring such a therapeutic actions-speak-louder-than-words proposition to the attention of both said ladies,” Illya jibbed as he turned his wheelchair toward the door of the room. “Nothing like a good catfight to liven up a dull day at the office,” he threw this last remark over his shoulder as he wheeled his conveyance through the open portal, giving Napoleon no further chance for a witty retort.

Alone again in his hospital room, Napoleon drew a deep and satisfying breath. Everything had turned out all right in the end. The properties of the Thrush catalyst had been identified and a way to counteract it developed. His closest friend had survived more than intact. And, due to

his own particular efforts at conciliation, U.N.C.L.E. was on the verge of adding another to its list of chartered member nations. All was indeed well in Solo's world.

Bereft of Illya's comfortable company, Solo turned his attention back to the small black-and-white television that had all morning been quietly playing in the background of his private hospital room. It was tuned into a local news broadcast that regained Napoleon's full focus just in time for him to catch a story on Dr. Christiaan Barnard having the previous day performed another successful heart transplant at Groote Schuur Hospital.

Smiling to himself as he watched the video of the probing international reporters interviewing impartial and clinically detached 'Switzerland', Napoleon murmured, "Each to making vibrations in his own way, Doctor, each in his own way."

—THE END—

