

The Ice Man Affair
by
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Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin could hear the Thrush agents behind them as they rounded the corner and saw the bank of elevators in an alcove at the end. They ran faster.

Illya skidded to a stop on the linoleum floor and slammed up against the wall between two of the elevators. "These are both occupied," he panted.

Napoleon whirled in a circle and spotted the sign that said "Stairs."

"Come on!"

They darted around the corner where they found the expected door to the stairs. But they also found a small elevator.

"It's private," said Illya, tapping the small plaque above the call button.

"Well, good. I feel the need for some privacy about now." Napoleon punched the call button. The doors opened immediately. That bothered him, but the pursuing Thrush agents were getting closer. He pushed Illya through the open elevator doors and pounded his fist against the button that would close them again. The two agents pressed their backs against opposite sides of the steel box, praying their enemies were too slow-footed to reach them before the elevator began to move. Illya aimed the muzzle of the stolen Thrush rifle at the slowly closing doors and prepared to fire at the enemy. When the doors finally met, he lowered the rifle to his side, then flattened himself against the wall again.

With a thunk and a whir of the hidden mechanism, the box began to descend, and down, down, down they went. Napoleon laughed with relief, then sobered again, and moved across to Illya. He had no weapons, his hands were empty, and he placed them on Illya's blond hair and began smoothing it.

"You okay? You all right?"

"I'm fine."

Napoleon returned to work mode. "I hope Avery and Misha are, too. Misha's been in a dark mood the last couple of weeks." He patted his pockets. "Communicators gone again?"

"The Thrush guards took them away after they roughed you up."

Napoleon blew a stream of air upward to move the lock of hair tickling his forehead. "Remind me not to put my initials on my next handgun. I didn't like the way the big one said 'trophy'. I wish we'd found it before we left."

Illya made a rude noise. "We were in a considerable hurry. But I did have the presence of mind to pick up this rifle."

Napoleon grinned. "Touché."

Illya nodded at the control panel. "Where are we headed?"

"Down."

"That much I guessed." Illya pushed the lock of hair out of Solo's eyes, an exchange of grooming. "You look stressed."

"Oh, no, not at all. Eight murderous thugs with our names written on the tips of their bullets. What could possibly be distressing about that?" He straightened his jacket and flicked lint off his lapel without looking at Illya.

"Good. Because we're not out of this yet."

Napoleon grunted an acknowledgment.

"Do you have a plan?" asked Illya.

"Of course. I always have a plan. I plan to wait and see what happens when this elevator reaches the basement."

They stopped and stared at each other for a moment. Then Illya said, "Bad plan."

"I never claimed I always had a *good* plan, just a plan," said Napoleon. He was already examining the walls and ceiling of the elevator. "I suppose we'll have to go up on top."

"It would remove us from the line of fire when the doors open."

"You think they're fast enough to beat us to the bottom?"

"You are fast enough, and they are ten years younger than you."

“Ouch. Thanks for reminding me. All right, up we go.” Napoleon assumed a lunging position to let Illya use his thigh as a step up to his shoulders.

A moment later, Illya unhinged one of the light covers. “In the movies, there is always a trap door,” he grumbled.

“Should be one here, too,” strained Napoleon.

“Yes, but where? Oh. Here it is.” Illya popped the first light panel back in place and pushed open the trap door. “Once we get through it, we won’t be able to put this panel back in place.”

“Toss it through and hope they don’t look up.”

Illya grinned. “You’re such an optimist.”

“That’s why you love me,” grunted Napoleon, giving Illya a little extra push up through the narrow opening.

Once through, Illya squinted into the darkness above the elevator, carefully avoided tangling his trouser leg in any of the cables and flattened himself on the top of the carriage. He reached down toward Napoleon. “Come on, come on, we’re almost to the basement!”

Napoleon grabbed hold of the metal roof and with a mighty groan, he muscled his way up through the opening. Illya helped, grabbing a handful of jacket and reaching down to stirrup Napoleon’s thigh with his other hand.

“Up you go.”

Napoleon squatted, panting heavily, on the roof of the car. Once he caught his breath, he whispered, “Did you notice that there are only two buttons on the control panel? One for down and one for up?”

“Now you tell me.” Illya began to get nervous. “How long should it take to reach the bottom?”

Napoleon made a face in the dark. “Not this long, considering we got on at eighteen.”

Illya lowered the trap door an inch and checked the control panel. “There should be a law against nonstandard elevators. There is just an arrow pointing down. How can a building have an elevator that says only up and down?”

“Now I remember what bothered me about finding this elevator on eighteen,” said Napoleon in the dark. “When we were in this building last week doing recon, I don’t remember see-

ing a private elevator in the lobby of the building. In fact, I distinctly recall an uninterrupted wall where this elevator's door should have been.”

“Not a good sign.” Illya's right hand readjusted itself on the Thrush rifle.

The elevator continued its descent.

Napoleon tried humor. “If the door opens and you spot a fellow with horns and a pitchfork, don't choose the room where they're having a coffee break.”

“What? Why not?”

“Never mind. Bad joke.” As he spoke, the elevator lurched to a stop. “Well,” said Napoleon, “that's a relief. I think.”

“Shh!”

Napoleon shushed and listened.

Silence.

The doors did not open. Napoleon nudged Illya. “Let's get down from here and pry those doors open.”

“The other side will probably be teeming with Thrush.”

“Maybe. But I just remembered a scene I saw in a movie once, and I want to make sure those doors have an outside. If they don't, we'd better start shimmying up this cable before...”

“Before what?” asked Illya.

“Trust me, you don't want to know. Go on, move.”

Getting back inside the box was easier than getting on top of it. A few short seconds later, they were examining the elevator doors. Napoleon pressed his fingertips into the crack between the doors and tried to pull them open, but he couldn't get enough leverage.

Illya reached behind him and pressed the “Open doors” button on the panel. The doors slid open quietly. He almost laughed at the expression on Napoleon's face. Instead, he swung the Thrush rifle into position, but there was nothing to aim at. The elevator opened onto a big, well-lit, empty room.

Cautiously, Napoleon peeked out. Nothing to the left, nothing to the right. The floor was linoleum, big squares of black and white. Twelve feet above them was the ceiling, about 2500 square feet of cream-colored sound absorption panels. At even intervals, rectangular plastic light covers diffused neon lighting. The hum of the neon was the only sound. The room was fifty feet by fifty feet. The walls were cream-colored, like the ceiling. It took Napoleon a moment to realize that they were covered with the same sound-absorbing material. There were doors in the walls, two on each of the sides and two on the opposite wall. You could tell they were doors. They were rectangular, they had doorknobs, and each one was marked with large numbers.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Napoleon said in a soft sing-song voice, "I don't like the looks of this."

"Neither do I," grumbled Illya. "I suggest we try to make this elevator ascend."

Napoleon nodded thoughtfully, but he was chewing his bottom lip.

"Oh, how I hate it when you get that look," deadpanned Illya.

Napoleon grinned. "Well, we are here, and it wouldn't hurt to take a look around."

"Isn't it enough that we completed our mission before we were apprehended? We are probably being watched by a dozen hidden cameras and a battalion of Thrush agents are most likely on their way down here with menacing weapons and evil intent."

Napoleon's brow furrowed in a question. "Evil intent?"

Illya stared at him. "You heard me." Then he sighed. "But we are here, aren't we? Very well. We'll take a look."

"Stay there a moment," said Napoleon. He stepped out of the elevator, half expecting an alarm to sound, but nothing happened. He took another step, craned his neck to look left, then rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "That's what I was hoping I'd find." He strode over to the fire axe on the wall and lifted the tool off its supporting pegs. "We'll use this to wedge the doors open so the elevator can't be called back up without us in it."

Illya nodded. "A good idea. You are assuming, of course, that a secret mystery room in the bowels of the earth abides by the ordinary laws of skyscraper construction."

Napoleon laughed. Illya released the doors and let them close on either end of the axe. They only had to travel a couple of inches. He stepped over the axe and joined Napoleon on the checkered linoleum. "Seriously, my friend, do you think they are going to let us wander at will through any of these doors?"

Napoleon wagged his eyebrows. “Well, my secret hope is that somewhere upstairs a bunch of frantic Thrush agents are running around trying to figure out where the hell we are because they don’t know about these rooms.”

“Dream on.”

“Pick a door.”

With no hesitation at all, Illya picked number five.

They placed themselves on either side, preferring not to stand directly in front of it in case it was rigged to explode when they turned the handle. Napoleon poised his hand over the knob and asked, “Want to guess what’s inside?”

“As long as it’s not the skeletal remains of the last UNCLE agent to fall down this rabbit hole, I don’t really care.”

Napoleon chuckled, then turned the knob and pushed the door open. The room was lit by the same neon lighting that illuminated the checkered linoleum, but the walls were green. They went in, leaving the door ajar. The door was in the center of a twenty-five foot wall, but the chamber was only fifteen feet deep. The floor was green linoleum, and on the wall opposite the door hung a cuckoo clock with no hands. Napoleon shot Illya a questioning glance, then ambled toward the clock.

“It’s broken,” said Illya from his spot near the door. “No hands.”

Napoleon felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck as he peered past the little doors on the face of the clock.

“Careful,” said Illya. “It might be dangerous. Remember Mr. Thor’s doll collection?”

Napoleon moved his face to one side, checked to make sure Illya was not in a direct line with the clock, then pushed the tiny swinging doors inward with one finger. A small red bird popped through the doors and the clock screeched, “Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!”

Napoleon jumped back a foot with his hand over his heart. Half a second later he regained his sense of decorum and plucked a small rolled piece of paper from the rubber band that secured it to the bird’s neck.

Illya spoke at Napoleon’s elbow. “Not very accurate. Cuckoos are gray, I believe.”

“Are they? Well, here’s another travesty of nature. This one talks.” He held the unrolled paper so they both could see it and read aloud, “Try door number 2.” He cocked an eyebrow at Illya. “What do you think?”

“I think we are crazy to be doing this. I also think it would be crazy to try door number two.”

“Agreed. Pick another number.” He tucked the paper into his trouser pocket.

Illya picked three. They followed the same safety routine to open the door. As soon as it swung open, a projector at one side of the room flickered to life and a movie appeared on the wall at the other side. The soundtrack was from one of Charlie Chaplin’s films, but the images were not. Napoleon stood inside the doorway and squinted at the screen.

Illya patted him on the shoulder. “I think you need glasses, my friend. You’ve been squinting a lot lately.”

“I squint when I’m confused.”

“In that case, you may need a therapist. You must be confused all the time.”

Napoleon ignored the sarcasm. “Do those guys look familiar to you?”

Illya frowned at the scenes unfolding on the wall. “Yes, they do. This is not good.”

“No, it’s not. There’s Avery and Misha in an UNCLE helicopter. And isn’t that Chuck Cornett?”

“How would a film of Chuck end up down here? Oh, sorry. Stupid question. What’s he doing?”

“I think this film is from that time he came to New York and we ended up in the Thrushmobile with the holographic projector, remember?”

At that moment, images of Cornett, Tuula Crighton, Napoleon and Illya appeared on screen driving a red Mustang convertible out of the car rental lot at the airport.

“Well,” said a suddenly sober Napoleon, “so much for the illusion of personal privacy.”

“Don’t despair. We have long suspected that they have people watching us in public.” Illya’s eyes moved around the perimeter of the room, but the light from the film was the only illumination and it was hard to see much. The other walls looked bare. “Do you think this room will have a message for us, too?”

“I think the film is the message. Obviously whoever prepared these rooms intended them for us.”

Illya tugged at Napoleon's elbow, prodding him out onto the checkered linoleum. "Us or any other UNCLE agents. We aren't the only ones in that film."

Napoleon pulled door number three closed. Just before it shut completely, they heard the sound of the projector winding down. "What do you think? Electric eye mechanism?"

Illya shook his head. "It could be simple mechanics, something to do with the door hinges."

Napoleon took a deep breath and let it out. "Good, you still have that rifle." He glanced at the elevator. The doors were still firmly propped open by the axe. "Our carriage hasn't turned into a pumpkin yet. Shall we try another door?"

Illya scratched his head with his empty hand. "I must confess, I am feeling more and more curious."

Napoleon grinned. "Pick a number."

"One."

They headed for door number one, and as they walked, Napoleon commented, "You're an odd little man. Have I ever told you that?"

It took Illya two seconds to figure out what he was talking about. Then he rewarded Napoleon with a thump on the arm.

Behind door number one they found heat lamps and grow lights and five rows of metal tables holding petrie dishes full of fungi. Napoleon took two steps into the room before Illya clutched his arm and yanked him back onto the checkered linoleum.

"Problem?" asked Napoleon.

"Micology," said Illya.

Napoleon looked blank.

Illya closed door number one and explained, "Someone is growing fungi in that room, and we don't know what kind or why they are doing it. I prefer to keep you away from anything fungal that Thrush might create."

Napoleon nodded. "My turn to choose." He put his hands on his hips and rotated, looking at doors two, four and six in turn. "Someone wanted us to try door number two."

“But they had no idea in what order we would pick the rooms,” said Illya. “Granted, if someone was here watching us, they might have planted a note in the clock, but it stretches the imagination to think of someone spending all day, or maybe weeks or months, down here hoping we will show up.”

“I agree. So the note is probably random. Just put there to direct anyone who investigated the clock to door number two.”

Illya nodded. “Now, if only we knew who put the note in the clock and why, then we would have a clue about whether to open two next or save it for last.”

“Well, I think a little logical thinking will help us in this situation,” said Napoleon, shooting his cuffs and adjusting his jacket. “We know nothing of this installation, but it was built by someone deep beneath a building in which Thrush has offices.”

“Three floors of offices,” said Illya. “And they own the building.”

“Right. So this facility most likely has something to do with Thrush.”

“An excellent conjecture.”

“So,” said Napoleon, “we do not want to open door number two at all. We’ll try four next.”

Illya clapped him on the back. “And if we’re lucky, it will have a toilet in it. I need to pee.”

Napoleon laughed out loud.

Behind door number four, they found a bizarre scene, a cardboard and papier maché set of a Honolulu beach, peopled by inflatable plastic dolls wearing skimpy bikinis and floppy straw sun hats.

Illya found himself pointing the gun first at the pink doll in the polka dot bikini, and next at the brown doll in the white bikini. “This room makes me nervous.”

Napoleon nodded. “Maybe it’s because of the lack of artistic proportion. That cardboard hotel over there should be much higher than this room, if these inflatable girls are supposed to be lounging by the pool.”

“I believe that blue inflatable pool is supposed to be the ocean.”

“Well, in that case the designer is just showing a lack of taste.” Napoleon moved cautiously in and out between the cardboard hotels and the much more realistic hot dog stand. “Shouldn’t this be a pineapple stand?”

Illya stood next to the cardboard hotdog vendor and looked him up and down. “Have you noticed that the women are inflatable dolls and the men are cardboard figures?”

“Yes, I have. It probably says a lot about whoever created this room.”

Illya snorted in disgust. “Portraying men as cardboard figures suggests Dr. Egret.”

“Maybe. But she would never use inflatable dolls in bikinis for her women.” Napoleon screwed his face up into a puzzle. “Think about it, though. First the broken cuckoo clock. A strange puzzling object of no apparent use, planted in incongruous surroundings. Images of UNCLE agents set to Charlie Chaplin music. And then the sinister fungus room. And now a bizarre beach scene. Does this abstract collection bring anyone to mind?”

Illya spat the name. “Partridge.”

“Give the man a cigar. Shall we check out door number six?”

They moved across the big room toward the door with the six on it.

Illya fidgeted with the rifle. “I thought our people locked Partridge away for life.”

“Maybe he escaped.”

“We would have been told,” said Illya.

As they talked, they opened door number six. Inside, they found a rack that looked very much like the one they had experienced in Partridge’s dungeon. This one, however, had an unwrapped mummy attached to it with ropes.

Illya frowned. “Someone has a sense of humor, putting clothes on a mummy. Why take the bandages off in the first place?”

One side of Napoleon’s upper lip curled in disgust. “This mummy was never wrapped in bandages.” He took hold of the creature’s coat sleeve with two fingers and pulled it down toward the elbow, revealing a golden watch on the shrunken flesh of the forearm. “Bandages would cover up the Timex.”

A moment later, they were silently searching the dead man’s pockets for identification.

“Nothing,” said Solo. “Whoever did this, they removed his I.D.”

Illya eyed the watch. "Perhaps." He grimaced in disgust as he undid the fastener and pulled the watch off the arm. On the back he found engraved initials. "J. E. Anyone we know?"

"I sincerely hope not," said Napoleon. He shuddered. "Let's get out of here."

"Ready to try door number two?"

Napoleon sighed. "It was my idea to check the rooms, wasn't it?"

Illya graced him with a crooked smile.

"All right, then. Door number two."

They followed the same routine as they had for the other doors. This one swung open on a domestic scene. It was filled with overstuffed furniture and antiques, chairs, curio cabinets, bookshelves and armoires. One end looked like a bedroom. The walls were painted to simulate windows. The scene outside looked familiar, somehow, but neither man could remember exactly where they'd seen it. A television screen flickered silently at the living room end. Just as Napoleon nudged Illya in that direction, the rocking chair moved as someone stood up and turned to face them.

Illya's eyebrows shot up. "Edith Partridge!"

Napoleon's shoulders sagged. "Oh, no. Not again."

"Now I remember the view," grumbled Illya, aiming the Thrush rifle at Edith.

Edith looked a little older, a little thinner, and a lot crazier. Her eyes burned as if she had a fever. "Emory, darling! Look who's come to visit! My nephews. Charming young men, aren't they." She took the ends of her shawl and wrapped them around her arms and shivered. "I do wish they'd turn up the heat. It's always so cold down here. Welcome, welcome! I haven't had visitors in ages. Won't you sit down?" She waved them toward a Victorian settee. "You won't need that rifle in here."

Illya glanced down at the Thrush rifle he was carrying. "It has personal significance," he said, cradling the weapon in both arms. "I'll just hold on to it. Call it a trophy."

"As you wish, dear," smiled Edith.

Napoleon was frowning, scouring the room with his eyes. "Where's Emory?"

"I don't see him either," said Illya.

"He's there," said Edith, pointing. "On the mantle. In that lovely marble box. I kept his ashes. They let me have them. No one but me really cared, you see. It's like having him with me in every respect, except of course now I win all the arguments."

Napoleon finally settled gingerly on the settee. Illya stood next to the arm, still moving his eyes around the room.

"Edith," said Napoleon, "what are you doing here?"

"Why, I live here, of course! Oh, I have a flat on the eighteenth floor, but there wasn't enough room there for all my lovely things. Have you seen the rack?!"

"Yes," snapped Illya. "We saw."

Napoleon tried a smile. "It looks just like new, Edith. If you don't mind my asking, uhm... who is J. E.?"

Edith pulled her rocker around to face the settee and sat back down. "Who?"

Illya's voice was flat and stern. "The dead man on the rack."

"Oh, him!" Edith reached for her tea cup. "Oh, dear. Did I forget to offer you tea? I'm sure I have enough to share."

Napoleon stopped her with a palm. "No, thank you, Edith. We can't stay long. We... we just wanted to drop by and see how you're doing in your new location."

"Oh, you naughty boy. Lying to Aunt Edith that way. I've been here for months. You could have come sooner, you know."

Napoleon looked apologetic. "Well, you know how life is. We get so busy." He left it at that.

Edith seemed satisfied. "Yes, that's true, isn't it? And I should be grateful that you came at all. None of my other young men have ever returned to visit me."

Napoleon nodded. "Was J. E. one of your young men?"

"Him?" The word was filled with disdain. "Heavens, no! I never met him before. They sent him down from upstairs. You know." She dropped her voice to a whisper and pointed at the ceiling. "The landlords." Then in a normal tone, "They're fussy, you know. Don't be late with the rent here, boys, or they get very irritable. I'm afraid that's what happened to that poor man. I do wish they'd take him off my rack. I can't play with it if it's occupied. Oh, excuse me, I'll just add some

water to my teapot." She got up and toddled off toward the front edge of the room where a hot plate was torturing a scream from a kettle.

Illya leaned over Napoleon. "I didn't know that G. Emory Partridge had died."

"Me, neither."

"Do you think she's really insane or just faking it?"

"Oh, I think she was always insane," said Napoleon, under his breath. "The question is, how in touch with reality is she? The landlords are obviously Thrush. But is this some strange kind of retirement home? Or is Edith still together enough to be working for them? Shh, here she comes."

"That's better," said Edith. "A nice hot cup of tea is just what we need. Milk? Sugar? Lemon?"

"Oh, you shouldn't go to all that trouble," said Napoleon. "We can't stay, remember?"

"Before we go," said Illya, forcing a note of cheerful interest, "we would love to see your upstairs rooms. We want to be sure they are treating you well here."

"That's right," said Napoleon, getting up from the settee. "And I don't see your victrola. How can we dance without a victrola?"

Illya frowned at him. "Victrola?"

Napoleon murmured back, "Old record player."

"Ah. Of course. The victrola." He looked around and spread his hands in defeat. "It must be upstairs."

Edith's features lit up. "Oh, yes, it is! I like to listen to it before I go to bed. All those Latin rhythms. They stir the blood, don't they?" She set her teacup back down. "Let's go, then. I'll show you my upstairs rooms, and you'll see that I'm doing just fine. Come along." She headed for the door.

Napoleon asked, "Aren't you taking Emory with you?"

Edith laughed. "Oh, you silly boy. He's just a box of ashes now. He doesn't feel the cold. And that marble case is much too heavy to cart around. He'll be fine here." They were out the door. "Oh, goody, the elevator is already here. I have complained several times that it's much too slow, but they never do anything about it."

Napoleon removed the fire axe from between the elevator doors and leaned it against the wall. "How many floors does your elevator stop at, Edith?"

"Oh, it's an express." Then she laughed. "The slowest express lift in the world, I'm sure. It goes from here to the eighteenth floor and back. That's all."

They got in, and Edith pressed the UP button.

Illya pushed some hidden meaning into his voice. "I hope we don't get into trouble by taking the time to see Edith's new flat."

Napoleon smiled. "Oh, I think Uncle Alex will understand."

Edith swayed from side to side, keeping time to some inner music. "Aren't you boys wonderful. It must be your day for visiting the relatives, eh?"

"You might say that," said Illya.

Napoleon took a moment to phrase his next question. "Do you have many security devices in your apartment?"

"Oh, I don't worry," poo-pooed Edith. "There's a doorman in the lobby, you know."

"No cameras in your flat?" asked Illya. "You know, in case you fall? Or something."

"Good heavens, no. I'm not active anymore. Not on the payroll, as they say. I just like my privacy and my music."

The elevator door opened on eighteen. "This way, boys! I'm just down the hall." She waited for them to exit. Then she took a small compact out of her shirtdress pocket and pressed a red gem on the top. Napoleon cocked an admiring brow as a portion of the wall slid across the elevator doors, leaving them completely concealed.

"Edith," he said, "I think you should be more careful with this elevator. We found you because you forgot to close the wall when you went downstairs."

"Oh, dear. I guess I'm becoming forgetful in my old age. I shall be more careful in the future. But how nice that you boys came down. If you knocked at my door, you would have thought I wasn't home." She toddled round the corner that hid the elevator from public view.

Napoleon and Illya followed more cautiously. They moved down the corridor sideways, back to back, keeping an eye out for trouble. Illya kept the rifle muzzle down, but one finger skittered over the trigger as they moved.

"Here we are," Edith sang out, turning a key in the lock of her front door. She pushed the door open and led the way in, chatting as she went. "And there's the victrola. Let's put on something festive, shall we?"

"Certainly," smiled Napoleon as Illya closed and bolted the door. "Something with a Latin rhythm." He moved around the apartment, mimicking a tango with an invisible partner as he checked the rooms for surveillance equipment or Thrushes lying in ambush. Nothing.

Illya murmured at his side, "You don't really think you'd be able to see their cameras, do you? You know how small they make them these days."

Napoleon grinned and nodded, and replied out the side of his mouth, "She's not active anymore, remember? Maybe they don't have to be subtle."

Illya grunted a concession. "I'll check the bathroom." He handed Napoleon the rifle.

Napoleon frowned, then relaxed when he remembered his partner had to pee. He stopped ghost dancing and took the easy chair next to Edith's. Then he recalled the last time he sat down in a Partridge chair and decided to stand next to the mantle.

"Where is your friend?" asked Edith, looking around for Illya. "What a nice young man. He looks ever so familiar."

"He had to wash his hands," said Napoleon. He wondered if he was pushing things too far as he added, "It's been a while, but you've entertained us both before."

Edith's eyes looked faraway. "Ah, yes, I believe I have. In the jungle, wasn't it? Oh, no, how silly of me. You came to the castle!"

Napoleon's smile froze on his face. "Uh, that's right." He cradled the rifle in his arms, uneasy with Edith's returning memory.

"You had some business with my husband, I believe."

"You're still sharp as a tack, Aunt Edith." Napoleon's eyes kept flicking to the front door, but he sidled toward Edith and lifted a flowered teapot on the table next to her chair. "More tea?"

"Oh, that's cold, I'm sure. Here, I'll go put on the kettle." She stood up and headed for the kitchenette.

Illya emerged from the bathroom. "Making more tea?" he asked.

Napoleon nodded and sighed. "I wish we knew if her phone was tapped or not."

Illya went to the phone table and squatted next to it to examine the wall, the underside of the table, and the bottom of the phone. "I don't see any evidence of bugging on the outside," he whispered. "Shall we give it a try?"

Napoleon checked to make sure Edith was busy. She was humming away, arranging cookies on a tray. He turned to Illya and gave him the nod.

Illya picked up the phone and listened. The dial tone sounded normal. He heard no clicking on the line. Slowly, he dialed a special number at Headquarters. Lisa Rodgers picked up.

"Boy Scouts of America, Lisa speaking."

Napoleon moved to Illya's side so he could share the receiver.

"Hello, Lisa. This is Ira Koffman. I'm calling about the outing my troop went on this morning."

Lisa's voice was immediately guarded. "Yes, Mr. Koffman?"

"Two of my boys have got lost in the woods."

"Oh, that's terrible. Shall I notify their parents?"

"I was hoping you could help me find them before we panic the adults."

"Yes, that might be a good idea." They could hear the smile in her voice, and Napoleon made a face.

Illya grinned. "I think we need a few extra searchers," said Illya, "and perhaps they should bring walkie-talkies to stay in touch in the woods."

"And how many boys in your troop, Mr. Koffman?"

"Sixteen plus the two who are missing."

"Did the missing boys take their camping equipment with them?"

"No. They were attacked by a hawk and ran off with nothing."

"Understood. I'll do what I can. But if they aren't found in half an hour, I'll have to tell their families."

"Thank you. Good-bye." He hung up.

Edith came around the corner with a tray full of tea and cookies. "If you wanted to use the phone, boys, you could have just asked me. But youth today... so full of secrets, aren't they? Here you go. Tea and cookies. Now you can't say no to cookies, can you?"

Illya took a cookie and broke it in two. "My friend is on a diet. I'm afraid he'll have to go without. But I will have one. They look delicious." He picked up a paper napkin and picked off bits of the cookie as he spoke, hiding them in the napkin. "Do you get out of the building much, Edith?"

"Oh, hardly ever." She sat down in her chair and sipped her tea. "I don't mind, really. There's not much outside I wish to see anymore. And the traffic in London these days!"

"But we're in--"

Napoleon squeezed his arm and cut him off.

Illya finished lamely, "--in the prettiest season of the year."

"Be that as it may," said Edith, smiling sweetly, "I have everything I need right here."

Napoleon asked, "Who does your shopping?"

"Oh, there's a lovely young man who works on the nineteenth floor. He picks up my list every week and delivers everything the very same day."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged looks. The nineteenth floor was filled with Thrush offices. Edith might not be an active agent, but she was still plugged into the system.

"There," said Edith, setting her empty tea cup on the table by her chair, "I'm ready. Who wants to be first?"

"Uh, first for what?"

"First to dance with me, of course! That tango is stirring my blood. I can't hold out much longer."

Illya shot Napoleon a look that made it clear he was not going to dance. Napoleon handed him the rifle and offered a hand to Edith. "At your service, madame," he smiled.

They danced a tango, then a rumba.

Illya forced himself to stare at the door. Watching Napoleon dance would be too big a distraction.

Napoleon had just initiated a samba when someone knocked at the door. He froze, and he held Edith still as a statue. Illya stopped the victrola, then went to stand next to the door.

Napoleon whispered to Edith, "Ask who it is."

Obligingly, she called out, "Who is it?"

"Special delivery for Ira Koffman."

Napoleon whispered to Edith, "Say 'refrigerator'."

"Oh, goodie, we're playing espionage," giggled Edith. Once again, she sang out, "Refrigerator!"

After a moment of silence, the male voice on the other side of the door called back, "Hot sauce."

Illya smiled and opened the door. "Hello, Dennis. Did you have any trouble finding us?"

Napoleon bent over Edith's hand and kissed the back of it. "Thank you for the dancing, Edith. It's been lovely."

"Oh, must you go so soon?"

"I'm afraid so," said Napoleon, accepting the Colt semi-automatic that Dennis offered. Illya was already out the door. Napoleon paused on the threshold and smiled. "Give my regards to Emory."

Wednesday, April 22, 2:00 p.m.

Alexander Waverly was not pleased. "You were inside the building. You located secret rooms beneath the parking level. You claim you searched them. And yet you return empty handed." He made a disgusted noise.

Napoleon steepled his fingers and crossed his legs. "I don't recall being instructed to retrieve anything, sir. We did find the stolen UNCLE documents before we were detained. We even managed to destroy them."

"Thereby insuring that Thrush would consider the information on them quite valuable," said Illya. "They most probably photographed them before putting them in that safe."

"And there is the added bonus that we managed to escape after we were caught," added Napoleon.

"Well, it's a pity you didn't make use of your discovery and bring us back something for your trouble," grumbled Waverly, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

Napoleon glanced at Illya, then back to Waverly. "Did I mention that we were being chased by three floors of Thrush agents?"

"Bah! Really, Mr. Solo, you used to be more resourceful."

That stung.

Waverly got up from his chair and walked to the window. He moved stiffly.

Illya cleared his throat. "We are prepared to go back in, sir, if you have another mission for us. But it would be wise to wait a day or two. Thrush is on high alert at the moment."

"It would also help if we knew what we were looking for," said Napoleon.

"Would you like me to draw you a diagram, gentlemen?" snapped Waverly.

Napoleon spread his hands and kept his tone light. "That would be very helpful, sir."

Waverly glowered at him, then harumphed a laugh. It ruined the glower. "Sorry, Mr. Solo. My arthritis is giving me fits today, and I'm taking it out on you." He hobbled back to his chair and flicked an intercom switch. "Lisa! Bring me that Ice Man file!"

"Ice Man?" Illya helped himself to coffee and poured one for Napoleon.

"The code name for what appears to be a new Thrush initiative, Mr. Kuryakin. Three men and one woman have died suddenly in the last month. Each one worked in a sensitive position in his or her government. Two of them confided to family members before they died that they had been pressured to divulge secret information, but they refused to do so. All four had visited New York in the days before their deaths."

Lisa arrived with the file and lay it open on the table between Napoleon and Illya. It was three inches thick. On top were the photos of the dead government workers. Lisa detoured to Waverly and held out her hand.

"Oh, bother, not that again," said Waverly.

"You promised," said Lisa. "No fuss, remember? Just take the pills." When Napoleon's brows arched in a question, Lisa mouthed silently, "Aspirin."

Waverly took the pills, then fished about for his pipe. "Now, where were we?"

Lisa left.

Napoleon said, "I guess the initiative is called Ice Man because they're putting government officials on ice. But these people all died accidental deaths, sir. There's nothing to indicate that they were killed by Thrush."

Illya flipped through the reports in the file. "Napoleon is right," he said. "This attaché to the Russian consulate died in an automobile accident on a visit home to Moscow. The private secretary to the German Director of Industry ran into a tree while downhill skiing. This poor fellow here worked at the American Embassy in London. He fell off a horse during a fox hunt. He was dragged and trampled before his companions could stop his mount. And the woman appears to have been a suicide. She was found in her kitchen, on the floor, with the gas oven turned on but not lit." He frowned at Waverly. "Are you certain these people were killed by Thrush, sir?"

"No, confound it, I'm not certain at all. But our London office is convinced that Thrush contacted that poor chap when he was in New York. And an eye-witness to the skiing accident swears that the German fellow fell sideways as he was passing the tree. He was an excellent skier, too experienced to take chances. But that day, he skied like a drunken man and the witness says it looked like he was shot and then hit the tree. But the autopsy showed no gunshot wound. The woman's husband and parents deny emphatically that she would kill herself, no matter what the problem. And the automobile accident that killed the Russian fellow was a single-car accident. He simply drove into the side of a building. Fortunately, it was late at night, or he would have taken some others with him. The Russian consul also believes that his man was being harassed by Thrush."

"And you want us to investigate these deaths?" asked Napoleon.

"You two study the file, Mr. Solo, and let me know what you think. We'll talk again tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir. Oh, uh, have we heard anything from Bates and Stalin?"

"No news is good news, Mr. Solo."

"Right." But Napoleon didn't believe that for a minute.

They settled in Napoleon's office and split the file between them. Illya sat cross-legged on the floor and spread papers out before him. Napoleon sat at his desk, his chin propped on one hand, while he turned pages with the other. They hadn't been at it more than an hour when Napoleon felt an overwhelming desire to close his eyes. He decided to lay his head down for just a minute

and rest his eyes. Illya was close by. If he dozed off, no one would be the wiser. As long as Illya was in the room, he was fine. A moment later, he was dreaming.

The thirteen-inch black-and-white t.v. in the corner of the tiny room cast a ghostly light on the group gathered before it. Solo and Kuryakin had led their team to another victory. Thrush's diamond-smuggling operation in Spain was history, and UNCLE had not lost a single agent in the process. That didn't mean it had been easy. Two young Section Two people were in the hospital, but they would recover. Solo wasn't so sure about New York's relations with the Madrid office. The mission began in New York where the diamonds turned up. When the trail led to Spain, he took his team with him. He didn't want to waste time briefing a new team in Madrid, and to be honest, he didn't want to risk going into action with people he didn't know. That was the part he left out of his report to Waverly. His reluctance to trust the agents he didn't know. Ever since Hong Kong's Hamilton Grant turned traitor in sixty-seven, he couldn't shake his doubts about unfamiliar agents.

The Madrid office's irritation was probably why they were being housed tonight in a cold, spartan colegio. The nuns who ran the school were efficient and discreet. They didn't seem to mind opening the cafeteria and making supper for the UNCLE agents. Solo decided they must be getting support from the Command. Most of the sisters were middle-aged or elderly. They moved quietly through the residence wing in their gray habits, taking advantage of the lull before the fall term to paint and scrub the place. The agents were each assigned a room, with a tiny bathroom with a two-foot wooden pole in the corner for a closet. The single bed was just a flimsy mattress laid on top of a set of drawers. A stark wooden crucifix hung on the wall above the bed. At the end of the room opposite the entrance, a student desk sat beneath the large curtainless window. The t.v. was on the desk. The window was cranked open to let in the fresh night air. It was colder inside the room than it was on the street.

Dennis Treacle leaned his big back against the foot of the single bed, his bear-like shape looking even rounder swaddled in a scratchy wool blanket. Tuula Crighton sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the set, staring up at the screen. With her head tilted back, her honey blonde hair hung all the way down below her shoulder blades. Except for the hair, from the back she looked like a man in her long fisherman's sweater. Her shoulders were broad and her arms were thick with muscle. Her waist narrowed and her hips were slender. Only from the front did her face give away her sex and her grandmother's Finnish origins.

Avery Bates, chopper pilot, straddled the single chair, a straight-backed wooden creation designed to instill discipline in the student unlucky enough to reside here. His gray-blond hair had been thinning since his days in Korea but refused to give up the struggle. He had gray eyes and freckles on his pale skin, and fine blond hairs everywhere skin was visible. Bates' partner, Misha Stalin, lay curled on a narrow mattress on the floor. Stalin was a dark-eyed, black-haired Russian, solidly built and taciturn. The mattress and the blanket that covered him came from the room next door, Illya's room, identical to this one, except it was empty. This one was full. No one wanted to separate yet.

Napoleon reclined on the bed, a thin pillow folded behind his head and shoulders. Illya lay tightly beside him, his right leg flung casually over Solo's thighs, his right arm draped across Solo's chest. Like the others in the room, they wore sweaters over their clothes and pulled a blanket over their legs and feet.

Treacle reached out and felt the steam radiator with the palm of his hand. "This thing is cold," he said. "I thought Spaniards liked it warm."

Napoleon pulled his blanket up higher. "The whole building is on the same system. They don't turn the heat on until late October."

Dennis groaned, "God, I miss individual thermostats."

Solo grinned.

The movie of the week flickered in the corner like a black-and-white fireplace, and they all stared at it, mesmerized by the pixel flames. Bela Lugosi had just announced, "I don't drink-- wine."

Misha Stalin moaned beneath his blanket. He alone was not watching the screen. He was waiting for his pain medication to deaden the ache behind his reconstructed nose. Pink scar tissue ran like a fat slug from the center of his left cheekbone through the bridge of his nose and across his right eyebrow. His right eye always looked half-closed. His left arm was folded under his head, and his right fist was twisted in the blanket. His pain subdued the group.

Bates played with his keychain, a smooth jade stone that fit just right in the palm of his hand. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, turn. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, turn. He worked his stone and Stalin rocked on his mattress. If someone told him he was squeezing in the same rhythm as Stalin was rocking, he would have reddened and shoved the stone back in his pocket. But no one said a word. Bates and Stalin were Third Level. Bates stared unblinking at the t.v. screen. He, too, was waiting for Stalin's meds to take effect.

Stalin was almost asleep, then he moaned again, and woke up.

Illya lifted his head from Napoleon's chest and murmured in Russian at Stalin.

"You need another pill?"

"Da, pozhal'sta."

Kuryakin's gaze moved to Bates. It carried an unspoken question and silent censure.

Without a word, Bates stood up, fished a small brown bottle out of his jacket pocket and tapped a white pill into the palm of his hand. He stepped into the tiny bathroom, ran some water in an empty coke bottle to rinse it, then came out to offer the pill to his partner.

The dark eyes closed again, but Misha was not asleep. Just waiting. The fingers of his right hand reasserted their grip on the blanket.

Bates exhaled wearily and resumed his position on the wooden chair.

“It’s not enough,” said Kuryakin as Van Helsing tested Dracula by seeking his reflection in a mirror.

“Illya--” began Solo, hoping to curb his partner’s intrusion into Bates’ and Stalin’s dynamic.

But Kuryakin was oblivious. Stalin was his friend. Stalin turned to him for Russian comfort. Stalin told him all his secrets. And knowing those secrets, Illya could not lie still and let his suffering continue.

“Nyet, he needs more.”

Bates blew air between irritated lips. “Now, looky here, Illya--”

Napoleon rubbed his forehead. “Here we go again.” An apology, directed at Bates.

Illya shook his partner’s arm, silent punctuation. “You are his friend. You should be telling him this. Instead, he hears it from me, and he thinks I am attacking him. You should be telling him, Napoleon. Napoleon.”

"Napoleon!" Illya shook his arm again.

"Huh?! What?!" Napoleon awoke with a jolt. "Illya? What's happening?"

"You fell asleep." Illya frowned with concern. "Did you not sleep well last night?"

Napoleon understood the concern. Being Third Level meant that neither of them could sleep well away from the other. Living together ensured that they both got enough rest. "I slept fine," said Napoleon. "I don't know what came over me. My eyes were tired and I closed them for a minute. Then bam, I was dreaming."

Illya's eyes darkened. "A nightmare?"

Napoleon shook his head no. "Not really. Just weird. Remember that mission we started in London and chased into Madrid?"

Illya shivered with the memory. "The boarding school," he said.

"Right. I was dreaming about that. Stalin was having a bad night."

"I remember."

"The strange part was, it felt like I was Avery. I mean, I was there in the dream, but I was sort of a bystander. Like part of the furniture. But I could feel what Avery was going through. Strange."

"You've had many dreams that were much stranger." Illya patted Napoleon's shoulder. "Avery and Misha have not returned from their assignment yet. You're worried about them. That explains the dream. Are you still sleepy?"

"No. Not at all. I feel fine." Napoleon straightened up and rolled his shoulders. "Sorry about that."

Illya grunted like a mother bear. "Have you found anything in your stack of reports?"

"Well, so far, it looks like these four people had access to information that Thrush would love to get their hands on. And I'm pretty sure they're all dead."

Illya chuckled silently. "You're all right. I'm going to get us some dinner. What do you want?"

"Surprise me," said Napoleon.

Illya turned at the door. "Stay awake," he ordered.

Napoleon made a face. But he knew Illya was serious. The nightmares that plagued him when he was foolish enough to drift off with no Kuryakin in the room were hellishly real, and they felt like traps. Waking up was like fighting his way through a molasses undertow. And the sound effects would be embarrassing if it happened at Headquarters.

By nine p.m. they were going through the files a second time.

"I can't believe there's nothing here," said Napoleon.

"It's here," said Illya. "We just haven't found it yet." He yawned and stretched.

Napoleon picked up his phone and punched in an extension. "Tuula? Napoleon. Any word from Bates and Stalin?... Okay. ... Yeah, I know. Thanks." He hung up.

"Nothing?"

"*Nada. Nye nichevo. Zip. Squat. Diddly.*"

"They'll be all right," said Illya.

"Let's finish this second read-through, and then we'll go home and get some sleep. Maybe something will pop out at us in the morning."

"I need caffeine if you want me to keep reading."

Napoleon grinned. "They should have some really foul coffee in the commissary by now. Strong enough to put hair on your chest." He headed for the door.

Illya switched to Russian long enough to say, "I thought you liked my chest the way it is."

Napoleon laughed out loud and headed for the commissary. He used the few seconds while he waited for the elevator to stretch and tense his muscles. He needed to work out. Somehow, running from Thrush agents did not provide enough exercise. He smiled to himself and entered the elevator. He pushed the button for the commissary floor and leaned against the wall. And fell asleep. And dreamed.

Misha Stalin was a healthy, handsome man when Bates first met him in 1953.

Bates was in the army then. He was stationed in Korea in 1952. That's where he met Napoleon Solo, and that's where he learned to fly choppers. His tour in Korea was cut short when an army shrink decided he was taking too much pleasure in the work. Bates had nothing but contempt for the man, and made the mistake of saying so. What the hell were they there for? They were trained to kill, they were paid to kill, and goddammit, he was good at it. He took pride in his skill. He was a good soldier. He would have been a court-martialed soldier if the Korean armistice at Panmunjom hadn't taken place on July 27, 1953. The shrink got drunk with him to celebrate and tore up the official complaints.

When the shrink sobered up, he diagnosed Bates with battle fatigue. Sent him to Germany for a rest.

As far as Bates was concerned, the biggest thing wrong with Germany was Germans. He kept his mouth shut about his feelings after he joined UNCLE, but in 1953 he was not pleased to find himself in Deutschland. The last person in his family to visit Germany had also been wearing an American army uniform. His older brother. Nothing came home but the dog tags.

Bates began drinking heavily to get through the long dark evenings. He figured it must have been the alcohol that made him throw caution to the wind when he found the Russian in the back of his Volkswagen, huddled in the tiny back seat, hands half-frozen around a Walther PPK.

He left the American bar humming "Back in the Saddle Again." He slid behind the wheel of the bug and started the engine before he saw his passenger's eyes in the rear view mirror. A second later he saw the glint of a streetlamp on the barrel of the gun. He was instantly sober.

"Well, cowboy, you gonna shoot the chauffeur or you gonna tell me where to drop you off?"

Hesitation in the dark eyes. And desperation. One hand pushed black hair off a low forehead, the other held the automatic steady. Accented English. Not German.

"I am in fwery bad trouble."

"Happens to the best of us, cowboy. Where y'all headed?"

"Please, you speak slower. To me is hard to understand accent."

Bates dropped the exaggerated Texas twang that earned him his nickname and glanced out the side window to make sure the dark street was still empty.

"All right. How's this?" He enunciated in his best U.C. Berkeley English. Bates trusted his judgment where people were concerned, and when his judgment was off, he trusted his silver tongue to get him out of trouble. He had already decided the man in the back seat did not want to kill him. "Where do you want to go?"

The dark eyes could not believe their ears. "You fwill take me to there?"

"Sure. Why not?" Slow, lazy movements to reach for the cigarettes on the dash. "Smoke?"

"Nyet. No."

"Can I smoke?" Patience.

"Yes. Vsyo ravno. I do not matter."

Bates smiled. "Well, there may be some who think that, but you matter to me as long as you have that gun pointed at my head." He lit the Camel and took a deep drag.

Dark Eyes lowered the gun a couple of inches, but it was still pointed at Bates.

“You’re Russian, aren’t you?”

Suspicion again. The gun lifted.

“Ya goveryu porusski,” said Bates smoothly. Six months, Monterey Language Training School. Easy duty. Kept his mind sharp. And now they had him eavesdropping on Russian newscasts instead of piloting a chopper.

Dark Eyes was grateful. He slipped into his native tongue. “It’s dangerous to speak Russian here.”

“Yes, I know. Your people haven’t officially declared an end to hostilities with the Germans yet. If they catch you, they’ll shoot you for a spy.”

“You understand my situation.”

“Mmm-hmmm. Say, I better move this car or someone will wonder why I’m still sitting here.”

“Yes. Move the car.”

Forward motion. “Who’s chasing you?”

“Everybody.”

Bates chuckled. “The man has a sense of humor. Seriously, who?”

“Seriously. Everybody.”

“The Russians, too? Hell, what did you do?”

Dark Eyes blinked slowly, twice. Thinking. At last, he said, “I fell in love with the wrong woman.”

Bates rolled the answer around for a moment. “Oh.” He drove. “Where are we going?”

“To the countryside.”

Surprise. “What the hell for?” He expected the border, a desperate dash for safety.

Dark Eyes clenched and unclenched his jaw, then shifted his eyes to the night outside. “I want to breathe fresh air. I want to watch the sun rise. I want to die under a tree.”

It only took a moment for Bates to understand. "Shit," he said in English.

"Yes," said Dark Eyes, also in English. "Fwery shit."

Bates drove in silence for half an hour. Then, "Is this all right?" He glanced at his passenger in the rear view mirror. "No buildings or lights for the past ten minutes. I think we're out of town."

"Yes." Silence. The Russian was looking out the window of the car, but it was too dark to see anything. "There are trees here?"

"Danged if I know," drawled Bates. Then in Russian, "We'll have to wait for morning to see if there are trees." He glanced at his watch. "It's two a.m. At least five more hours before you have enough light to see by. Damn dark and nasty country, if you ask me. I'm already AWOL. I might as well wait with you."

"You do not like Germany?"

"Nope."

"Neither do I. You are American?"

"Yep."

"Soldier, yes?"

"Yep."

"I will get out here, and you can go back to your base. Good-bye. And thank you."

"Hold on, cowboy." The word sounded funny in Russian. "You want me to let you out of this car so you can watch the sun come up and then blow your brains out. Is that right?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"No. Thank you. I'm sorry, I can't just leave you here alone."

Tension. "Why not? Look, I am not interested in American secrets. I am not here to spy on American soldiers. I made a big mistake--"

Dark Eyes struggled with his fears. Bates pretended not to notice.

“Yeah, I understand all that, see? But the problem is, I’m not just American. I’m from Texas. You know about Texas, cowboy?”

“From the movies.”

“Yep. Well, out in Texas we live by a code, see?” Bates scrounged his boyhood memories of John Wayne movies. “The Code of the West, we call it.” He did his best to translate it. It came out Cowboy’s Rules in Russian. “Yep. The Code of the West. Can’t leave a man alone in the dark to die. Got to stay with him long enough to find out what he’s about, and who his folks are, and where to send the body. You know.”

“You are making this up, yes?”

“No way, no how, cowboy. You heard me talk when I got in the car. That was Texan. It’s a whole other English, see? We live different down there. Texas used to be it’s own country, you know.”

“Like Khazakstan?”

Bates suppressed a grin. “Yep. Sort of like that. And I have to live by the Code of the West, see?”

Silence.

Then, softly, “Why are you being kind to me? You do not even know what I have done.”

“Sure, I do. You fell in love with the wrong woman. Remember?”

Silence.

“You would not be kind to me if you knew the whole story.”

“Why not?”

“Because Joan Fayne would not approve.”

Joan Fayne. Bates blinked in the dark. Ah! John Wayne.

“Well, heck, cowboy, I don’t have to share the man’s politics to live by the same Code. There are lots of different kinds of folks in Texas.” He lit another cigarette. “So. What did you do that’s so terrible?”

“Do you know a woman named Tsvetaeva Raisa Sergeievna?”

Bates' eyes widened. Just that morning he'd heard news of Tsvetaeva out of Moscow. She was in Vienna, touring with the Bolshoi Ballet. "The dancer? The woman who just offered to sell her soul to Uncle Sam in exchange for political asylum?"

"Yes, her."

"What about her?"

"She is the person I fell in love with."

Bates felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. "Damn," he said in English. Two hours after Tsvetaeva banged on the door of the American Embassy to beg for political asylum, the German police found a dead man in her hotel room. "Who was he?" asked Bates, knowing that Dark Eyes would understand.

"He was the reason I could not be with her."

"And you killed him? So you could have her?"

"Nyet, nyet! It wasn't like that. I didn't mean to..." Dark Eyes took a deep breath and strengthened his voice. "I went to the hotel. Raisa said we could have tea and talk about home. We were homesick. When I got to her door, I heard them arguing. And then I heard him hitting her. And she was crying. I just wanted him to stop hurting her. All I did was hit him with my fist." He shook his head in amazement at the memory. "A real man would have laughed it off, you know? But he was old and out of shape, and I guess I hit him harder than I thought."

"Hey, cowboy, I got news for you. You didn't kill that guy. Some spook did it."

"Spook?"

"A spy. A professional. Used a garotte."

"How do you know this?"

"It's my job. I monitor Russian transmissions. Radio shows, news programs, and other messages sent in and out of Moscow. If all you did was hit that guy, you didn't kill him."

"Then why are they chasing me?!"

"You can't figure it out?"

Silence.

Bates took a deep breath and let it out. "Listen, cowboy, this just ain't your night. It was Raisa. She told the Embassy people that you did it. She's a double agent. She was covering for the spook that killed her so-called boyfriend."

"Nyet, nyet, that can't be true."

"Sorry, friend."

"Then there is no hope. I am doomed."

"Not if we get you out of Germany."

"It is too late." Dark Eyes lifted the gun to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

"It is too late." It didn't happen this way....

"Too late." Gun to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

He's still alive! It didn't happen this way!

"Too late." Gun. Mouth. Blood. Brains. No more Misha.

Nooooooooo!!!

Illya frowned at the noise. Who was disturbing his concentration? He got up and opened the office door. Someone was screaming.

"Napoleon!" He ran for the elevator. A small cadre of UNCLE employees were gathered in the corridor. Two security personnel had already pushed the call button. Illya arrived just as the doors opened.

Napoleon had slid to the floor. The noise was coming from him. His eyes were half open but Illya knew he was trapped in a nightmare. He grabbed Solo's arms and shook him hard.

"Wake up! Napoleon, wake up! I'm here! I'm right here!"

The noises fell to a low moan. Napoleon struggled to open his eyes, but the tendrils of the dream had a fierce hold on him. Illya barked at one of the gawking agents, "Get some ice water! Now!" Then he switched to Russian. "I'm here, milii moi. It's just a bad dream. It's a dream! Wake up!"

When the agent brought a cup of water, Illya doused Napoleon's face with it.

Coughing and sputtering, Napoleon opened his eyes and focussed on his partner's face. He blinked at the faces in the corridor. Some of them looked away, awkward and embarrassed to have seen him out of control. Napoleon sagged against the wall. "Shit."

"It's all right now. Come on, get up." Illya half lifted his partner off the floor. Then he snarled at the gawkers, "Don't you people have something to do?"

Back in Napoleon's office, Illya settled him in his chair and then asked, "Does this mean there will be no coffee?" He handed Napoleon a wad of paper towels.

Napoleon laughed, a single syllable. "Very amusing." He daubed at his face and shirt front with the paper towels, tossed them in the trash, and ran his hands through his hair. "I'm worried about Misha and Avery."

"You dreamed about them again?"

"Yes. But this time, the dream took a twist that didn't happen in real life. This time Misha killed himself."

"It was just a dream."

Napoleon couldn't conceal his irritation. "You always say that!"

Illya dropped his eyes to the floor. "I meant--"

"I know what you meant." An apology in his tone. "I just... The damn dream was so real. I don't usually dream about actual events. Those nightmares are different. You know that. They're... they're so twisted and tortured that I usually know that I'm dreaming. But this one... I had no idea it was a dream until Misha pulled the trigger."

Illya frowned. He paced back and forth between the door and the desk. "Napoleon, I think you are focussing on the wrong thing. The dream is not the problem here. The problem is falling asleep. That makes twice this afternoon. Earlier, you thought your eyes were tired. You closed them for a minute, and you fell asleep. But I was here with you, so there was no nightmare. But this time, you walked into an elevator and you fell asleep! Why?!"

Napoleon narrowed his eyes at Illya. "Good question." He got up and rested one arm on the filing cabinet. "I got on the elevator and pushed the button for the commissary floor. And the next thing I knew, you were throwing ice water in my face. God almighty, I don't even remember feeling sleepy!" He spread his hands. "What the hell is going on?"

"If this happens when you are driving a car--." Illya stopped in mid sentence.

The realization hit them both at once.

"--like the fellow in Moscow! They all died in accidents," said Napoleon, returning to his chair and spreading the files once more across his desktop.

"Doing things," said Illya, "that were only dangerous because they fell asleep!"

"An experienced skier falls asleep in the middle of a downhill run and hits a tree."

"Yes," said Illya, "and an excellent horseman falls asleep in the saddle and ends up being thrown and dragged and trampled!"

"And a woman turns on the gas, preparing to light her oven, but before she can strike the match, she drops to the floor sound asleep. I think we've figured out how all these people died."

"But not how Thrush managed to do it." Illya picked up his half of the files and arranged them on Napoleon's desk with the other papers. "At least now we know what we're looking for in this mess."

"That's right," said Napoleon. "Each of those four people must have something in common with me."

"I think it's safe to assume they were in the same building we were in today," said Illya. "Shall I call Tuula for some help?"

"Yeah, have her bring the coffee."

"Napo
leon--."

"Seriously, Illya. We're the only ones who will recognize whatever it is, because we were there, together, in that building. Oh, and ask her to check on Bates and Stalin again."

Illya found it at ten past midnight. "Napoleon! Look at this. These are the lists of the things the authorities found in the victim's pockets. For the woman, they found it in her handbag. Does anything look familiar?"

Napoleon scanned the lists. His eyes grew big. "Sweet Jesus!" He dipped into his pants pocket and pulled out the paper he'd found on the cuckoo clock. It still said, 'Try door number two.'

"They all had the same notes! That means they were all in that room."

"Yes. We've found the link."

"But not the answer."

Illya put his hands on his hips and shook his head in mock exasperation. "You Americans. You want everything handed to you on a platter."

Napoleon grinned at him. And fell asleep.

Illya managed to get his hand between Napoleon's face and the top of the desk before the two collided.

They slept on the couch in Napoleon's office, nestled together like spoons. Because they were in UNCLE headquarters, they felt safe enough to drape their holsters and weapons over the back of a chair. But they left the desk lamp on.

Neither of them understood why Napoleon was falling asleep and Illya wasn't. They'd been together the whole time they were in the Thrush building. They spent fifteen minutes on the couch, trying to figure out how Thrush had affected Napoleon without affecting Illya. Illya made sure that neither of them ingested anything. Maybe the Ice Man was a weapon, a tool that could be aimed at one individual. If that was so, when was Napoleon targeted? By one a.m. they were both asleep.

Thursday, April 23, 8:30 a.m.

Tuula Crighton knocked on the office door, then walked in. "Rise and shine, Section Two. I've got fresh coffee and glazed donuts. What every working man needs to start the day." She handed out tall paper cups of hot coffee while Illya fished in the sack for a donut.

"This is not commissary food," said Illya, smiling.

Tuula grinned. "Just a sign of the high esteem in which I hold you both. Did that make sense? No matter. Hey, I heard from Avery about six a.m."

Napoleon rubbed sleep out of his eyes. "Don't you ever go to bed?" he asked. Then, "How are they?"

"They're fine. But that diplomat they were transporting? Dead. He evidently fell in the shower and hit his head. They were out of touch last night because they were answering questions at a police station in Boston. They did manage to go through his stuff, though, and they brought back everything they thought might be of use to us."

Napoleon's forehead wrinkled in a question. "Were they working on this Ice Man thing?"

"Evidently, yes," said Tuula. She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder about Waverly's state of mind, you know? I wish he'd filled me in about this earlier. Anyway, the fellow they were transporting had come to UNCLE for help because he was being pressured for information, in a very subtle way, by someone he thought was harmless. Someone he met at a diplomatic function. But Mr. Waverly was a friend of his father's, so he came to ask the Old Man's advice. That was Tuesday morning. When Waverly heard who the person was, he put Avery and Misha on it. "

"Well?" said Illya. "Who was it?"

"Let me guess," said Napoleon. "Edith Partridge."

"Bingo," said Tuula.

"So much for her retirement status," said Illya.

Illya's communicator beeped. He had to look for it. At last he located his jacket on the doorknob of Napoleon's private restroom and opened the channel. "Kuryakin here."

Misha Stalin was too stressed to speak English. His Russian came fast and furious. "I am trying to land the helicopter! Avery lost consciousness at the controls. I'm not very good at this!" There followed a few seconds of unintelligible cursing and the usual sound effects brought on by adrenaline overload.

Illya shook the communicator, as if that would help Misha to focus. "Misha! Throw something wet in his face! He is just asleep!"

A few tense seconds later, they heard Avery's voice. "What in tarnation?! Why'd you soak me with--. Christ all Friday!! Gimme them controls!"

Illya perched on the edge of Napoleon's desk. "Misha? Come in, Misha."

Still in Russian, Misha responded. "You were right, Illushka. I threw water on him, and he woke up. He's at the controls again. I owe you, my friend."

Everyone in the room relaxed. Napoleon left the couch and spoke into Illya's communicator. "Avery, can you hear me?"

"Oh, yessirree bob. You might say every one of my senses is a tad enhanced at the moment. What the hell happened to me?"

"Avery, you need to land that chopper now. Where are you?"

"We're close. I can see the helicopter pad on the top of UNCLE headquarters."

"All right. As soon as you touch down, report to Waverly's office. We've got a meeting with him in five minutes, and it sounds like you and Misha need to be there."

Napoleon finished bringing Avery and Misha up to speed around Waverly's table. "So, until 8:55 this morning, my theory was that the delivery system for this weapon--"

"It could be a drug," interjected Illya.

"--is located somewhere in that Thrush building. All the victims had spent time in New York, and it was possible that they had been inside the building during their stay here." Napoleon twiddled a yellow pencil as he spoke.

"Problem," said Bates. "We know for a fact that Bingham, our deceased diplomat, was not in that building during the critical time frame. He met a woman named Edith Partridge at a party. They talked. He decided she was nuts and harmless, but she wanted to give him information in exchange for details about some economic summit he was helping to arrange. He humored her without revealing anything. He said he had to think about it. That party was on Long Island. The next morning he came here to talk to Mr. Waverly. That was day before yesterday."

Napoleon tossed the pencil on the table and clasped his hands behind his head. "Well, there goes my theory."

"No," said Illya. "Avery fell asleep while piloting a helicopter. That was very nearly another fatal accident. And this Bingham fellow, he slipped in the shower? My guess would be that he fell asleep first." He turned to Avery. "Did he received any visitors yesterday? Did he remark on anything odd?"

Avery frowned. Misha nudged him and said, "Messenger."

"Oh, that's right," said Avery. "Thanks, pardner. Yeah, a special messenger came to Bingham's office. He had all the right credentials and we patted him down. No weapons. Hell, we were even in the room with him the whole time. He just delivered a dossier on some of the summit participants and left. But hell, I don't see--"

Illya was excited. "Did you bring the dossier with you?"

"I think so, yeah. If he took it out to his place on Long Island, then we brought it in."

Misha was up and digging through a box of materials he had carried in with him. "Here it is." He held up a black diplomatic pouch with the seal of the British Embassy on it.

Illya reached for it, but Napoleon stopped him. "Give it to me, Misha. If it is a drug, I've already been exposed."

Illya relented.

Napoleon opened the pouch and pulled the contents out onto the table.

Waverly chewed on his unlit pipe. "What exactly are you looking for, Mr. Solo?"

"Well, yesterday I would have been looking for a piece of paper like this one." He pulled the note out of his pocket with its 'Try door number two' message. "The other four victims each had a similar note in their possession when they died. I thought it was proof that they had been in Edith Partridge's secret rooms, but maybe they didn't go there."

Tuula nodded. "Right! Maybe the paper was sent to them--"

"--by messenger," finished Napoleon. He held up a four-inch square of white paper. "And here it is." He turned to Avery. "My crystal ball tells me that you went through the pouch to see what was in it."

"Not exactly," said Avery. "The contents were spread out on Bingham's coffee table, and I put them back in the pouch. I didn't read anything though."

"No, but you touched every piece of paper, correct?" Illya's eyes burned with excitement.

"Hell, yeah. I had to, didn't I?"

"And Misha did not touch the contents of the pouch?"

"No, he was collecting stuff from Bingham's briefcase."

"Good. Don't let him touch it now, either. No one should touch it. Mr. Waverly, I think we've found the weapon. I suggest we turn it over to the boys in the lab."

"Good idea, Mr. Kuryakin. Miss Crighton, what does intelligence have to say about Thrush's motivations in this case?"

Tuula frowned. "Well, sir, that's a bit confusing. None of our intelligence so far indicates any Thrush plot involving a new drug that could do what this one does. Three of the victims specified that they were being pressured by Thrush, and yet our moles tell us that Thrush has bigger things on their plate than pestering individual petty bureaucrats. Their words, not mine."

"Uh, excuse me," said Napoleon. "I just had a crazy idea. Mr. Waverly, do we know the status of G. Emory Partridge?"

"The fellow from that Yukon affair? He's still in prison, Mr. Solo. With any luck, he'll stay there."

"But he's alive?"

"Yes, of course."

Illya saw where Napoleon was going. "You mean the ashes," he said.

Napoleon nodded. "Edith Partridge has a marble chest on her mantle, and she told us it was Emory's ashes. But if he's not dead--"

"--then there must be something else in the box," finished Illya.

Avery leaned toward Tuula and shook his head. "Lord, it's spooky when they do that."

They grinned at each other. Then Avery fell asleep and slumped over the side of his chair.

Napoleon sighed. "Well, it doesn't look like Avery or I will be rounding up Edith Partridge."

Waverly harrumphed. "No need for you to do so," said Waverly. "We'll lure her out of the building and bring her here. Miss Crighton, your people can come up with something suitably irresistible, can't you?"

Tuula rubbed her hands together. "Yes, sir, we certainly can."

Waverly cast his eyes over the other four. "As for you gentlemen, you're stuck here for a while until the lab can find an antidote. That goes for Mr. Kuryakin and Mr. Stalin, as well. These small notes may not be the only way of transmitting the drug."

Napoleon was irritated at being sidelined, but at the same time he was relieved that Illya was forced to stick around as well. They joined Avery and Misha for coffee in the commissary.

"You sure you don't want none of these eggs?" asked Avery. "They taste pretty good."

"No, thanks," said Napoleon. "We had breakfast earlier with Tuula." He stirred sugar into his coffee.

"So," said Avery, "I understand you've been falling asleep on the job." His gray eyes twinkled.

"Ha, ha," said Napoleon. "Very funny."

"At least you were on the ground," said Misha, before forking half a sausage into his mouth.

"Once at his desk," said Illya, "and the second time in the elevator. Alone."

"Ouch," said Avery. "Any witnesses?"

"I tried not to count," said Napoleon.

"Eleven," said Illya.

Napoleon winced.

Avery buttered his toast. "Well, don't worry about it. Everyone knows you two are Third Level. Ain't no one gonna say nothing, that's for sure." He took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. Then, "Make much noise?"

"Let's change the subject," grimaced Napoleon. "I was more worried about you two than myself. I dreamed about you, both times. And the second time... Well, it wasn't pretty."

Avery nodded. "How long do you think this drug, or whatever it is, will last?"

"We're not sure. But if this fellow Bingham is typical, then we can assume the victims all received their tainted note within as much as twelve hours before their accident. Maybe more. And they may have been affected before the fatal moment, as well, and not realized anything was wrong. The first time, I thought my eyes were tired and I'd just dozed off."

"Nasty stuff," said Avery. "This Edith Partridge... You fellows know her?"

"We ran into her in Britain about five years ago. Nutty as a fruitcake, as they say, but extremely dangerous. She was very eager to give me a live demonstration of her torturer's rack. The real thing. We saw it again in the secret rooms she has beneath the Thrush building we infiltrated yesterday."

"Yes," said Illya, helping himself to one of Misha's sausages, "but it was already occupied."

Napoleon tapped out a rhythm on the sides of his coffee cup with his fingertips. "Uh, Avery, tell me... Did you have time to dream before Misha hit you with the water?"

Avery thought for a second. "Nope. No dreams. But then, he was sitting right beside me."

Napoleon nodded, took a deep breath, and let his eyes roam the commissary. Only a couple of the other tables were occupied. No one seemed to notice him. He exhaled slowly.

Avery tossed a wink at Illya and said to Napoleon, "What're you worried about, son? If they were going to talk about you behind your back, it would have happened last June when you and Illya broadcast your personal business from that surveillance van. Howling in an elevator is nothing compared to that."

Napoleon's expression darkened and he leaned back in his chair. Then he let go of his irritation and punched Avery playfully in the arm.

Avery laughed.

The day dragged on. At last, the call came at 3:30 that Section Three had retrieved Edith Partridge. Napoleon, Illya, Avery and Misha headed for Waverly's office. Dennis Treacle was already there, standing discreetly against the wall, his weapon drawn.

Edith was wearing a different shirtdress, but the same shawl. Except for looking slightly pale, she seemed none the worse for wear. She sat in the chair to Waverly's left. When Napoleon entered, he thought he saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes, but a moment later she masked it with a façade of fantasy.

"Oh, are these your sons, Alexander?"

Waverly snorted. "You know perfectly well who they are, Edith. No more games. This is a very serious business."

Edith pouted like a child. "I would like to go home now."

"Not yet, I'm afraid," said Waverly. "Gentlemen, have a seat."

Napoleon looked around. "No Tuula?"

"She has other matters pressing," said Waverly. "You can fill her in later. Mr. Treacle has been standing by to make sure Edith doesn't try anything while she's here." He was in the process of lighting his pipe.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged a glance of relief. Waverly was feeling better today. When he was out of sorts, he only played with the pipe. Today he was smoking it.

Waverly turned his attention to Edith. "Now, my dear, there is some reckoning to be made. But first, about this confounded drug of yours,--"

"Oh, it's not my drug, Alexander. It was invented by an associate of my husband's, a man name Eissmann. Johann Eissmann. A brilliant chemist, by the way. But not much of a dancer, I'm afraid."

Illya touched Napoleon's arm. "J. E. Johann Eissmann."

"Yes, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Mr. Eissmann is probably dead, sir. We found a mummified corpse on Mrs. Partridge's rack, and it was wearing a watch engraved with the initials J. E."

"Ah. I see." Waverly puffed contentedly on his pipe. Again to Edith, "This Dr. Eissmann created the drug in a form that could saturate paper, correct? And any person who came in contact with that paper would absorb the drug through the skin."

"Oh, Alexander," cooed Edith, "your intellect still shines."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," muttered Waverly. "You've killed five people with your little scheme, and Mr. Solo and Mr. Bates were nearly six and seven. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Stuff and nonsense, Alexander. I'm practically housebound these days. How could I possibly do such a thing?"

Avery interjected, "You were able to get to a party on Long Island Monday night to suggest an exchange of information with a man named Bingham."

Napoleon added, "You already told me and Illya that you have an errand boy at your beck and call to do your shopping. I would guess that he was available for other types of deliveries as well, with a little extra bonus from you."

Edith's ding-a-ling expression faded and the woman that looked round at them now looked completely in charge. "Do you have any idea how boring it is to be retired from Thrush? Why, you can't even visit old friends at the office! They just want to stick you in a corner and forget all the wonderful work you've done for them over the years. And when Emory got himself incarcerated, well, that was simply horrid. I explained that if he had listened to me, everything

would have been all right. But no! He had to go off on his own, fly to the Yukon and attempt a mission without me. He deserved to get caught!

"So when I began making a little money on the side, buying and selling information, I neglected to inform my Thrush landlords. This was an Edith Partridge operation, not Thrush."

Napoleon frowned at her. "How long have you been doing this?"

But Edith turned an imaginary key in her bottom lip. "Tick-a-lock," she said. "Not another word."

The phone rang. Waverly picked it up. "Yes?... Yes. ... I see. Thank you." He hung up and made a rude noise. "Well, you won't be doing it again. Miss Crighton has retrieved your marble chest, the one you said holds Emory's ashes. And that was the lab. They say the chest holds the powdered form of the drug that those notes were saturated with. You're out of business, Edith. You may be happy to know that you are going to join your husband in prison, my dear. I'm sure you've missed him." He punched an intercom button. "Lisa? I'm expecting a matron and two security guards from our UNCLE holding facility. Let me know when they get here."

"They're already here, sir," said Lisa.

"Thank you." He closed the connection. "Mr. Treacle? Please escort Mrs. Partridge out of the room and turn her over to the matron."

"Yes, sir. This way, Mrs. Partridge."

Edith heaved a long-suffering sigh. "I won't say goodbye. Just toodle-oo. Especially to you, young man." She waved her fingers at Napoleon. "We'll meet again someday."

After she was gone, Napoleon said drily, "That's what worries me."

Avery drawled, "Guess we have to rename that case."

Waverly smiled for the first time that afternoon. "Oh, I don't know, Mr. Bates. Ice Man is much more romantic than a surname, don't you think? We mustn't lose our flair for the dramatic. Look at Edith Partridge. With no flair, she's just an executioner, a heartless killer. Granted, that's what she has become, but in the old days, she was a true romantic. An idealist. It's sad, in a way."

Napoleon's eyebrows were reaching for the ceiling. "Would you prefer to turn her loose and let her keep playing at espionage?"

"Oh, good heavens, no," barked Waverly. "The woman's criminally insane. Which is why she'll go to our facility and not into the court system. Dismissed, gentlemen. Oh, by the way, the lab boys have an antidote for you."

In the anteroom, Napoleon grinned. "You've got to hand it to him. He knows the realities of the world. Turn Edith over to the regular authorities and some lawyer will have her in a rehabilitation center somewhere, dancing with the inmates and looking for an opportunity to escape."

Misha's jaw was set, and his eyes glowered. "Dramatic flair. Pah! I spit on romance. He was *nye* in helicopter with me!!" He headed for the lab. Illya followed him.

Napoleon held back for a moment, one hand on Avery's arm. "Hey, Tex," he said softly, "what ever happened to that woman, Tsvetaeva, you told us about?"

Avery rolled his eyes and rubbed a hand over his mouth. "She killed herself. The pressure got to be too much for her, and she took a bottle of pills."

"When?"

"Two weeks ago."

Napoleon nodded and let his eyes follow Misha down the hall. "Is he all right?"

Avery took in air to his belt buckle and let it out again. "He will be, son. He will be."

End