

The Nietzsche Formula Affair

by

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Somewhere in the East Village

The door slammed behind the Thrush agents as they left the Manhattan Funerary Supplies showroom. Their raucous laughter was abruptly muted as the door closed.

Napoleon Solo pushed the lid of the coffin open with his left hand and Illya Kuryakin lifted himself off his partner on all fours just far enough to peek over the edge. His blue eyes darted right and left, then he sighed heavily and rose upright on his knees.

“All clear,” he said. He started to stand.

“Watch out!” Napoleon hissed with alarm as Illya’s knee brushed his groin.

Illya braced his hands on the edge of the coffin and lifted himself on his arms, then swung one leg out onto the floor. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Napoleon raised his arms stiffly to press his hands to his face. From behind splayed fingers, he groaned, “I’m quitting.”

“Yes, you said that earlier.”

“I really mean it. Thrush can keep their damn Nietzsche Formula. I don’t care what it does.”

Illya drew his automatic and moved around the satin draped showroom, checking behind each wall curtain. Coffins of various colors and prices were displayed along the walls, some on platforms, some on tall racks, and a few on a strip of artificial turf down the center of the room. Napoleon and Illya were crawling out of the second model in the row, a modest polished oak box with a beveled lid and brass-plated accents.

“They are gone,” said Illya. He returned to the coffin and stretched a hand out to his partner. “And I have located a door.”

“You think I’m kidding,” said Solo, taking Kuryakin’s hand and letting himself be pulled to his feet. “When this assignment is over, I’m turning in my resignation.” Still standing in the coffin, he slipped the toe of one shoe under the satin pillow head rest and flipped it out of the coffin onto the floor. “Did you hear that thug pass this coffin by?” He raised the pitch of his voice to mimic the thug. “That priss ass Solo wouldn’t be caught dead in the cheap ones.”

Illya looked at the floor and tried not to smile. “I told you the Supreme model would be the first place they’d look.”

Solo stepped out of the coffin, checking his suit for wrinkles. “I am not a priss ass,” he hissed, his sibilants whistling through the words. He turned around. “Is my jacket creased?”

“No,” said Illya. “It’s fine.” He patted Napoleon on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Hiding in a coffin is the last straw,” said Napoleon.

Illya was already heading for the door. “They would have found us if they had really looked. The fact that they did not makes me nervous.”

“It’s not just the indignity of it,” said Napoleon, shooting his cuffs as he followed his partner across the room.

Illya put his ear to the door and listened for a second. Then he put his hand out for the door handle.

Napoleon caught up with him and seized his wrist before he touched the knob. Their eyes met. Kuryakin's face was a question mark. Napoleon's eyes darkened with caution. As if nothing was wrong, he continued in the same tone as before, "It's the principle of the thing." He worked as he talked, pulling a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket. "An agent with seniority should not be wasted on a mission..." He used the handkerchief to protect his skin as he picked a thread off the back of the door knob. "...that two survival school dropouts could handle..." He cradled the hanky in both hands and showed the long strand to Illya. "...with one arm tied behind their backs..." Illya recognized the strand for what it was and immediately assumed a more respectful posture toward it. "...the morning after a bout of heavy drinking." Napoleon carried the strand across the room to one of the deluxe coffins. Illya got ahead of him and opened the lid. Napoleon lay the strand and the hanky gently in the bottom of the coffin, and Illya closed the lid. They backed away carefully.

Solo exhaled shakily. "On the other hand, if Thrush underlings are being armed with state-of-the-art throw-away explosives..."

Illya wiped the palms of his hands on the lapels of his jacket. "The moisture and oils from human skin trigger the explosion."

"A Section Two man in Dallas lost three fingers to one of those last month."

"No wonder they were in a hurry to leave," said Illya. "Having us blow our hands off on the door is a lot more entertaining than taking us in for questioning."

Napoleon made a face. "It makes me yearn for a simpler time, when Thrush agents had a sense of honor."

Illya snorted rudely at the concept of a Thrush agent with honor. "Do you think it's safe to open now?"

"Just in case, you'd better use the corner of your jacket on the door knob."

Illya's brows shot up. "Me?! Why don't you try it?"

"Come on, Illya. You're my big, brave Russian, right? Besides, if I lose a finger, I'll never be able to play the piano again."

"Yes," said Illya. "And if I lose a finger, I'll never be able to..." He leaned close to Napoleon's ear and whispered the rest of it.

Napoleon laughed and shook his head left and right. "Amazing," he grinned. "Okay, you win. But I want a demonstration later."

"But of course," said Illya gravely.

Napoleon shrugged out of his jacket and used its double thickness between his hand and the door knob. Nothing went bang, so he turned the knob. The latch clicked and he opened the door a crack and peered through. The corridor was empty.

"All clear," he said softly, slipping his jacket back on.

Weapons in hand, they moved cautiously into the hall.

"No surveillance cameras," noted Solo.

"I don't like it," said Illya. "Something is not right."

"Why?" asked Napoleon. "Because we're getting away?"

"Because it's too easy," muttered Illya. "They knew we were in that room. They could have found us if they had searched every coffin. But they left."

“After rigging the door to blow us to smithereens,” said Napoleon. “That seems completely in character.”

They were approaching an outside exit. There was no knob this time. The door had a bar handle. The two agents looked at each other dubiously.

Napoleon sighed wearily as he squatted to put his eyes at the level of the bar. “I could swear that this job used to be easier,” he said.

Illya stood next to him, watching the corridor, ready for trouble. “Yes, and we used to be younger,” he countered.

“I don’t see any threads on this door handle, but you’d better double check.” He straightened up with a groan.

Illya suppressed a smile. They switched positions. After a few seconds Illya said, “It looks fine to me, too.”

“Good. So, open it.”

Illya pinned him with hooded glare. But he backed up a bit and lifted his foot, and depressed the bar.

Locked.

“Damn,” said Napoleon.

Illya took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I am beginning to feel an urgent need to leave the premises.”

“Ditto.”

“Back through the showroom?”

Napoleon shuddered. “Do we have any other options?”

The corridor contained three other doors, but they had already spent considerable time verifying the safety of the first two. If Thrush had rigged the place with a bomb, or if the thugs who’d wired the first door decided to set fire to the place, they would waste even more precious time checking the other doors. They stood in the hall, looking at each other for a moment, the same thoughts running through their minds. At last, Illya said, “There was a window behind one of the curtains in the showroom. Painted black. But still a window. If they just painted over the glass, we should be able to break through it.”

“And we already checked that door.”

“Right.”

“Okay. Back to the showroom.” Napoleon trotted down the hall, and Illya followed. Back inside the showroom, Napoleon rubbed his arms. “This place gives me the creeps. Where’s the window?”

Illya traveled half the length of the room, then moved to the curtained wall and began looking for the part in the drapes. “It’s here somewhere,” he muttered.

At last, he grabbed the edge of the drape and pulled hard. The ceiling hardware gave way and the whole curtain came down with a breathy thump. “Ah. That’s better,” said Illya. He turned to Napoleon, and flourished a hand at the wall. “As I promised. A window.”

The window was tall and wide and multi-paned. It’s size and style dated the building to the previous century. The panes were painted black.

“I wonder why they painted it black?” asked Napoleon, hefting a free-standing metal ashtray. He decided its bulk was sufficient and he hurled it at the window. The blackened panes crashed and tinkled to the floor. The ashtray also crashed to the floor.

Illya and Napoleon stared at the bricks behind the glass.

Illya commented wryly, "Well, at least we know why they painted the window."

Napoleon chewed his bottom lip. "You know, partner, I am beginning to feel a little claustrophobic in this building."

"Mmmmm," nodded Illya. "The phrase 'rats in a trap' comes to mind." He waved an arm toward the corridor. "The other doors?"

"My thoughts exactly," said Napoleon. He used the hem of his jacket on the knob of the door, just in case, and turned it.

But now the door was locked.

Napoleon roared in anger and frustration. He pounded his fists on the door and kicked it hard, twice. When the rage passed, he turned his back to the door and slumped against it, panting.

"Sorry," he mumbled, sliding slowly to the floor.

"No apology necessary," said Illya. "You have established an important fact."

"Do tell."

Illya's mouth twisted in half a grin. "No ordinary interior door can withstand your wrath. I have seen sturdier looking doors splinter under your pounding. Therefore, this is no ordinary door."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Definitely. Because you see, my friend," said Illya, squatting in front of Napoleon's sagging form, "we are not getting old or soft. On the contrary, Thrush considers us dangerous enough to construct this very sturdy cage for us. The reason we cannot escape this building is because it has been specifically designed to contain us."

Napoleon spread his hands. "But why? They didn't even take our weapons. In fact, they didn't take our communicators."

They stared at each other for half a second, then simultaneously reached for their pens. Both men activated their devices and spoke into them.

"Open Channel D," said Solo.

"Open Channel H," said Illya.

Static.

They tried again.

Dead air.

"Shit," said Solo.

"I wonder if they will feed us?" asked Illya wistfully.

Napoleon reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a rather soft Hershey bar. "Here."

Illya looked pleased. "Spasibo."

"You're welcome."

Illya unwrapped the chocolate. "Want some?"

"No, thanks. If I eat on an angry stomach..."

"Oh, yes. I forgot." He folded four soft squares of chocolate into a stack and popped them into his mouth.

"They left us our guns," said Napoleon, frowning. "Why did they do that?"

Illya spoke around the Hershey bar. "Because they expect them to be useless to us."

Napoleon closed a fist on Illya's forearm. "They're going to gas us."

An accented baritone drifted from across the room. "That is exactly what they were planning, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon and Illya jumped to their feet and turned toward the voice. They pointed their automatics at the sound with twin precision.

“Where are you?” demanded Napoleon. “Come out where we can see you. Now!”

The baritone chuckled. “How quaint.” It came out “qvaint”. “The direct masterful approach. Very well.” From behind the remaining wall drapery, on the side of the room opposite the window, stepped a pale, distinguished looking middle-aged man. He had a patrician nose and a high forehead. His dark brown hair was thick and wavy, and it was so long that he wore it pulled back in a low ponytail. He had high cheekbones and a pronounced jaw line. His dark eyes burned feverishly, and he looked too thin. His expensively cut blue silk suit looked a bit loose around the middle.

“What’s your name?” Napoleon’s voice was flat and hard. “How did you get in here?”

“My name is Dmitri. And as for getting in here...” he spread his arms to indicate the showroom “...I came through that door.”

“We would have seen him,” said Illya.

“You might have,” said Dmitri, “if you were here at five a.m. this morning. That’s when I came in.”

Napoleon’s features wrinkled in disgust. “You’ve been hanging out in here all day long? I don’t believe it. We searched this place earlier.”

“Yes, I know. You woke me. It was very rude.”

Napoleon and Illya exchanged wary glances. Napoleon’s face displayed his skepticism. Illya’s features were a strained mix of doubt and caution. With a slight movement of his head, he signaled to Napoleon that they should separate a bit. Napoleon understood and appeared to amble casually a few steps to his right. If the newcomer was armed, their chances for survival were greater if he could not take them both out with one blast of gunfire.

Illya spoke to distract Dmitri from Napoleon’s movement. “Forgive me, Dmitri. But may I ask where you were sleeping? We checked the room very thoroughly.”

Dmitri waved a bony hand in the direction of the Super Deluxe Satin Fluff with Weather Stripping. “In there. I sleep in there. It’s my favorite model.”

“In the coffin?” Illya’s throat felt suddenly dry.

“Yes, of course,” smiled Dmitri. “Where else would a vampire sleep?”

Napoleon laughed and spread his hands. “Oh, a vampire! Right. See, Illya? What did I tell you. They gassed us, and now we’re hallucinating.”

“You are not hallucinating,” said Dmitri calmly. “And those villains who trapped you here have not gassed you. Yet. This room, however, contains apparatus for that sort of thing.”

Napoleon’s eyes moved up and down Dmitri. “Are you saying you’re not one of those villains who trapped us?”

“That is exactly what I am saying. Their gas dispensing mechanism is reminiscent of the chambers at Dachau. Their lack of imagination is pitiable. I have disabled the device. The last time they used it, a perfectly good human being was killed, and I emerged from my coffin with a splitting headache from breathing the noxious fumes.”

Illya chuckled warily. “This is a joke, yes?”

Dmitri shrugged. “See for yourself. Go on. You are the scientific one, I believe. Go look. Behind the drape you have not yet torn down, there is a metal panel in the wall. Lift it out of its slot and you will find the pipes and gauges of the mechanism. And there, along the track lighting

in the ceiling, you will see the tubing. Yes, it looks like an automatic sprinkler system, but instead of water, it spews a deadly gas. Deadly to you, that is.”

Illya went to the remaining velvet drape. This time he didn't waste energy looking for the opening. He grabbed them and yanked them to the floor. The metal panel was there, just as Dmitri had said. Grim faced, he glanced at Napoleon. Solo nodded once, and Illya removed the panel. Behind it were pipes and gauges, and just visible inside the wall were the tops of three large metal canisters to which the pipes were attached. There was also electrical wiring and remote switches for operating the gas valves.

Illya's pupils shrank to half their normal size. “He's telling the truth. They operate this by remote control. We have to get out of here.” He headed purposefully for the door.

“But it's locked,” said Dmitri. “Remember?”

Illya shot him a scathing glance.

Napoleon lifted his chin and spoke to Dmitri. “If you are not our enemy, then help us get out of here. Aren't vampires supposed to have special powers?”

Illya snorted in disgust. “Napoleon! He is insane. There are no vampires.”

“Oh? Well, I recall a time, Illya, when we were not at all certain about that.”

Illya flushed hotly. “Yes? Well, when it was chasing us through the woods and sending the wolves after us, you were just as... uneasy... as I was.”

Napoleon allowed himself a tiny smile. “Touché, partner.” He addressed Dmitri. “Well? Vampire or not, can you help us get out of here?”

“Yes. I will help you. On one condition.”

Illya made a rude noise. Then he lifted his automatic in the air. “I have a condition, too,” he snapped. “If you don't help us, I will use you for target practice!”

Dmitri lifted his shoulders an inch and dropped them. “Do what you will. I have been shot before and survived. However, it would be a shame to bloody this suit, would it not?”

“He's right, Illya,” said Napoleon wryly. “It would be a terrible waste of fine tailoring. All right, Dmitri. What's your condition?”

Dmitri's eyes burned with anger. “These criminals are holding a friend of mine. Promise you will help me free him, and I will help you.”

“That's all?” asked Napoleon, surprised.

“No,” said Dmitri, “forgive me. I have two conditions. Help me free my friend, and then let us both go.”

“That's easy,” said Napoleon. “Done. Now get us out of here.”

Illya was not pleased. “Napoleon, you don't know what you are saying. I think...”

But Dmitri cut him off. “Quiet!” he hissed. “I hear two men in the corridor. They are coming to see if you are dead. They think they have gassed you.”

“I don't hear anything,” said Napoleon.

A second later, they heard the sound of a key being inserted in the lock. With spontaneous grace, Napoleon and Illya flattened themselves against the wall, one on either side of the door. It opened inward. When the first thug entered, Illya grabbed his forearm and flipped him with a judo move. Napoleon had spotted the second man through the crack between hinges, and just as the fellow was about to conk Illya on the head with the butt of his pistol, Napoleon slammed his full weight against the door and into his assailant's face. The man keeled over backward, his nose spurting blood.

The first man was pushing himself off the floor, trying to gain some leverage to throw himself at Illya again, but Illya pointed his gun at the man and fired.

Dmitri shrieked, “*Nyet!!! Nyet!!!* Don’t kill him!”

Illya blinked, not trusting his eyes, as suddenly Dmitri was next to the bleeding thug, holding him in his arms.

Napoleon checked the corridor, then came back and nudged Illya. “What’s going on? Does he know that guy?”

Dmitri hissed at the wounded man, spraying his face with a fine mist that seemed to come out of his throat as he spoke. “Tell me where they are holding the vampire,” he murmured. He hissed and sprayed the man again. “Tell me, son. Don’t you want to tell mama all about it?”

The wounded man was in shock. His face was gray, and cold sweat shined on his forehead and upper lip. “M-m-mom? How..? What are...?”

“Quickly, my son. Tell me, so we can be together.”

The Thrush agent’s eyes filled with a feeling that Napoleon could not bear to witness. He turned his face away as the man’s breath rattled around his dying words.

“Warehouse. Denmark Building. Wooster Street....” Silence.

Napoleon fidgeted. “All right, let’s get out of here.”

Dmitri laid two fingers against the man’s carotid. “He is not yet dead.”

Illya said coldly, “He will be before an ambulance can get here.”

“Come on, Dmitri,” said Napoleon. “Let’s go save your friend.”

Dmitri closed his mouth over the dying man’s carotid and began sucking like a calf at a teat.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” Napoleon gaped in morbid fascination. “Illya...!”

Illya set his jaw against the bile that rose in his throat. “Come on, Napoleon,” he murmured testily. “Let’s get out of here while we can.”

Napoleon nodded, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away. Illya took his arm and pulled him out the door. They trotted down the corridor to the exit door, but it was locked again.

“Damn it!”

Illya took a breath and threw his shoulders back. “Wait here. I’ll get Dmitri. He said he could get us out of here.”

Napoleon grabbed Illya’s coat sleeve. “But Illya, he’s... he’s...”

Illya suppressed his suspicions and gently slugged Napoleon in the shoulder. “Hey, partner. He is a nut case who likes to pretend he is a vampire. We have seen worse things.”

“Well, yeah,” said Napoleon, laboring to comprehend what he’d witnessed. “But not for at least six months.”

Illya chuckled. “Good. You are fine. Wait here. If anyone else shows up, shoot first and ask questions later.”

Napoleon nodded and propped himself against the wall next to the exit.

Illya turned to go after Dmitri and had to stop short to avoid bumping into him.

“*K chortu!* Never sneak up on me like that!” Illya snapped harshly. He followed up with a string of Russian expletives.

“You have a colorful vocabulary for a twentieth century Russian.” Dmitri looked healthier. There was a spot of color on his high cheekbones, and his suit fit him better now. “I apologize if I startled you. Here, and back there, as well. Ordinarily, I never feed on human beings. But you shot him. The smell of blood was tempting enough when Mr. Solo smashed the other man’s nose,

but I would not touch him because he was going to live. The man you shot, however... he was going to die, no matter what. And I was ravenous!"

Napoleon nodded, his lip curled in disgust. "Sure. No problem. A man's got to eat."

Illya smouldered, "Get us out of here."

Dmitri pushed at the bar on the exit door. "It is locked."

Illya pointed his gun at Dmitri. "I love how it feels when I pull the trigger," he growled.

Dmitri chuckled. "I could force the door, but they usually have men posted in an automobile to watch the exit. We will go this way. Follow me." He moved to the third door in the corridor, on the opposite side from the exit.

"Be careful with that door knob," Solo said, but too late. Dmitri was already turning the knob.

"Locked, of course." He laid his left hand high on the door next to the jamb and gave a little push there and against the knob. The wood of the door splintered with a loud crack and gave way. Dmitri pulled his hand away from the knob, then noticed the thread hanging from his fingers.

"Don't touch it!" barked Illya. "The oils from your skin will detonate the explosive."

Dmitri deliberately pulled the thread away with the thumb and index finger of his other hand. "Fortunately, my skin is different than yours." He reached inside the now open room and flipped on a light switch. "There is a dustbin in the basement. I will deposit this there. Also, there is a tunnel that runs under the street into that building across the way. It is a used book store today, but it used to be a Catholic hospital one hundred years ago. This was a convent, and the nuns who tended the patients used to cross under the street to get to the hospital."

Napoleon and Illya followed Dmitri but kept their weapons at the ready. The basement smelled of damp stone and decades of disuse. The bulb at the head of the stairs did little to illuminate the nether reaches. As the darkness closed in, Napoleon stopped walking. Illya was close beside him, one fist closed firmly on his partner's jacket.

"Uh, Dmitri? We can't see a thing down here," complained Napoleon.

"And I should warn you," said Illya, "that I have a nervous trigger finger in the dark."

Dmitri's baritone drifted to them from a few feet ahead. "Some young men should never be allowed to play with guns," he chided. "You cannot see me at all?"

Napoleon inhaled sharply as two eyes glowed green at him in the dark. "Oh, gosh," he quipped, "it's the Cheshire cat."

"I do not understand," said Dmitri.

They could see his eyes blink, floating in the darkness.

Illya explained. "Your eyes glow in the dark like a cat's eyes."

"Oh, that. My condition affects the structure of the eyeball. I have ... oh, what is that called? So much to keep up with these days. A tapetum lucidum? Something like that." His voice was moving closer. "Come, come! Let's go!"

Napoleon objected. "We can't see anything. Not where we're walking, nothing."

Dmitri dug in his pockets. "Here. Take this."

Napoleon felt a familiar object being placed in his hand. "A key chain?"

"There is a little flashlight on the end."

Napoleon found the switch and an instant later, he could see the uneven surface of the basement floor and ahead, the brick-lined arch of the mouth of a well constructed passageway. "All right," he said, throwing more bravado into his voice than he was feeling, "lead on, Dmitri."

At the other end of the tunnel was a heavy wooden door. Dmitri put his ear to it and listened. "Good. There is no one in the storeroom." He put his shoulder to the door and pushed. It opened slowly, then stopped. The gap was fourteen inches. "Follow me."

Napoleon and Illya squeezed through after him. Napoleon swung the flashlight around. They were in a small storage room, filled with janitorial equipment and pieces of shelving. The flashlight beam glinted off a metal chain, and Napoleon pulled it. A forty-watt bulb illuminated the drab space. Dmitri closed the door, then replaced the boxes of supplies that had blocked it.

"I prefer that they not know I use this entrance. They might put a lock on it," he explained. "Wait until I listen at the other door. It is relatively early. Someone might still be working in the store." He placed his ear against the other door.

Illya glanced at his watch. "It's nine p.m."

"No wonder you were hungry," said Napoleon.

Dmitri straightened. "Not a sound. The store is empty. Come." He opened the door and moved into the basement level of the bookstore. It was a maze of shelving, all of it stuffed with books in various conditions. The shelves were marked with subject labels. "The stairs are at the back of the store. This way."

Napoleon paused to turn off the storeroom light. They would use the flashlight. If they turned on the store lights, someone on the street might notice and call the police.

Illya's thoughts were moving in the same direction. "Is there a security alarm?" he asked.

"Yes, but only on the front and rear exits."

"Oh," said Napoleon drily. "Then there's not a problem."

Illya laughed silently.

Dmitri led them up carpeted stairs to the main floor, then continued upward.

"Where are we going?" asked Napoleon.

Dmitri stopped on the second-floor landing and unbolted the window. The glass was protected on the outside by a heavy mesh, nailed to the outer frame to keep the window from being broken. Dmitri hefted the sash and the window opened. "I will go first. Then you can lower yourselves down the side of the building, and I will be there to catch you when you jump." Giving no time for objections, he dislodged the metal mesh as if it were supposed to pop free, then perched on the window sill, swung his legs over and dipped his head under the lifted sash. A second later, he pushed off.

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other doubtfully, then poked their heads through the window to the alley below. Dmitri was standing there, looking up at them.

"Fifteen feet," said Napoleon.

Illya nodded.

"Do you think he can really catch us?"

Illya murmured softly, "If I shoot him, his corpse can break our fall."

Napoleon grinned. "I'll go first."

"No, I will," said Illya. "I weigh less. You can lower me a couple of extra feet. Once I am down, I will stand close to the wall and you can drop to my shoulders."

Napoleon nodded. "You don't trust Dmitri?"

Illya was already arranging himself on the sill. "Of course not." He anchored himself with his forearms as his shoes scabbled against the outer brick wall. "He's a vampire. Take my hand."

Napoleon grinned at him and grabbed his wrist low enough to allow Illya to latch on to him in the same manner. Then he braced himself with his free hand against the side of the sill.
“Ready.”

Illya nodded. He let go of the window sill and let Napoleon lower him as far as he could. Then he felt Dmitri’s fingers tapping at his shoes.

“I am here,” said Dmitri. “Drop now.”

Illya looked up at Napoleon, gave a “what-the-hell” roll of his eyes and nodded his assent. Silently they mouthed together, ‘One, two, three.’

Dmitri caught Illya as he came down and set him on the ground.

Illya straightened at once and stepped away. He straightened his jacket, made sure his gun was still in place, and said, “*Spasibo*.”

“*Pozhal’sta*,” replied Dmitri. “Now let’s get your partner down.”

Once they were all on the ground, Napoleon pulled out his communicator. “Open Channel D.”

A moment later, a female voice responded, “Go ahead, Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon grinned with relief. “Hello, Karen, my sweet. Mr. Kuryakin and I were unavoidably detained, and the building we were detained in had some sort of transmission blocking apparatus. It is also set up as a gas chamber. I think the city building commission should be notified, don’t you?” He gave her the address.

Dmitri objected. “What are you doing?! I sleep there!”

Illya quieted him. “If we don’t check in, our people will send a search party, and we won’t be able to go after your friend. Now come show me where the car is.”

“What car?”

“You said they have men waiting in a car to watch the back door. Show me.”

As Napoleon finished with Karen, Dmitri led Illya to the mouth of the alley.

“There,” he whispered. “In that dark car to the left of the fire plug.”

“I see them,” said Illya. “Napoleon? Are you set for sleep darts?”

“Yep. Wait here.” Napoleon checked his gun to make sure it held the sleep dart magazine, then stuck it and his hand into his jacket pocket. He straightened his tie, shrugged his shoulders back, and walked toward the car as if it were his own. When he got there, he took hold of the driver’s door handle and opened the door.

Illya and Dmitri could hear the “Phhht! Phhht!” of the darts as Napoleon fired, but little else.

“Very impressive,” said Dmitri.

Illya grinned. “They used to make as much noise as a bullet, but we had the boys in the lab put a special team on it. Our superiors prefer that we kill as few people as possible.”

“And the man in the showroom?” asked Dmitri.

Illya grunted. “I said, *our superiors* prefer that we kill as few people as possible.”

Napoleon returned to them. “They’ll be asleep for about six hours. Let’s see if our car is where we left it.”

It was. Napoleon drove. Illya rode shotgun.

Dmitri sat in back. “Please, hurry,” he said. “I fear that my friend may be suffering. And if we don’t rescue him before morning, he may die.”

Napoleon leaned one arm over the back of the seat and craned his neck to look out the back window as he maneuvered out of the parking place. “Oh, that’s right,” he said, as if he had forgotten. “The vampire thing.” He turned forward again and shifted into first. He manhandled

the Mustang into the street. “So, tell me, Dmitri. What’s the real reason Thrush is holding your friend? Did you two decide to take a little cream off the top of some lucrative operation, or what?”

Dmitri sat with his arms extended, bracing himself on both sides as the car moved. “They discovered what we are,” he said simply.

Napoleon glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “Does my driving make you nervous?”

Dmitri shook his head stiffly left to right. “No, of course not. But I find it difficult to trust a machine that moves as fast as an automobile but has no living brain harnessed to it.”

Illya laughed out loud.

Napoleon made a face. “Gee, thanks a lot.”

“Horses,” said Dmitri. “I mean horses. They live, they breathe, and they go only as fast as God intended. They are unlikely to run into a brick wall, and if they do, at those speeds, their passengers will probably survive.”

“Oh,” said Napoleon. “But I thought vampires were immortal?”

Dmitri was abrupt. “I cannot explain in this vehicle!”

Illya interrupted. “Don’t worry. Napoleon may not look it, but he does have a living brain.” He wagged his brows at his partner. “The warehouse. The Denmark Building on Wooster Street. That is in SoHo.”

“Got it. Once we get to Houston Street, you can direct me.”

“Do you think we’ll find what we’re looking for there?” asked Illya.

“Who knows?” Napoleon swerved sharply to avoid hitting the opening door of a Chrysler. “Idiot,” he muttered. “Dmitri says the people who are holding his friend are Thrush, and one Thrush is as good as another. Don’t you agree?”

Illya made a sour noise. “Well, if nothing else, perhaps they can tell us where to find what we’re looking for.”

From the back, Dmitri spoke through gritted teeth, “We are looking for my friend Pyotr.”

Napoleon nodded as he tapped the gas to make it through a light before it changed. “Of course, but we’re also looking for something else.”

Illya tapped on Napoleon’s arm and pointed to a parking space. “Pull in here.”

Napoleon pulled in.

“I’ll be right back,” said Illya. He glanced around, then got out of the car and strode off down the street.

“Why are we stopping?!” Dmitri’s voice was stronger now that the car was standing still. “We must get to that warehouse and rescue Pyotr!”

“We will, we will,” said Napoleon. “Don’t worry. We’ve got all night.”

Dmitri leaned forward and snarled at Napoleon, “I don’t think you are taking this rescue very seriously.” He purposely revealed his fangs.

Napoleon squinted at Dmitri’s canines and whistled softly. “Say, those are very nice. Do they come off? Or did you have them cemented on?”

Dmitri roared with rage and frustration, “I hate the twentieth century!” He threw himself against the back seat and fumed.

Napoleon regarded him cautiously in the rearview mirror. “Uh, look, Dmitri, I don’t mean to sound cavalier about your friend. U.N.C.L.E. has a very strict policy about the safety of innocent bystanders. Illya and I will save your friend from Thrush, never fear. But we also have to locate a certain item and take it back to Mr. Waverly... He’s our boss.... Before morning. It’s not that we

aren't worried about Pyotr. But if we get too emotionally involved, we might make a mistake. And if we make a mistake, we could be killed. And if we're dead, who will help you rescue Pyotr?"

Dmitri sighed. "You make perfect sense, of course." He stared glumly out the window. A neighborhood theater was attracting movie goers, and the sidewalk was busy with foot traffic and moving to and from the surrounding restaurants and the cinema entrance. Dmitri watched them. "I don't hate everything about the twentieth century," he amended. "Movies are quite nice. Pyotr loves the movies." He sighed. "Tell me, Napoleon, is your uncle a government agent?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Not my uncle. U.N.C.L.E.. The United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. It doesn't work for any single government. It's sort of an extragovernmental agency. U.N.C.L.E. agents come from different countries all over the world." Napoleon turned sideways on the front seat for a second to glance back at Dmitri. "Now you tell me something, all right? How come you know my name and Illya's name and the fact that he is... how did you put it?... the scientific one?"

Dmitri shrugged wearily. "I was in my coffin when the Thrush agents chased you into that showroom, and I heard everything that was said. Both by them and by you. They were talking about you while they searched."

"Illya and I couldn't hear them unless they were right next to us," objected Napoleon.

"Yes, I know. I have very keen ears."

Illya returned to the car carrying a white take-out bag. He closed the car door, and the scent of hamburgers and fries filled the air. "Supper," he announced.

Napoleon grinned. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

"No more angry stomach?"

"No, just hungry stomach. Coffee?"

"Coca-Cola. Hot liquid is dangerous in a moving car." Illya dug into the bag while Napoleon started the engine.

"I was just explaining to Dmitri that we have every intention of rescuing his friend from Thrush."

Illya nodded. "Is he ready to tell us why they're holding him?"

Napoleon glanced at Dmitri in the rearview mirror. "What about it, Dmitri?"

Dmitri thought for a moment, bracing himself again with both arms. "Very well," he decided. "I told you I am a vampire, correct? Well, vampires are not what your filmmakers would have you believe. We are people, like you, but we suffer from an infection. We are not... how do they say it? ... risen from the dead. We never died. When a person dies, a person dies. The body decays. The soul escapes. Pyotr and I are alive. But this infection has brought about changes in our physical being. We drink blood for nourishment because we cannot digest anything else. We avoid sunlight because we have become ultrasensitive to the ultraviolet rays, and we have an allergy to vitamin D. I just learned that a few years ago. As science progresses, we learn more and more about what our condition involves."

Illya directed Napoleon to turn left.

"Pyotr saw an advertisement in the newspaper offering free medical treatment for patients with unusual conditions who would form part of a test group. I wanted nothing to do with it. It is better if medical science does not know about us. But Pyotr is lonely. He has only me for company, and although we have been... very close... he needs more companionship than I." He stopped talking and stared out the window for a few moments.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances. Illya handed Napoleon an unwrapped hamburger and commented to Dmitri, “You are lovers, and he grows tired of you. You may speak openly. Napoleon and I are open-minded about these things.”

Dmitri blinked at Illya, then conceded, “Yes, we are lovers. Or we were, for a very long time.” He began to relax when Napoleon managed to keep the car on the street and avoid the sides of buildings. He shrugged and lowered his hands to the seat. “I went along with his desire to contact the research facility because of the chance of meeting others like ourselves. Perhaps we would find a group of fellow sufferers, and Pyotr would have new people to talk to. Perhaps things would improve between us. That was my hope.”

Napoleon swallowed burger. “But the research facility was run by Thrush?”

“I do not know,” said Dmitri. “However, one of the doctors was surely in their service, for they have Pyotr.”

Illya gestured with a French fry. “But why, Dmitri? What possible reason could they have for holding him prisoner?”

“The doctor who was interviewing him grew excited when he told her of his symptoms. He did not introduce himself as a vampire, of course. But he told her of his infected blood and of the results... both the bad and the good. Yes, we are forced to subsist on blood and we must avoid the sun... but we also have enhanced faculties. Our hearing is very keen, and our sense of smell is equal to that of a scent hound. Our body fat is greatly reduced, and lean muscle increased, giving us the strength of three or four men of similar size. And we have developed some other ... symptoms... that have proved quite helpful over the years.”

Illya directed Napoleon to turn right down Wooster Street. Napoleon turned and drove slowly, looking for a place to park.

“These other symptoms,” he said. “You mean, like that hypnotic mist you sprayed in the Thrush agent’s face? The mist that made him think you were his mother?”

Dmitri was impressed. “Very observant, Napoleon. Yes, that is one such symptom. I pray that the evil doctor has not discovered that particular feature of Pyotr’s anatomy.”

Illya tapped Napoleon’s arm and pointed at a parking place. “Dmitri, you still haven’t explained why they are holding him.”

“He came home two days ago... we have been sleeping in the coffin showroom for several weeks. Pyotr loves to read, and the tunnel leads to the bookstore... well, that is irrelevant, I suppose. But he was agitated and upset. He told me the doctor wants to study him. She is eager to determine what the infection is all about. I assumed she wanted to cure him. But he said no. She wants to isolate the infection... she believes it may be an undiscovered virus... and she wants to modify it so that it will confer the positive symptoms without any of the negative ones. She told Pyotr it would be a tremendous medical breakthrough that could benefit the human race in untold ways. But she said he had to go with her to a special facility where she could study his case at length. He refused. He did not want to become a virtual prisoner. He offered to let her take some blood samples, but insisted on his freedom. She became very agitated, and she demanded that he comply. He refused. When he prepared to leave, she summoned three large muscular men to restrain him. Ha!! He used his strength and the hypnomist to subdue them. At that point, the doctor changed her tune. She apologized for her overeager behavior. She begged him to continue their association. She claimed it was merely her exuberance for the research that made her act so foolishly.

“I was alarmed. I told him we would have to leave. I told him we were in great danger. But he refused to believe me. He said the doctor promised to introduce him to others with the same infection. I didn’t believe it, but Pyotr wanted desperately to find others like ourselves. He said he was going to rendezvous with her once more. He laughed at my fears. Last night I followed him to her office, but I stayed out of the way. I eavesdropped from a distance. They talked for a long while, but by three-thirty this morning, Pyotr grew impatient and demanded to meet the people she told him would be there. It was then that we learned my fears were justified. The doctor led him into an adjoining room, and her associates from the previous evening shot him with a tranquilizer dart and shackled him and placed him in a cage. I was frantic! But I could not think. I could not devise a way to secure his release, after seeing how the tranquilizer incapacitated Pyotr. What would keep them from doing the same to me? Nothing. I stayed nearby for as long as I could, long enough to hear the doctor order him removed from those offices. But I did not know where they were going to take him. I heard her talking on the telephone to others... I assume they were her colleagues, or perhaps her superiors... but she talked about Thrush, and the power that her new virus would provide for Thrush operatives. By then, dawn was approaching, and I had to return to the showroom. I was preparing to rise and go look for Pyotr when you gentlemen were thrust upon me.”

“You’re sure you heard her talking about Thrush?” asked Napoleon.

“Oh, yes. I heard all of that very clearly. As I said, I have very keen hearing. She was gloating over the phone. She said, ‘Thrush will never lose another battle. And they will owe it all to Dr. Egret and her Enhancement Virus.’ That was her name. Dr. Egret.”

“My, my, my,” said Napoleon. “Life is full of surprises, isn’t it, Illya.”

“Isn’t it, just?” replied Illya. He pointed out the front window. “The Denmark Building is that brick warehouse at the end of the block. Shall I call for backup?”

Napoleon sat for a moment, thinking. At last he said, “See if you can get Mark and April.”

“They’re in San Francisco.”

“Tuula and Dennis?”

“They are backing up Avery and Misha. Why so picky?”

Napoleon tossed his head in Dmitri’s direction. “I don’t want to have to explain the vampire delusion to just anyone.”

Dmitri leaned forward and hissed fiercely, “I am not delusional!” He opened the car door. “I am going after Pyotr. Come or stay, as you wish.” He was already on the sidewalk.

Napoleon and Illya exited the car.

“Wait, Dmitri!” called Illya.

“Why?”

Napoleon and Illya trotted after him. They each took hold of an arm. “We need a plan,” said Napoleon.

“If they spot us coming in,” said Illya, “they might hurt your friend.”

Dmitri stopped and looked from one to the other. “Very well. What is your plan?”

Napoleon looked around. Wooster Street was full of life. A gallery across the street was holding an open-air show, and thirty people mingled on the sidewalk, sipping champagne. The patrons were well dressed, and the artists looked like hippies. The ground level of the Denmark Building had been renovated into boutiques and a coffee house. The faint sound of bongos drifted out on a cloud of espresso fumes. Next door a head shop was still open, and half a dozen

bell-bottomed love children mingled with starving artists amidst display cases full of bongos, roach clips, and colored roll-your-own papers.

Napoleon shook his head hopelessly. “We stick out like a sore thumb.”

Dmitri spied something through a boutique window. “Come with me,” he commanded. They followed him into a used clothing store.

Twenty minutes later, Dmitri emerged wearing a long flowing cloak. “I have always wanted one of these, every since I saw Bela Lugosi wearing one in that ridiculous movie.” He pulled the cloak across his chest and covered the bottom half of his face with his arm. “What do you think?”

“You look sinister.” Illya had traded his white shirt and tie for a black turtleneck. His hair completed his artistic look. He slipped his black jacket back on to cover his shoulder holster.

Napoleon had not fared quite as well. “I hate costumes,” he muttered. But the flack jacket covered his shoulder holster, and he was grateful no one suggested he try to look like a hippy. He stuffed his tie into one of the pockets in his camouflage pants, refusing to leave everything behind. “That suit cost two hundred dollars.”

Illya patted the front of his olive drab tee shirt where it pulled taut across his pecs. “Put it on your expense voucher,” he murmured. “Besides, you look very sexy in army fatigues. Do the combat boots fit?”

Napoleon grinned. “Close enough.” He looked down at Illya’s bulge. “I look that good, huh?”

“We’ll talk about it later. One more thing.” He pulled a wooden ban-the-bomb pendant out of his pocket and draped its braided-leather necklace around Napoleon’s neck. “Perfect. Let’s go save a vampire.”

They looked around for Dmitri, but he was gone.

“Damn it!” cursed Napoleon. “If he blows our chance to grab Egret...”

“Patience, my friend. He doesn’t even know we want her. Come on. Let’s try the coffee house. We need access to the upper floors.”

“Try around the corner. Look for a front door.”

“*Bozhe moi*, I love it when you give orders in that outfit,” growled Illya playfully.

“Yeah, well, cool it or we’ll have to explain to Mr. Waverly how we lost Egret because I had to...” He leaned close to Illya’s ear and whispered hotly, “...blow you in the back seat of the Mustang.”

Illya’s blue eyes twinkled. Then he cleared his throat and forced himself to get serious. “All right. Play time has to wait.” They managed to peek around the corner without looking too furtive.

Napoleon murmured, “Two hefty looking hippies with suspicious bulges under their tie-dye vests, and the wrong kind of shoes.”

Illya nodded. “The front door is out. Where the devil is Dmitri?”

Someone hissed at them from the entrance to the coffee house. It was Dmitri.

“There you are,” said Napoleon.

“I have found a way upstairs. And I have smelled Pyotr in the passageway. They are definitely here. Or they were a short time ago. Hurry!”

Napoleon and Illya followed him through the dark little club. Candles flickered on small round tables littered with espresso cups and ashtrays. The sweet pungent smell of marijuana competed with the tobacco smoke and won, hands down. Dmitri led the way up a narrow set of

stairs to a balcony with more tables and thicker smoke. The bongo music was coming from this level. The musician was playing to no one but himself, one ear bent to his drums, his eyes closed. Dmitri went through a beaded curtain at the back of the balcony. Napoleon started after him, but a tall beefy middle-aged man dressed in beaded leather and embroidered denim stiff-armed him and backed him into Illya.

“Hey, man. We don’t want any trouble here. Why don’t you go back to the base and polish your tank or something.”

Napoleon opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Illya slipped between him and the over-sized hippy.

“Cool it, man. He just got back from Nam, you dig? His brain is fried. Sometimes he thinks he is still in the jungle.”

“So what’s he doing here?”

“Rehab,” said Illya. “It’s important that he meet no resistance...if you know what I mean.”

The big man nodded knowingly. “Like, cool, man. As long as he’s anti-war... Uh, he ain’t dangerous, is he?”

Illya patted Napoleon’s back. “Not as long as he gets his medication.”

“Wow, man. Okay, like, be cool.”

“The coolest,” said Illya. “Come on, General, let’s check this village for Viet Cong.”

Once they were out of range of the big hippy, Napoleon muttered, “Where do you pick up all this stuff?”

Illya smiled enigmatically. “Just let me do the talking. Where did Dmitri go?”

“Down the hall and to the right.”

They passed rooms full of young people passing bongos and pipes. The lighting in the hall and in the rooms was black light, and psychedelic posters lined the walls, the luminous pinks and greens and blues and oranges shining eerily on all sides. When they went around the corner, the posters were fewer and all the doors were shut. One of them bore the hand-lettered word “Cats” and the other “Chicks”. The door at the end of the hall was labeled with the language of the The Establishment: Authorized Personnel Only.

Dmitri was waiting for them. “Through here. I can smell Pyotr very strong here.”

“How can you smell anything in here but pot?” asked Napoleon.

“Shh!” Dmitri put a finger to his lips. “I smell other scents as well. One female, and three males.”

Napoleon rolled his eyes, but Dmitri was already working on the door. He placed his hands carefully and pushed. The locks held but the wood splintered and the door gave. He went on through without a glance at the mess.

Napoleon and Illya stared at the door in astonishment, but down the corridor a voice was saying, “The bathroom is *where?*” They didn’t wait for whoever it was to find the Cats and Chicks. They closed the door behind them as well as they could and hoped no authorized personnel noticed its damaged state.

Dmitri led them to an elevator, but Napoleon stopped him before he could press a button.

“Jesus, Dmitri, you might as well send up a flare,” said Napoleon. “We’ll take the stairs. Come on.”

In the stairwell, Illya asked, “Dmitri, can you really smell how many of them there are?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Can you smell *where* they are?”

“On the next floor. I can hear them as well.”

“Good,” whispered Napoleon. He led the way up the stairs and pointed at the first door in the corridor. “Put your ear against this door and tell us if there’s anyone on the other side.”

Dmitri listened for several seconds. His features darkened with rage. “I hear Pyotr weeping! I will kill them all!”

Napoleon and Illya tried to quiet him, but it was too late. He burst through the door and roared at the three men and the woman standing around the hospital gurney. On the gurney lay his friend Pyotr, strapped naked to the metal. He looked frightened, and his eyes were wet. His mouth was covered by a wide strip of duct tape.

Dmitri attacked the first man, snapping his neck and dropping his body to the floor. Napoleon and Illya drew their guns. Napoleon fired a sleep dart at the second man, but he had time to stagger to the desk in the corner before he went down. Illya pointed his weapon alternately at the third man and the woman.

“Freeze!” he cried.

The woman was slender, middle-aged, fine featured and not at all familiar looking. But then, Dr. Egret never looked the same way twice, so neither agent was surprised.

“Yes,” she said. “I suggest all three of you freeze.” She stepped aside so they could see what she was doing. She was holding a hypodermic syringe. The needle was plunged into Pyotr’s arm. “If I press this plunger, he dies,” she said calmly. “Won’t Mr. Waverly be pleased? Two U.N.C.L.E. agents cause the death of an innocent citizen? The headlines will be graphic, I promise you.”

Napoleon and Illya still had their weapons trained on her. “Oh, gosh, I don’t think he’ll mind too much. After all, if we bring in the notorious Dr. Egret, we’ll be voted most valuable U.N.C.L.E. agents of the year.”

Dmitri was horrified. “What are you doing?! Stop at once! Napoleon, Illya, I beg you... You cannot risk Pyotr’s life!”

Napoleon pushed a warning into his voice. “Dmitri...”

“*Nyet!*” Dmitri stepped in front of them and put his hands on their weapons. “You said you would help me!”

The third man grabbed a scalpel from an instrument tray and stabbed Dmitri between the shoulder blades. Dmitri cried out and fell forward, dragging Napoleon and Illya to the floor. By the time they got untangled, two armed men in cheap suits thundered in from another room. They aimed their guns at Napoleon and Illya who sighed heavily in unison and surrendered their weapons.

“Tie them to the other gurneys,” said Egret coldly. She removed the hypodermic from Pyotr’s arm. “And be careful, for Christ’s sake. They may look like buffoons, but they have proven extremely dangerous in the past.”

Napoleon mouthed the word, “Buffoons?”

Illya dropped his head and tried not to laugh.

“Give me one of those guns,” said Egret. “Good. Now, Mr. Kuryakin, I am pointing this weapon at your spine. I suggest you do as you are told. Get on your knees.”

Illya lowered himself carefully to his knees.

“Hands on your head, and keep them there,” said Egret.

Illya placed his hands on his head.

“Very good. Now, Victor, you and Julius tie Mr. Solo’s hands behind his back. If he resists, I’ll blow a hole in Mr. Kuryakin’s spine.”

Napoleon felt all the fight go out of him.

Egret laughed. “Yes, I thought so. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to your precious partner, would we, Mr. Solo?”

Napoleon frowned at her. “I liked you better as a blonde,” he said calmly, “although not even a blonde wig could make you as pretty as those girls from Nazarone.”

“Please, Napoleon,” said Illya tersely, “try not to irritate her at the moment, will you?”

“Shut up!” Egret would brook no nonsense. “None of your cute little conversations. Shut up, or I’ll tape your mouth like his.” She indicated Pyotr with a toss of her head. “The stupid little bastard. I run all these risks, I spend all this money setting up a lab, and my latest blood tests show that he is absolutely normal!!” She screamed the last, spewing flecks of spittle with her rage. “But at least it’s not a total waste of time.” Her voice quavered with the effort at control. “At least I can deliver two top U.N.C.L.E. agents to Thrush central. And maybe they’ll let me do the interrogation.”

Napoleon’s hands were tied.

“Put him on the gurney, face down,” snarled Egret. Then her eyes sparked with a frightening fire. “No, wait. Strip him from the waist down. Pants, shoes, underwear. Everything.”

Illya watched uneasily as the Victor and Julius undressed Napoleon. “There is no need to get fancy,” he said as calmly as he could. “If Thrush Central gives us to you for interrogation, you will have all the time in the world for that.”

He was rewarded by the jab of a hypodermic in his left buttock.

“Ow! What are you doing?! What... what...?” Illya’s voice faded slowly as he crumpled to the floor.

Victor and Julius had Napoleon’s trousers off, but when Illya slumped unconscious, Napoleon struck out at them, using an elbow on Julius and a head butt on Victor. But Julius grabbed him by his bound wrists and yanked his arms up behind him. Napoleon bent forward, groaning.

Egret moved to the medical tray at Pyotr’s head and lay her gun down. “Cover him, Howie,” she said to the third man. He held the gun as if it were a bomb waiting to go off. “Be careful, Mr. Solo. Howie is a medical technician, not a trained marksman. If he has to fire, he’ll probably kill you accidentally.” She took her time preparing another hypodermic. “Victor and Julius are going to put you on that gurney, and you’re going to let them, if you want your precious partner to survive the night. Lay him on his back, boys, and lace those straps around his arms. Oh, too bad, Mr. Solo. You look so uncomfortable.” She made tsk, tsk noises. “Now strap his ankles and his thighs.” She moved closer to observe. She reached out to pull the edges of his flak jacket away from his pelvis. “My, my, Mr. Solo. No wonder they say you have balls.” She took his limp penis in her free hand. “I’m going to make sure you can’t go anywhere before morning.” She squeezed his penis, and Napoleon flinched. “Oh, come on, let’s get hard, Napoleon,” she murmured mockingly. “What’s wrong? Not in the mood?” She squeezed him again and pumped him hard.

Napoleon yelled in protest.

“Why, Napoleon... you used to like girls.” She lay the side of the hypodermic needle against the head of his penis, and Napoleon sucked in air. Egret chuckled. “The penis is so sensitive, isn’t it? But I think the psychological sensitivity is even greater than the physical. The thought of me pushing this needle into the head of your penis... Oh! That got a reaction, didn’t it?”

Napoleon struggled so hard against his restraints that the gurney rolled.

Egret calmly pressed her foot down on the wheel brake. “We can’t have you rolling out the door half dressed, now can we?” She let go of his penis and took his balls in her hand. She smiled wickedly as she exerted pressure. Napoleon’s face reddened and he grimaced against the pain. Egret laughed and twisted his testicles. Napoleon yelled and banged his head on the gurney. Egret let him go.

“Just a taste of what’s to come, darling,” she said breathily. Then she laughed. “This almost makes up for my disappointment over vampire boy. Almost, but not quite.” She stepped over to Pyotr who watched her with wild, frightened eyes. “This one’s for you, Pyotr.” She jabbed his bicep with the needle and pushed the plunger. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s just something to help you sleep through the night. I can’t afford to lose sleep worrying about you boys. The only way I can rest is knowing you are unconscious.”

Pyotr was already asleep.

Egret waved at Illya. “Julius, Victor. Strip him naked.” She cut a piece of duct tape and carried it to Napoleon.

Still breathing hard from the pain she had inflicted on his testicles, he panted, “No, please, I’ll suffocate. A dead U.N.C.L.E. agent is no good to Thrush Central, right?”

But she covered his mouth with the tape and pressed it against his skin with more force than was necessary. Then she leaned over him and hissed, “I’ve had a really bad day, Napoleon. So don’t piss me off any further.” She straightened up and whirled to Julius and Victor. “Tie his hands in back, just like Solo’s.” She walked over to Dmitri and nudged him with a foot. He didn’t move. She pulled her leg back and kicked him hard. Nothing. She reached down and pulled the scalpel out of his back. Blood spurted from the wound for a moment, but the dark cape covered most of the blood. She backed rapidly away when she noticed that the toe of her white medical oxford was stained a bright red. Then she chuckled. “At least we don’t have to tie this one up, right, Howie?”

Howie was sweating. He looked young, but his hair was thinning, and in another year middle age would rob his body of its last illusion of youth. “Oh, Doctor Egret, I’m afraid I’m going to be ill. All this excitement, the violence, the... the sadism...”

She smiled at him, a dark, secret smile. “It excites you, doesn’t it, Howie?”

He couldn’t speak. He nodded several times, but he had to look away.

“Good,” she purred. “Just a few more details, darling, and ...” she leaned close to his ear “... it’ll be your turn.” Then she moved away from him. “All right, Julius, now you and Victor pick Mr. Kuryakin up and lay him on top of Mr. Solo. Face to face. Won’t that be cozy, Napoleon, darling? Don’t drop him! Careful. Yes, like that. Line them up, now. Make sure the important parts are touching. And don’t curl your lip at me, Victor, or I’ll have you sent to the Island for medical experimentation.” Her voice cut like a whip.

Victor controlled his revulsion. “I’m sorry, Doctor. It’s just having to touch these U.N.C.L.E. agents.”

“Yes, of course it is, Victor,” Egret sneered. “Now bind him tightly to the gurney.”

When they were finished, she stopped and surveyed the room. “Let’s see, now. Yes, Napoleon is still breathing. That’s good. Illya is still unconscious. This one on the floor is dead, and Pyotr is out like a light. All the live ones are securely tied... oh, one last thing. Open those windows a foot or two, boys. Let’s make sure they all get some fresh air tonight. Good. All right, then. It’s late, and we’ve done a full day’s work. Let’s all go get some sleep. We have a big day

ahead with Thrush Central tomorrow. Oh, Victor. I almost forgot. Bruce is dead, but Andrew will revive in about five hours. Lay him on the floor. He looks terribly uncomfortable sprawled across that desk. And put some of those sheets over him so he won't catch a chill from the open windows. Good! Now we can go beddy-bye. Come along, Howie. Goodnight, Napoleon!" They filed out, and Egret turned out the light and closed and locked the door.

Napoleon lay as still as he could in order to calm his breathing. He needed a plan, but all he could think about was how glad he was that Illya was unconscious. This way only one of them would have to deal with the emotional baggage of Dr. Egret's cruelty.

Their situation, however, would not allow him to do nothing. He wondered if perhaps he had made a fatal mistake. He didn't want to explain their "vampire" to his fellow agents, but being discovered in his current situation would be even more humiliating.

Relax, Polé, he told himself, no one from U.N.C.L.E. is going to see you like this. Egret will be back in the morning to turn you over to Thrush, and they'll probably kill you. So don't worry about it.

He started to laugh, but the duct tape prevented it, and he nipped the urge at once when he realized there was no way to breathe and laugh at the same time. In addition, the weight of Illya on his chest was making each breath an effort of will.

I'll probably suffocate before morning. That would be comforting, except it would mean that Illya would come to on a corpse. Think, dammit!

But his brain refused to cooperate. He spent several seconds holding his breath in order to feel the rise and fall of Illya's respiration. Once he verified that Illya was breathing, he spent several more seconds trying to get enough air in through his nose to satisfy his greedy lungs. He decided that noses were pitifully inadequate inhalers, and he wondered idly if U.N.C.L.E. scientists could invent artificial nostrils and implant them in inconspicuous locations to help agents like himself who were stupid enough to wind up with duct tape over their mouths.

This train of thought was interrupted by the sound of someone moving. Solo strained to determine where the sound was coming from, and as he did, there was an audible grunt and groan from the floor. Dmitri?

A moment later, his guess was confirmed. Dmitri cursed meatily in Russian as he struggled to his feet. Napoleon could make out his shape as one shade of dark against the deeper black of the laboratory's interior. The erstwhile vampire was staggering toward Napoleon.

Dmitri steadied himself on the edge of the gurney, then carefully peeled the duct tape from Napoleon's mouth. Napoleon squeezed his eyes shut against the sting of tears as the tape separated from skin and facial hair.

"Sorry," said Dmitri. "Perhaps I should have ripped it off quickly."

Napoleon worked his lips and jaw, and breathed deeply through his mouth. "Please don't apologize. I'm just very grateful you aren't dead."

Dmitri snorted. "Those imbeciles. They thought they could tell whether I was alive by feeling my pulse!"

"Whatever were they thinking?"

Dmitri chuckled. "You still do not believe me, but I forgive you. Let me unfasten these restraints and get you and Illya off this table."

"Won't that be easier if you turn on a light?"

"If they left a man to watch downstairs, a light could give us away." As he spoke, the first restraint came undone and Dmitri started on the next.

“Good thinking,” said Napoleon. “What about your friend? Is he all right?”

“Yes, I can hear him breathing. I will free him in a moment. You are conscious. I prefer to have two of us conscious and unfettered in case Dr. Egret suffers from insomnia and decides to return prematurely.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on that point,” said Napoleon. As Dmitri lifted Illya off him, he added, “Be careful.”

Dmitri smiled, and his fangs caught the light from the street lamp. “I will lay him on the desk and then release you.”

Once Napoleon was on his feet, Dmitri used a scalpel to cut through the tape that bound his hands.

“Thanks. I’ll take care of Illya’s hands. You see to your friend.” Napoleon felt around in the vicinity where he remembered his trousers to be and got lucky. He dressed himself, then freed Illya’s hands and found his partner’s clothes.

Dmitri was doing the same for Pyotr.

“How is he?” asked Napoleon.

“I am not sure. He...he smells different.” Dmitri sounded confused. “I don’t understand.”

“Did you find his clothes?”

“No.”

“Well, take the clothes off that sleeping Thrush agent and get Pyotr dressed. We can’t carry him out of here naked. We’ll attract too much attention.”

Dmitri nodded, but his mood had shifted. Silently, he stripped the unconscious Thrush agent. His clothes would be baggy on Pyotr, but too big was better than too small.

Napoleon finished dressing Illya, then pressed his lips to his forehead under cover of darkness. “Illya. Illya! Can you hear me? Wake up!”

Dmitri said, “If we knew what drug they used, we might find an antidote.”

Napoleon nodded. “I’ve got a kit in the car. We can test a drop of Illya’s blood. Have you finished with Pyotr?”

Dmitri chuckled, but there was a sadness to the sound. “He is dressed, and the Thrush agent is bound and gagged. I fear I was not gentle with him. But if his colleagues return as they promised, he should not lose any limbs.”

Napoleon blinked at the barely visible outline of Dmitri’s profile, then he asked quietly, “Are you sure you don’t work for the CIA?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Never mind. Just a little joke.” Solo took a deep breath and let it out. “All right, let’s see if we can get out of here.” He moved cautiously to the window and peered out. “I don’t see anyone, but the angle is bad from up here.”

Dmitri spoke close to his ear. “One of the men who tied you to the table is sitting half a block south in a blue Chrysler sedan. He seems to be dozing intermittently.”

“How the hell can you tell all that from here?”

Dmitri shrugged. “Call it a gift.”

“Well, maybe they don’t know we came up through the coffee house. If we go back down that way, they may not have anyone on Wooster Street looking for us.”

“If they do, and he was in this room, I will know.”

“Right,” said Solo, not believing it for a minute. “Let’s go, then.” He picked Illya up in his arms and headed for the door.

Dmitri was there first, listening. A moment later, he tried the knob. The door was locked, but it did not slow Dmitri down. He wrenched the knob, something cracked in the locking mechanism, and the door opened. Dmitri sniffed the air tentatively. "Very well. It is safe to proceed. I will get Pyotr and follow you."

Napoleon said a little prayer of thanks as they maneuvered through the coffee house crowd with a minimum number of stares and no questions. He paused at the entrance while Dmitri sniffed the night air.

"All clear."

Napoleon shook his head and rolled his eyes, but his own experienced gaze had revealed nothing either, so they moved onto the street and headed briskly for the car. It was 11:25 p.m. The crowd at the gallery had thinned a bit, and moviegoers were still watching the last reel. Napoleon felt naked without his gun and his communicator, but he was grateful the feeling was only figurative. If Egret had taken all their clothes with her, things would have been worse.

Fortunately, she had not taken everything. His wallet and keys were still in the pocket of his camouflage pants. He balanced Illya's unconscious form against the side of the car while he unlocked it. Two curious gallery guests eyed them warily and quickened their pace as they move by. Napoleon bundled Illya into the passenger seat and closed the door.

"Come around to the driver's side, Dmitri, and I'll help you get Pyotr into the back seat."

"There is no need. You have fulfilled your part of the bargain. You have helped me save him. I will take him home now."

Napoleon paused with his hand on the driver's side door handle. "Thrush owns that building. You aren't safe there."

"Pyotr and I have several homes in the city. We move around a lot."

Napoleon nodded slowly. "Uh, sure. I just thought you might like a chance to get even with Egret for what she did to Pyotr."

Dmitri's eyes fell to Pyotr's unconscious face, and his features filled with a dark mixture of sadness and rage. When he looked at Solo again, his eyes burned with the same fire Solo had seen there in the funerary showroom. "*Da, da*, I would like that opportunity very much."

"Good. Get in."

Dmitri was not sanguine about entering U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, but Napoleon reminded him of their goal.

"We both want to get Egret," he said, pulling the Mustang into its space in the underground parking garage. "And I would feel better if your friend was checked out by our medics. They can counteract the drug in his system and make sure he doesn't suffer any long term effects. U.N.C.L.E. frowns on Thrush's tendency to damage our citizenry."

"Very well," said Dmitri. "But I must be home before dawn. I have a problem with the sun, remember."

Napoleon smiled. "Right. Uh, say, Dmitri? I think it would be better inside headquarters if you would keep quiet about the vampire thing. Some of our doctors are psychiatrists, and I did promise to let you guys go. I'd like to keep that promise."

Dmitri nodded somberly. "Understood."

"Good. Wait here with Illya and Pyotr. I'll go get us some help." Napoleon got out of the car and headed for the wall phone. By the time he returned to the car, an elevator door was opening.

Four men and two women emerged. The men were wheeling gurneys. Napoleon greeted the woman in the white coat. "Hello, Doc."

Gloria Burnside flashed him a grim smile. "Any bleeding?"

"No. But Illya and an innocent were shot up with some kind of drug. Probably a standard sedative, but I need Illya awake and functioning."

Burnside nodded. "I can tell from your voice that you're working. All right, we'll take care of it. Come on, people, let's get them out of the car."

Dmitri climbed out of the back seat.

Burnside nodded at him. "Who's the conscious one?" asked Burnside.

Napoleon grinned. "Another bystander. He helped me get Illya out of Egret's clutches."

Burnside's eyebrows shot skyward. "Egret?"

Napoleon nodded. "Yep. That's why I need Illya."

"All right. You do your thing with Waverly, and I'll send Illya upstairs when he can walk and talk on his own again."

"Thanks. Oh, Dmitri here would like to stay near his friend. He's Russian, and his English is iffy, so don't ask him a lot of questions, okay?" The lie slipped easily off Napoleon's tongue.

"Got it."

An hour later, the door to Waverly's office whooshed open, and Illya Kuryakin entered. Solo smiled at him. "No fair. You went to the locker room and changed."

Illya looked down at himself. He was still wearing a black turtleneck, black pants, and black jacket. Then he said, "Oh. You are joking." He suppressed a smile. "Your new tailor has done a splendid job."

Napoleon was still wearing the flak jacket, camouflage pants, and combat boots they found in the used clothing store. "Where is Dmitri?"

"Burnside will send him up in a few minutes. He took off his cloak, and one of the nurses noticed a copious amount of blood on the back of his expensive blue suit. He told them it was not his, but they insisted on examining him for puncture wounds."

Napoleon shifted uneasily in his chair. "They didn't find any?"

"No." Illya met Napoleon's gaze in a moment of silent communication.

At last, Napoleon looked away and cleared his throat. "Interesting," he commented.

"Yes," Illya agreed.

Alexander Waverly emerged from his private bathroom, drying his hands on a towel. "Ah, Mr. Kuryakin. Just in time to help us firm up this plan to capture Egret. Mr. Solo has a theory about the project she is working on. We believe it is the same project that you and Mr. Solo were investigating earlier this evening. Thrush's Nietzsche Formula." He moved to his chair and reached for his pipe and humidior.

Illya poured himself a cup of coffee from the carafe on the revolving table. Then he refilled Solo's cup as he spoke. "That would seem to indicate that the innocent victim of her experiment tonight was supposed to provide her with something she needed for her formula."

Napoleon dropped a sugar cube in his cup and stirred. "But she was disappointed, wasn't she? What was it she said? 'I run all these risks, I spend all this money setting up a lab, and my latest blood tests show that he is absolutely normal.' That was it, wasn't it?"

Illya grunted an affirmative. "Except she was screaming at the time."

"So she must have been taken in by his story, then."

Waverly tamped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "What story is that, Mr. Solo?"

Napoleon arched his brows and stalled for time. "Ah... well, sir... uh, you see..."

Illya came to the rescue. "Our friends suffer from the delusion that they are vampires, sir."

Waverly paused with a lit match over his pipe. His shaggy brows met in a frown over the bridge of his nose. "Preposterous."

"Yes, sir," said Illya. "Nevertheless, the one called Dmitri believes it to be true, and I assume his friend was telling Dr. Egret the same thing. Evidently, she is a bit more gullible than Mr. Solo and myself." He let his eyes meet Solo's gaze for a moment, but neither of them could hold it.

"Will wonders never cease," mumbled Waverly. He shook the match out just as it reached his fingers and lit another. For a few seconds, no one spoke as Waverly sucked on his pipe. Then he cleared his throat and asked, "Will they help us lay a trap for Egret?"

Napoleon leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "I don't know, sir. We'll have to ask them."

The doors slid open, and a mini-skirted young woman escorted Dmitri and Pyotr into the room. They complemented each other nicely. Although both had dark hair, Pyotr's was thick and curly, the perfect frame for a face that was the picture of sensuality. His lips were full, his lashes long and dark, and he moved with the grace of a dancer. He was the softer of the two, a contrast to Dmitri's angular features, patrician nose, and bony hands.

Dmitri spoke. "Ask us what, Mr. Solo?"

Mr. Waverly stood up. "Welcome, gentlemen. I am Alexander Waverly."

Dmitri gave a militaristic bow. "I am Dmitri Ivanovich Lipatov. And this is my companion, Pyotr Danielovich Degtyarenko."

"You are Russian," said Waverly.

"Yes," said Dmitri, "but we have lived abroad for many, many years."

"Please, sit down, gentlemen. We were about to ask a favor of you."

Dmitri pulled a chair out for Pyotr who sat gingerly upon it, as if it might fall through at the last moment. He was still wearing the Thrush agent's clothes, and they were too big for him. He looked vaguely like a boy playing dress-up in his father's clothing. Dmitri sat in the chair beside him, one hand resting gently on Pyotr's wrist. "A favor, Mr. Waverly? We will do our best to comply. Your men have dealt fairly with us, and they helped me rescue Pyotr from that madwoman Egret. We will try to accommodate you."

"Excellent. Because we hope to capture that madwoman, as you call her, and put her behind bars. Will you help us lay a trap?"

Dmitri's expression was guarded as he replied, "We will do all that we can."

"In that case, I will leave you in the hands of Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin. They are skilled strategists, and I'm sure they will come up with a plan that will entail a minimum of risk for you both." Waverly returned to his chair and began pulling file folders from a stack on the table.

"That will be all, Mr. Solo," he said absently.

They were being dismissed.

Napoleon exchanged a wry glance with Illya, and got up from his chair. "Uh, yes, sir. We'll be going now. We have to trap a madwoman."

Waverly made a sound that might have been a chuckle, but Napoleon couldn't be sure.

"Dmitri? Pyotr? If you'll come with us, Mr. Kuryakin and I will buy you a late supper."

Pyotr spoke for the first time. "Oh, I'm famished! Yes, let's go eat."

They left U.N.C.L.E. headquarters on foot and headed for an all-night eatery on Forty-Second Street. Once clear of U.N.C.L.E.'s surveillance cameras, Napoleon offered Dmitri a graceful out.

"Dmitri, Illya and I are not expecting you to hang around while we try to catch Egret. We had a bargain. You kept your end and we plan to keep ours. You and Pyotr are free to go."

Pyotr looked surprised. "But Dmitri, I thought you said—"

Dmitri cut him off by responding to Napoleon. "I want to be there when you catch her, Napoleon. Which means we must work quickly. Sunrise is 7:00 a.m. I must be safely inside my coffin before then."

Napoleon gave Dmitri's shoulder a friendly pat. "Come on, Dmitri. You can drop the vampire thing now. We've been through a lot together."

Pyotr gaped, then broke into a high-pitched laugh. "*Bozhe moi!* He doesn't believe you! This is too much. Oh, Dmitri, life is truly cruel, isn't it?"

Napoleon and Illya exchanged uneasy glances.

"What are you talking about?" asked Illya, opening the door to the neon-lit interior of the aging cafeteria.

Pyotr gestured with one arm, then as if for the first time, he realized that he wasn't wearing his own clothes. "That witch! What did she do with my Brooks Brothers? These clothes are horrid! I look like a refugee."

Napoleon took out a twenty dollar bill and paid for the four of them. Illya picked up a tray in each hand and thrust them at Dmitri and Pyotr. Dmitri took them both, but Pyotr was still obsessing about his clothes.

Napoleon took a tray and followed Illya down the serving line. Illya made selections and placed them on his and Napoleon's trays. Napoleon was still trying to get an answer out of Pyotr.

"You're not going to tell us what's so funny?" he asked.

Pyotr sighed dramatically. "I was merely commenting on the cruelty of existence. That deceitful physician promised me I would meet more people with our... affliction,... but there were no others! I was the only one. And she put me in a cage. And drugged me!" As he spoke, Pyotr loaded his tray with food. Dmitri put a glass of water on his.

"And when she tested your blood, she found out you were perfectly normal," said Illya.

"Ha!" Pyotr's voice was full of contempt. "I was not normal when she put me in that cage! I was as infected as Dmitri. In fact, it was Dmitri who infected me, so many years ago." He turned and looked sadly at his friend.

"Uh, Pyotr, we're in a public cafeteria. It would be better if you didn't shout to the world that Dmitri has some kind of infection."

Pyotr looked around. The formica tables were empty except for two gaudy hookers sharing a tray and a pack of smokes next to the window.

"Oh, really, you can't be serious." Pyotr rolled his eyes.

Illya finished selecting foods and nudged Napoleon toward a table against the rear wall.

Napoleon nodded and followed Illya as he addressed Dmitri with a sympathetic smile. "You're awfully quiet, now that Pyotr is safe. Do you always let him do your talking?"

"Oh, please!" Pyotr wagged a finger at Napoleon. "He usually does most of the talking. He's upset. And why shouldn't he be? I am upset as well! And with good reason!"

Illya was running out of patience. Once they all sat down, he leaned across the table and snapped in Russian, “Pyotr, if you don’t shut up and let Dmitri tell us what is going on, I’m going to stuff that fried chicken down your throat sideways.”

Pyotr was taken aback, but refrained from speaking. He concentrated on taking his first tentative bites of mashed potato and gravy.

Illya glared at him until he was satisfied that no further outbursts were forthcoming. “Now, Dmitri,” he said at last, “what is the matter?”

Dmitri’s transformation was unnerving. The arrogant confidence he had displayed earlier in the evening was gone. He looked sad and shaken. He sipped at his water, then spoke. “That Egret creature did a blood test before she kidnapped Pyotr. I heard her talk about it. Remember? I told you how I followed Pyotr to her office, and how her henchmen shot him with a tranquilizer gun. Once he was unconscious, she discussed the results of the blood test with the one she calls Howie. Pyotr’s blood was proof of all his claims, she said. With a little funding and the right equipment, she was sure she could create an elixir that would duplicate those conditions in others. In other words, she was going to isolate what made Pyotr the way he was and sell it to this Thrush organization.

“But something happened between that test and our arrival at the lab tonight. Tell them, Pyotr.”

Pyotr, however, was now offended. He made a tick-o-lock gesture over his mouth and refused to speak. Instead, he crossed his arms and glared at Illya.

Dmitri growled and seized a handful of Pyotr’s hair. “I am not in the mood for games, Pyotr,” he whispered fiercely. Then he commanded, with a hypnomist enforcer, “Tell them!”

Pyotr blinked in confusion. When he realized that he had been sprayed, his eyes widened in horror, but he could not stop himself from speaking. “Egret’s assistant, Howie... He examined me... My teeth, my body temperature, my...my vital signs... and he determined that I...” Even under the hypnomist, he started to laugh at the irony of it all. “He determined that I had some kind of infection!” More laughter, with an unhealthy edge to it. “He decided to do me a favor and clear up the infection. He didn’t tell Egret. He just gave me an injection of something, and continued with his tests. The panic on his face when I fainted! Ha!” He was perspiring now, and breathing rapidly. But Dmitri’s hypnomist still controlled him. The pain in his voice made it clear that he did not want to relive what had happened to him. “When I came to, Howie whispered in my ear... He said if I told Egret what he had done, he would kill me. Then he covered my mouth with tape... A few minutes later, I heard Egret screaming about the second blood test. She claimed I was a hoax. Accused me of lying to her! And all the time it was her own assistant who had destroyed her plans. Whatever he gave me... cured the infection. I am no longer a vampire.” His chin quivered.

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other. Then Napoleon said, “But isn’t that a good thing? To be cured?”

Dmitri replied, “No. It is not. Because now my poor Pyotr must consciously decide whether he wishes me to infect him again, or whether he prefers to remain normal and live out his life in the daylight.”

Napoleon blinked at Dmitri for a moment, then gave a dubious half-smile. “Uh, you’re putting me on, right? This is a joke... Isn’t it?”

“No,” said Dmitri. “Pyotr is no longer infected. He can walk in the daylight. I cannot. I want to find this Egret woman before dawn.” He sipped at his water. “And I want to kill her.”

They finished their meal in silence. Once the hypnomist wore off, Pyotr continued to eat, but with considerably less relish. Napoleon picked at his food, prompted by a solicitous Illya who occasionally tapped his fork on the edge of one dish or another to draw Napoleon's attention to the food. His own dishes were soon empty, and when Napoleon laid his fork down, Illya unobtrusively moved the tray closer to himself and kept eating.

When everyone had finished and Napoleon had fetched coffee for himself and Illya, he spooned sugar into his cup and made a suggestion.

"We need a plan."

Illya snorted softly.

Napoleon shrugged. "It shouldn't be hard. Waverly said we're skilled strategists."

"We need backup," said Illya, sipping coffee. "I do not want to risk losing her once we find her."

"Finding her is easy," said Napoleon. "We go back to the lab and wait for her."

Pyotr looked horrified. "I am not going back there! I am not infected anymore. One bullet and I will be dead!"

"You're right," said Napoleon. "You are not going back. We are." He waved a finger back and forth between himself and Illya. Then he squinted at Pyotr, "That infection protects you from bullet wounds?"

"It speeds the healing process to a remarkable degree," said Pyotr.

"And I shall go with you," said Dmitri.

Illya made a face. "We prefer to take her alive, Dmitri."

Napoleon pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "No wonder Egret wanted your blood."

"Before we argue over details, we must find her," said Dmitri, "and I have a distinct advantage over you gentlemen. My enhanced senses make tracking a much easier chore."

"Yes," said Illya sarcastically, "all the way down to the curb where she undoubtedly climbed into a car and drove away. Or are you able to distinguish the different scents of individual brands of tires?"

Dmitri glowered at Illya. In a voice filled with suppressed rage, he said again, "I hate the twentieth century!"

Napoleon was thinking. He tapped his fingers on the table. "I don't know, Illya... That hypnomist thing could come in handy. You saw how fast it worked on that fellow in the funerary showroom. Thrush has conditioned their agents to resist our current supply of truth drugs. But they don't have a defense against whatever is in this hypnomist. Time is of the essence, and Dmitri could facilitate any interrogation that arises."

Illya took a deep breath and let it out slowly. At last, he said evenly, "You are in charge. If you want Dmitri along, I will not object."

"Thanks. Meanwhile, you arrange for backup."

"*Do govorilis.*" Agreed. Illya relaxed again.

Dmitri insisted that whatever was going to happen had to happen before dawn. Napoleon assured him that his part in the plan could be accomplished within the hour. Dmitri promised to meet them in front of Del Floria's tailor shop at one a.m. Then he excused himself and Pyotr, and the two of them left the cafeteria.

Illya drained his coffee cup. "And what will we be doing between now and one a.m.? In fact, what will we be doing after one a.m.? You haven't told me your plan yet."

Napoleon grinned. "We will be arranging for a team of U.N.C.L.E. agents to move in on Egret, as soon as we know where she is."

"But of course," said Illya, as if that clarified everything. "Thank you for sharing the details."

Napoleon laughed. "Okay, here's the deal. We pick Dmitri up in front of Del Floria's and head back to the lab. Don't worry, we will be extremely well armed, and there will be back up waiting for us downstairs. Then we have Dmitri use that hypnomist on the Thrush agent who was out cold on the floor."

Illya's expression brightened. "Andrew!"

"Exactly. He'll be forced to tell us where Egret is, and our people jump on her and haul her back to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters before Dmitri gets a chance to take his revenge."

Illya wagged his eyebrows. "You sound very militaristic this evening. It must be the fatigues you are wearing."

Napoleon's brown eyes sparkled. "Come on, Romeo, let's go catch the bad guys so we can go home and polish my combat boots."

Illya grinned and followed him out the door.

Napoleon pulled the Mustang to the curb just as Dmitri rounded the corner and headed for Del Floria's. Dmitri looked flushed and agitated as Illya got out to offer him the front seat.

"Are you mad? I will sit in the back where I stand a chance of surviving an impact. Thank you anyway." He climbed into the rear seat, careful not to catch his cape in the door.

As Illya slipped into the front seat and pulled the door shut, Napoleon examined Dmitri in the rearview mirror. "Is everything all right? You look... upset."

Dmitri nodded vigorously, extending his arms to brace himself for transport. "Upset? Yes, I am upset. Pyotr is giddy with the realization that he is well. He wants to experience the daylight for a while before he makes his decision about whether to... join me once again... or not." He fell into a sullen silence.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged raised eyebrows before Napoleon pulled into the street. There was very little traffic at that hour of the morning, and they arrived at the building on Houston Street in half the time it had taken at 9 p.m.

"All right, Dmitri. Here's the plan," said Napoleon, leaning over the back seat. "We're going upstairs and you will use your hypnomist thingy on Andrew, the Thrush agent, and we will ask him some questions. He should know where Egret is."

Dmitri nodded. "Excellent idea. Let's go. I want to see Egret die before morning."

"Uh, right." Solo cleared his throat. "Okay, let's go."

The Thrush agent stationed in the car to watch the lab window was snoring softly when Napoleon gave his Section Three people the signal to move in and take him into custody. They would need to turn a light on upstairs, and they didn't want him to alert anyone that the situation had changed. Having equipped themselves at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, Napoleon and Illya made short work of the locked doors between them and the lab. They didn't bother with the coffee house entrance, but used a more direct route, now that the sentinel was out of the way.

Upstairs in the lab, Andrew was still out cold. Solo checked his watch. "It's been under four hours," he said. "We may need to give him the antidote to bring him around."

Illya was ready. He pulled a small case out of his inside coat pocket and opened it up. Inside were three mini-syringes filled with red, blue, and green liquid.

Napoleon ran a finger over the syringes. "The blue one, I think."

"Definitely the blue one," said Illya.

"Shall I do the honors?" asked Solo.

Illya made a humming sound. "Oh, no, allow me," he said with elaborate politeness. "I feel I should give something back."

Napoleon chuckled. "But of course." He and Dmitri rolled Andrew over, and Illya jabbed the hypodermic into the man's thick buttock through his boxer shorts.

"Ouch," said Napoleon with a frown.

"Exactly," said Illya. "I am still sore." He put the used syringe back in the case and tucked it away.

Within seconds, Andrew began to moan. Napoleon rolled him onto his back again. "Andrew? Andrew! Wake up!"

Dmitri took the man by one arm and pulled him into a sitting position. Once upright, he slapped him firmly across the face. "Wake up!" he commanded.

Andrew's eyes opened with a start. "Huh? Hey, who hit me?" He sounded groggy. Then his eyes focussed, and he saw Napoleon, Illya, and Dmitri surrounding him. "Hey! Hey, help!! Dr. Egret! Howie!!"

"Silence!" commanded Dmitri. "Your friends have abandoned you. But we will take you to them. All you need to do is tell us where Dr. Egret is." His last word came out "izzzzz" and he accompanied it with a healthy dose of hypnomist.

Andrew blinked as the moisture hit his skin. "Jeez! Don't spit on me, you creep, or I'll—I'll—have to tell you... everything..."

"That's right," said Dmitri, soothingly, adding another exhalation of spray. "You must tell me where Dr. Egret is. Then we can return you to her. You will be a hero. You can tell her that the U.N.C.L.E. agents have escaped. She will reward you greatly."

Andrew's eyes were glazed now. "Yeah... yeah, I'll be a hero... I'll get a raise." He smiled.

"Where is she?" cooed Dmitri.

Andrew gave them an address in Jersey City. Napoleon relayed it to his team via his communicator.

"All right, let's go."

Dmitri let go of Andrew's arm and straightened up. "What about this man?"

Illya looked down at the still groggy Andrew. "Our back up team will be here in a few minutes and take him into custody. Until then, we can't have him making any phone calls." He took his case out again and opened it. "The red one, Napoleon. It's your turn."

Andrew was too groggy to object. A second later, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped over. His head hit the floor with a loud thud.

"Oh," said Napoleon with mock concern, "sorry about that, fella." He patted Andrew's tee-shirted shoulder and gave the empty syringe back to Illya. "Now we can leave." He turned to give Dmitri the bad news that they would not be taking him along. "Dmitri, I'm sorry about this, but... Dmitri?"

Illya whirled, his eyes checking every corner of the room. "Where did he go?"

Napoleon checked the connecting door to the adjoining room. Nothing. He checked a door in the corner, but it was a closet, and Dmitri was not inside.

“He must have slipped out when we were drugging Andrew,” said Napoleon lamely, knowing that he should have seen any such move.

Illya knew it, too. “Well,” sighed the Russian, “at least we know where he is going.”

“And we’d better get there first,” said Solo.

“That should not be too difficult,” said Illya, as they hustled through the door and down the stairs. “He hates the twentieth century. I would wager that he cannot drive a car.”

But the Mustang wasn’t there.

Napoleon searched his pockets for the keys. Nothing.

“Sonuvabitch! He picked my pocket!”

Illya sighed heavily, still scanning up and down the street, hoping against hope that they had parked somewhere else. “But to what purpose? I cannot believe that he can drive. He was a terrified passenger.”

Napoleon’s shoulders sagged. “With that hypnomist thing, he doesn’t have to know how to drive. He could hypnotize someone else into doing it for him.”

Illya grimaced. “Probably some inebriated partygoer stumbling home in the dark.”

Napoleon’s face fell. “Damn. I love that Mustang.”

Illya lowered his eyes to cover a smile. “Well, my friend, it is just a car. We will get you a new Mustang. Meanwhile, we’d better warn our team that someone is trying to beat them to the target.”

Napoleon pulled out his communicator and opened a channel.

Back at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, Napoleon and Illya monitored their team’s progress from Waverly’s office. The old man had finally left to get some sleep.

Napoleon flipped a switch on the intercom and asked someone to bring them some coffee.

Illya leaned toward the speaker and added, “And hot tea, please.”

When the tray arrived, Illya occupied himself with pouring tea and coffee, while Napoleon paced restlessly. He hated waiting around at headquarters for other agents to report on the action. When the communications panel beeped, Napoleon leaped for it and flipped a toggle. “Solo here.”

“This is Jurado. We reached the address. This is pretty spooky, Mr. Solo. Everyone is dead.”

Napoleon looked at Illya as he spoke. “Dead? How? What killed them?”

“No sign of gunshot wounds anywhere, sir. No blood anywhere, either. There are three men here and two women. They appear to have died from broken necks. And there is a note pinned to the nightgown of the woman you described as Dr. Egret. It’s for you.”

“A note? What does it say?”

“It’s weird, Mr. Solo.”

“Yes, well, uh, all my personal correspondence is unusual, Mr. Jurado. Just read it.”

Jurado read it. “*Napoleon. This carnage is only a shadow of my pain. I apologize for deceiving you. By the time you read this, I will be far away. Dmitri.* I have no idea what it means, Mr. Solo. I hope it makes sense to you.”

Illya approached to stand beside Napoleon. “Jurado. Are there any visible marks on Dr. Egret’s body?”

“I don’t know, sir. Let me ask.” Silence.

Napoleon looked at Illya. “What are you thinking?”

Illya shrugged. “I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to check.”

Napoleon nodded. "Uh, you don't think Dmitri was really a... a..."

Illya brushed away the possibility. "No, of course not. But he went to great lengths to reinforce his delusion. I just thought that perhaps..."

Jurado's voice interrupted. "Mr. Solo?"

"Yes, Jurado?"

"There are no marks on any of the bodies, sir. Shall we leave them here for the local police? Or shall we clean it up, sir?"

Illya mouthed the words at Solo, 'Clean it up.'

Napoleon spoke. "I don't think we need to alarm the citizens of Jersey City with a multiple homicide, Mr. Jurado. Do the usual clean up, but bring Egret's body back to headquarters. I want to make sure it's her."

"Yes, sir. Jurado out."

Illya returned to his chair. "We'll never know, of course."

Napoleon sat down next to him, avoiding Waverly's seat, and rubbed his face. "I'm tired."

Illya continued, "She always wore a disguise. Even if this body has no false face on it, we still cannot be sure the woman is the real Dr. Egret."

"I know. Do you think Dmitri was really Thrush? That he killed her before we could question her in order to shut her up?"

Illya blinked in the silence and thought for several long seconds. "No," he said at last. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because if he were Thrush, Egret would not have been working on the Nietzsche Formula. If he is Thrush, they have already perfected the formula."

Napoleon nodded slowly. "Good point." He looked around. The revolving table held nothing but their tea and coffee. The indicator lights on the communications panel next to Waverly's chair glowed softly, demonstrating that somewhere in the building U.N.C.L.E. employees were talking to agents in the field, agents reporting their progress on a dozen different missions. Napoleon hoped they would have better news to report than he did. He chewed his bottom lip. "I'm not looking forward to telling Waverly that we had Egret in our grasp but a... a civilian got to her before we did."

"It would be nice to bring in the civilian responsible," said Illya, a hint of suggestion in his voice.

Napoleon tilted his head and looked at his partner. "Do you think...?" He stood up and strode to the communications panel. A moment later, he was talking to Jurado again. "Mr. Jurado, this is Solo. Did your team happen to find a Ford Mustang in the vicinity of Egret's house?"

"Let me check, sir."

Another silence, during which Napoleon shifted restlessly from one foot to another and stared down at the round toes of his combat boots. They really did need shining. That made him smile. Illya pulled a phone close and punched a button for an inside line.

Jurado's voice erupted from the communications console. "Mr. Solo? No Mustang on or near the premises, sir. If he came in your car, he left the same way."

"Thanks, José. Solo out."

Illya spoke into the phone. "Yes, this is Mr. Kuryakin. Mr. Solo and I will be down momentarily, and we need a car.... Yes, I know we signed one out earlier, but we need another

one....” He made eye contact with Napoleon and grimaced in frustration. “I understand, but the first one was stolen, and we need....”

Napoleon walked over, took the phone, and barked into the receiver. “This is Napoleon Solo, Chief Enforcement Agent. What’s your name?!.... Well, Mr. Frankel, we are coming down for a car, and you are spending the rest of your watch writing a report for Section One explaining why you insist on putting obstacles in the path of field agents on a mission. Understood?!” He slammed the phone onto the cradle. Then he took a deep breath and smiled at Illya, “Gee, that felt good.”

Illya chuckled silently.

“Now,” said Napoleon, “where does this Pyotr live? Who’s on duty from Section Four tonight? Anyone we know?”

“We know them all,” said Illya wryly. He reached for the phone book. “But we may not need them.”

“Oh,” said Napoleon. “You’re suggesting the direct approach.”

Illya grinned and opened the book. “Let me see... Lipatov, Lipatov.... No Dmitris here. Let me check Degtyarenko...”

“There can’t be many of those in the book.”

“One is all we need,” said Illya, stabbing the page and sliding the book toward Solo. “Pyotr Degtyarenko.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. I guess that’s what a Ph.D. will do for you, huh?” Solo slugged his partner playfully in the arm. “Let’s go.”

Illya finished jotting down the address and number, then trotted after Napoleon. In the elevator, he commented, “They are using fake names, by the way.”

“Gee, a pickpocket and a car thief is using a fake name. Why am I not surprised?” Napoleon tried in vain to straighten his flak jacket and smooth his camouflage pants. He rubbed the toes of his combat boots on the backs of his calves. It helped a little bit, but not much.

Illya suppressed a smile. “You look fine. Our car-thieving pickpocket has a literary bent. I was trying to remember where I heard those names before, but it took me a while. Lipatov and Degtyarenko are characters in a novel called *Sofia Petrovna*. It was published in *Novy Zhurnal* here in New York a few years ago. Very sad book.”

“Of course. It’s Russian.”

Illya had no time for a comeback. The elevator doors slid open. A rather obsequious and apologetic Mr. Frankel was waiting for them, holding a set of car keys.

“Here you are, Mr. Solo, sir. I’m sorry, but the other car you like to drive is in the shop, sir. The Chryslers are available, and there’s a 1955 Buick, but I thought you would prefer this, sir.” He dangled the stylized keys.

Illya’s face brightened. “The Volkswagen! I’ll drive.” He snatched the keys and headed for the yellow beetle.

Napoleon got into the passenger seat and grumbled, “He gave us the bug because he figures we already lost one whole car tonight. No point in trusting us with anything bigger.”

“This will be faster. You know how I drive.” Illya wagged his eyebrows and grinned mischievously at Napoleon.

Napoleon reached for the dash grip and held on tight. “Oh, yes, I know how you drive.”

According to Dmitri, he and Pyotr had several abodes in Manhattan, but the one in the phone book was a third floor walk-up on Perry Street in the Village. Illya managed to keep his speed just under the legal limit, but on the mostly deserted three a.m. streets, it took all his will power. They drove past the address slowly, then parked half a block away and walked back. At that hour, all the clubs and bars in the neighborhood were closed, and the street was deserted. They stopped in the entryway and read the names next to the buzzers.

Napoleon's finger hit the button next to "Degtyarenko" three times.

No one answered.

After a full minute, he buzzed again, long and hard.

"Perhaps no one is home," said Illya.

"And perhaps the two of them are quietly leaving by the back door," said Napoleon.

"Shall I check for another entrance?"

Napoleon only took half a second to decide. "No. We don't separate. We saw that hypnomist in action."

"Right." Illya pulled a pair of black gloves out of his pocket and slipped them on before he tried the door handle. Locked. Napoleon was fishing in one of his camouflage pockets, and a second later he retrieved the electronic door opener they had used earlier to get into Egret's lab. It was the size and shape of a miniature cookie cutter, but it was solid with top-secret components. Napoleon placed it against the door in the vicinity of the lock and turned the knob on the top to three o'clock. Silently, they mouthed along with the timer. "One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three..." Something in the door clicked. Illya tried the handle. It opened easily, and he grinned at Solo in the light from the street lamps.

"I love technology," whispered Illya.

"Third floor," whispered Napoleon. "Apartment A."

They mounted the stairs as silently as they could and flanked the door. Illya rapped on it with the back of his hand. A few moments later, the door opened, and Dmitri announced in an excellent Lugosi imitation, "I bid you welcome."

Napoleon and Illya stepped away from the wall and eyed Dmitri with irritation.

In his normal voice, Dmitri said, "No, really, come in. I have been expecting you."

The apartment was masculine, yet cozy. Illya moved around the perimeter, admiring the Russian icons on the walls, the silver samovar occupying pride of place on an antique sideboard, and the bookshelves filled with literature, history, and science in several languages.

Napoleon followed Dmitri to the overstuffed matching sofas. Except for the couches, the room was filled with antiques. "You have some lovely things here," said Napoleon.

"The accumulation of a long lifetime," said Dmitri. "Pyotr is making tea."

"Oh, you drink tea?"

"But of course. We are civilized people."

Illya snorted. "Civilized people do not leave five dead bodies in Jersey City," he commented drily.

"Where are your coffins?" asked Napoleon.

"Coffins are so uncomfortable for sleeping, don't you agree?" Dmitri gestured at the sofas. "Please be seated. Pyotr will serve tea."

"I thought vampires had to sleep in a coffin," Napoleon persisted, his tone mildly sarcastic.

Dmitri gazed at him for a long moment, then leaned back on the couch and rubbed a finger over his top lip. "Napoleon, as I tried to explain to you before, I suffer from an infection which

causes symptoms that my fellow beings have identified with vampirism for many centuries. I drink blood because I cannot digest anything else, although Pyotr and I have discovered that we can still enjoy tea and other herbal infusions. I must avoid sunlight because it burns my skin, just as it would yours if you stayed out in it for too long. I, however, can only endure it for a minute or two before it raises blisters. I don't know if I would actually burst into flame as they do in the movies because I have never been able to stand the pain for longer than that. It also sears my eyeballs, and even through my eyelids, a minor exposure can do great damage to my vision. Although I told you earlier that I needed to be in my coffin before dawn, I do not really sleep in one because it is usually uncomfortable. The model at the mortuary showroom was an exception. Although, I admit, I do keep one here for... dramatic effect."

Pyotr appeared with a tray filled with a tea pot and glasses. He had changed into his own clothing. He was wearing bell-bottomed levis and a skin-hugging long black sweater. His feet were bare. He was very thin and looked too young to have been in a long-term relationship with Dmitri. His sensual features were showing signs of fatigue, and his eyes were red around the rims. He poured the tea silently.

Napoleon had the uneasy feeling that Pyotr had been weeping.

Illya came to stand behind the sofa where Napoleon was seated. "Why did you kill those people?" he asked. "Napoleon told you we needed to bring Egret in alive."

"I did not kill them," said Dmitri. He reached into a pocket and produced the keys to the Mustang. "By the way, these are yours. Your car is around the corner, on Bleecker."

Napoleon took the keys. "I didn't think you could drive. You said you hated the twentieth century."

"I do. But how can one live in this century and not learn to drive?" He shrugged. "I do not enjoy it."

Illya frowned at him. "What do you mean, you didn't kill them? If you didn't go there to kill them, why steal our car?"

Dmitri turned a hand over. "I confess that I intended to kill them. But that is not the same as actually committing the murders. When I arrived at the address provided by the unfortunate Andrew, they were already dead. Someone else had beat both of us to it. I merely took advantage of the situation to leave you a note."

Napoleon held his glass of tea but did not drink. "Another dramatic effect?" he asked.

"I suppose so," said Dmitri. "Does it matter?"

Illya said coldly, "It matters if you are lying to us and you really did kill those people."

Dmitri glanced at a clock on the wall, then double-checked the time with his wristwatch.

"Are you expecting someone?" asked Solo.

"No, just a nervous habit. Years of fearing the sunrise. Pyotr, please either sit down or leave the room."

"No, stay," said Napoleon. He waved Pyotr to the sofa. "Come sit down. We'd like to ask you a few questions. We'll do so privately, if you prefer." He glanced meaningfully in Dmitri's direction.

Pyotr perched on the arm of the sofa on which Dmitri was seated. "What do you want to know?"

Napoleon smiled disarmingly. "You seem much quieter than you were at the cafeteria. Is everything all right?"

Pyotr looked away. “No, everything is not all right. Everything is lousy. I was excited because that Egret woman... or rather her bumbling accomplice... gave me something that cured my infection. Lucky for me, since they were not prepared to shield me from the sunlight. If Howie had not accidentally cured me, I would have been horribly burned. They had the windows opened and undraped in that place. I thought I would be happy if I was cured. I would not be limited to the nighttime. I could go out and make new friends and...” He stopped himself and glanced at Dmitri. “I’m sorry, Dmitri. I didn’t mean...”

“Never mind,” said Dmitri. “There is no going back. Answer their questions.”

“Yes, go on,” said Napoleon. “You were excited about being cured. And then?”

Pyotr played with the hem of his sweater, rolling it under then unrolling it. “And then Dmitri brought me home, and I... We had words. I don’t want to lose Dmitri, but I don’t want to be infected again. Not now. Not right away. I want to see the world in the daylight for a while! I want to watch a few sunsets, and lie on a beach on the Black Sea. I can travel now, without worrying about the time, about the sunrise and sunset! Don’t you see?” He was talking to Dmitri now. “I want to go home, Dmitri! I want to see Mother Russia, see what is happening there. We get such a distorted picture here. You could come with me, my darling! I will be able to watch over you during the day!”

Dmitri snorted. “If you are watching over me, you cannot be lying on a beach. Besides, I told you before, if we go home, we may never get out again. What if you don’t like what’s happening there? As you yourself said, now that you are cured, one bullet could end your life. You have lost the curative effect of the infection.”

Pyotr’s face fell. “I know. But can’t we stay together?”

Napoleon looked up at Illya who returned his look of comprehension. Now they knew why Pyotr had been weeping.

Dmitri sounded weary. “You wish to live a normal life. You cannot do that if you are living with a...” He glanced at Napoleon, then away. “With an invalid,” he said at last. Then to Solo and Kuryakin, “I have decided to leave. Pyotr will keep the apartment here. I will need a few days to arrange my affairs, and then I will go. I will check back in a few months, to see if he has had enough of the normal life.” He smiled bitterly. “This affliction of mine can be problematic, but it also offers certain benefits. For example, I am much older than I look.” He reached up and touched Pyotr’s face with his fingers. “Don’t wait too long to make your decision, my pet. Any wrinkles you accumulate in your uninfected state will be with you always, should you choose to return to me.”

Pyotr stood up and moved out of Dmitri’s reach. “That was cruel,” he said petulantly. He turned and left the room.

Dmitri sagged against the couch. “I will miss him terribly,” he said sadly.

Illya came around the sofa and sat down beside Napoleon. “Dmitri, perhaps we can discover what Howie gave to Pyotr. Then you will also have the option of curing your infection.”

Dmitri sighed heavily. Then he smiled wistfully. “You are assuming, Illya, that I wish to be cured.”

“You don’t want...?”

Napoleon understood. “Your current condition means you age very slowly, your physical strength is three to four times greater than that of other men, and you can survive injuries that would kill an uninfected person. Correct?”

“You are a perceptive man, Napoleon.”

“And of course,” added Napoleon, “there is that hypnomist thing. How do you do that, anyway?”

“How do I what? Spit on people? The same way you do. But my spittle has some chemical in it that... influences people’s will.”

Napoleon grinned. “I don’t suppose you would donate some to U.N.C.L.E. for laboratory analysis?”

“Now you are beginning to sound like Dr. Egret,” said Dmitri softly.

Illya countered drily, “No need to be insulting.”

“My apologies,” said Dmitri. He stood up and moved to look out the window onto the dark street below. “As I recall, gentlemen, I saved both your lives early this evening, by disabling the mechanism that was intended to deliver lethal gas to the room you were trapped in. I also retrieved the information from the dying Thrush agent that led you to Dr. Egret... and me to Pyotr. And if I am not mistaken, had it not been for me, the two of you would still be in that lab, in a rather embarrassing position, awaiting Dr. Egret’s return and most likely a death sentence at the hands of your captors. Does that about sum up our situation?”

Napoleon looked chagrined and dropped his eyes to the floor. “Uh, gee, when you put it that way,” he said, “it sounds like we owe your our lives twice over.”

Illya grunted. “Irritating, isn’t it?”

Dmitri chuckled darkly. “I like you, you know. Both of you. Maybe someday we can be friends. But I must leave New York and let Pyotr have a chance at a normal life. Can you understand that?”

Napoleon nodded. “Yes. We can understand that.” He stood up and prepared to leave. “Oh, just a moment. We do have one question.”

“Yes?” Dmitri moved to open the door for them.

“Your enhanced sense of smell,” said Napoleon, tapping his nose. “When you pinned that note on Dr. Egret, uh, did she smell like the same woman to you?”

Dmitri cocked his head as if he hadn’t thought of that before. “Now that you mention it, Napoleon, no, she did not.” He sounded surprised and more than a trifle miffed. “What a cunning and dangerous woman she is! Like you, I was misled by appearances. And I was so disappointed to find them all dead when I got there that I didn’t even register the lack of her scent!” He threw his head back and laughed. “Thank you, Napoleon. It seems I now have something to look forward to, after all.” He extended a hand.

Napoleon shook it. “When you find her, send me a telegram, would you?”

Dmitri’s dark eyes twinkled. “I will. One twentieth-century line.”

Illya looked from one to the other in exasperation. “And what line might that be?”

Napoleon and Dmitri grinned, then chorused, “The wicked witch is dead!”

Downstairs, Napoleon tossed the Mustang keys in the air and caught them again. “I guess we should each drive back to headquarters and drop off one of the cars,” he said.

“No,” said Illya.

“No?”

“No. You are too tired to drive. We will come for the Mustang tomorrow. Today. Later. Come on.” He squeezed Napoleon’s arm and directed him toward the Volkswagen.

“Where are we going?”

“U.N.C.L.E. agents are allowed to sleep. Even Waverly sleeps. We are going home to bed. Get in.”

Napoleon grinned and climbed into the beetle. After Illya got in and started the car, he asked, “Do you think Dmitri could really be a...you-know-what?”

“Napoleon, I already told you, he is not a vampire. He is just a delusional individual who suffers, most likely, from a combination of rare conditions. Porphyria, for example.” Illya maneuvered the car around a corner as he spoke. He was careful to stay under the speed limit. No point in getting pulled over if they were on their way home.

“What is porphyria?” asked Napoleon. “I never heard of it.”

“It is a hereditary blood disease. It has only recently been identified, but it probably contributed greatly to vampire myths of the past. The symptoms include extreme sensitivity to sunlight and a tightening of the flesh of the gums, causing the incisors to appear more prominent. Combine that with some other problems, including the mental confusion that often accompanies porphyria, and Dmitri could easily convince himself that he is a vampire. You remember he said that he loves the movies. His love of that cape and his Bela Lugosi imitation prove that he is well aware of the film stereotypes.”

“Uh-huh.” Napoleon nodded, but he was still frowning. “What about Pyotr? Egret obviously thought he had special powers.”

“No, she thought he had a blood condition. But her most recent blood tests proved that he was normal.” Illya stopped for a red light, looked carefully in all directions to make sure there was no traffic and no policeman, then rolled through it. “Pyotr is young and impressionable. A young gay man, in love with a mature, romantic figure... he probably enjoyed playing the game for a while. But Dmitri told us things were not so good between them even before we rescued Pyotr. Remember?”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s right.”

“You sound disappointed,” said Illya, pulling up to the curb in front of their building.

Napoleon shrugged. “Well, I am. We didn’t get Egret. She’s still on the loose. And I guess I was sort of half hoping that there was such a thing as vampires, you know? A little mystery, a little romance... Life can be so hum-drum.”

“What is ‘hum-drum’?”

“You know... boring.”

Illya pulled the key out of the ignition and chuckled. “You are an U.N.C.L.E. agent, Napoleon. A spy. How can you talk about life being hum-drum? The mystery is, if Dmitri did not kill those people, Thrush must have done it, and if they did it, why did they do it? And as for romance...” He slid the driver’s seat back as far as it would go and leaned toward Napoleon. A moment later, he had unfastened the camouflage pants and freed Napoleon’s dick from his underwear.

Napoleon gasped. “What are you doing?!”

Instead of speaking, Illya closed his mouth around its target and began sucking. His tongue ran up and down, around and around, clockwise and counterclockwise. Napoleon slumped in his seat, levering his hips up to meet Illya’s mouth.

“Oh, Jesus, what if someone sees us?” he panted.

Illya hummed around the flesh in his mouth, and Napoleon moaned and arched his back.

“You’re crazy, Illya,” he gasped. “This is crazy!”

Illya hummed again and slipped a hand under Napoleon’s bottom. He squeezed hard.

Napoleon cried out. His right hand clutched at the grip over the passenger door and his left hand close around a fistful of Illya's blond hair. The little car rocked violently as he thrust his hips upward, trying to go deeper into Illya's throat.

Illya closed the fingers of his left hand around the base of Napoleon's engorged dick and began pumping him manually while his lips and tongue concentrated on the head. As Napoleon's movements grew more urgent, Illya flicked his tongue faster and faster and the rhythm of his sucking intensified.

At last, Napoleon arched and twitched as his body came in Illya's mouth. He clamped his jaw shut to keep from waking the neighborhood, but his strangled cry sounded like a foghorn in the confines of the tiny car. When Napoleon exhaled and relaxed, his breath fogged a large part of the passenger-side window. His eyes drooped half-shut, and his limbs trembled with exhaustion. He felt Illya fastening his trousers.

A moment later, Illya was outside the car, opening Napoleon's door. He reached in and pulled Napoleon's legs out onto the street.

"Come on, sleeping beauty," murmured Illya, switching to Russian. He took Napoleon's right hand and pressed it against his crotch. His erection was hot and hard through his slacks, and he ground his hips against Napoleon's palm. "I want to fuck my soldier boy."

Napoleon let himself be bundled out of the car. He pressed his mouth to Illya's ear and mumbled, "Will you bite my neck?"

Illya laughed deep in his chest and growled like a Russian bear, "Follow my orders, and you will be rewarded."

In the shadows of a shopfront across the street, Dmitri watched and listened. The U.N.C.L.E. agents were very fond of each other. He felt a pang of jealousy. They were also clever, especially Kuryakin. He filed away the information on porphyria. That would come in handy some day. He waited until they were inside their building before he headed for his one-room apartment in the East Village. He would rest until nightfall, and then he would begin his journey west. He needed to give Pyotr some time to think, some time to be normal. He needed to get away from these intelligent U.N.C.L.E. agents. And he was looking forward to hunting down the Egret woman. His hunger for revenge would keep him warm during the long nights with no Pyotr in his bed.

He sighed wearily. He wondered if he would ask her what Howie gave Pyotr when he found her? He wondered if he wanted to know? He paused to look up at the U.N.C.L.E. agents' building. He concentrated and focussed, and he could hear the Russian making verbal love to the American. He tilted his head and sniffed the air, and he could smell the sperm that was spilled in the Volkswagen. He glanced up and down the street, and he could see it as clearly as any man would see it in the sunshine.

Then he laughed, a deep, rich sound that echoed in the street. When he found Egret, he wouldn't ask if there was a cure. He would just kill her.

He didn't want to be cured.

The End