

The Shadow Chasers Affair

by Pat Dunn and Diana Lynn Smith

Somewhere in New York City, May 1986

"Although I doubt even Vanya's could help your sense of fashion."

Tell me again why we're sitting in front of a New York novelty shop, acting like some cheap private eye spying on a cheating husband?" Jonathan MacKensie dunked a sodden teabag in a Styrofoam cup of tepid water, and then set the thing on the dashboard. He looked around the rental car in disgust at the litter of crumpled chip bags, greasy sandwich wrappers and crushed drink cups. "They're going to charge extra for this mess. And you're not putting it on the expense account —"

"Because there's something weird going on here, Jack." Edgar "Benny" Benedek was busy staring at the modest storefront through a camera with an obscenely large telephoto lens. He ignored Jonathan's admonition about the expense account, as he always did. They'd had a running battle about it ever since they'd first hooked up nearly a year ago.

"What's so weird about a magic tricks shop? We've been sitting here for hours, Benedek, and I've seen absolutely nothing even remotely resembling paranormal." The handsome Brit impatiently looked at his watch. "I need to get back to Georgetown —"

"Ol' Georgetown Institute can get along with one less Anthro prof for a few more hours. Especially one who isn't very observant. You'd never make it as a reporter, pal."

"Thank God for small favors. And what do you mean I'm not observant?" Jonathan demanded in indignation.

"For one thing you haven't noticed the number of suits going in and not coming out." Benny lowered the camera and glanced at MacKensie to gauge his reaction.

"Not coming out? Don't be absurd, Benedek, of course they've —"

"Wrong-o, Jack," Benny corrected, gesturing with his camera. "I've got a picture of everyone who's gone inside for the past three hours —"

"Benedek! That's illegal!"

"— and everyone who's come out, and I'm telling ya they only match up about 20 percent of the time. Sooo ..." Benny drew the word out, then grinned. "Where are they going, huh? It's gotta be a secret room in the back —"

"They must be coming out and you're just missing them. What else could they be doing? Holding secret societal meetings?" Jonathan smirked, then began shaking his head in denial. "Benedek —"

"Exactly what I was thinking. And what better front for a Black Arts circle than a magic shop?"

"Black Arts?" Jonathan's voice went up an octave and cracked. "Where on earth did you get that notion?"

"Think about it, Crown Prince of Skeptics. They're trying to blend in, look like ordinary businessmen but they blend in about as well as you would at a Grateful Dead concert. Look at this guy coming out — does he really look like a novelty shop aficionado to you?" Benny pointed his camera at the slim blond man emerging from the shop, and clicked away.

Jonathan had to admit that the man in a black suit and tie didn't look like a typical practical joker. The blond bowl-cut hair framed a solemn face, with blue eyes without a hint of a twinkle. He raised his hand and imperiously hailed a cab. Surprisingly, a New York cab slid into place in front of him and he disappeared inside. A moment later, it pulled away, heading into traffic.

"He's probably never cracked a joke in his life," Benny judged. "Let's see where he goes now, okay?"

"You can't mean to follow him! That's an invasion of privacy!" Jonathan had to snatch the cup of tea from the dashboard as Benny pulled out into traffic, but it still splashed all over him and he finally dropped the empty cup to the floorboard.

"What privacy? It's a public street, fer crying out loud." Benny handled the New York traffic with ease, disregarding Jonathan's warning gasps at the near misses. "We're just gonna see where he goes."

"Probably to dinner. After all, it's nearly eight o'clock. Let's just go back to your apartment, get some Chinese take-away, and have some dinner of our own," Jonathan begged, hands splayed on the dashboard as Benny cut in and out of traffic, expertly following the Yellow Cab.

"Hang on to your skepticism, Jack! We're gonna blow this secret right out of the water!" Benny was chuckling gleefully as the cab pulled up in front of a shop and the blond man emerged from the cab and disappeared into the store.

"You're giving me whiplash!" Jonathan declared as Benny brought the rental car to a halt half a block from the shop. He paused in rubbing the back of his neck to peer through the windshield. "Vanya's? A dress shop? Explain that, Mr. Snoop. Why would your mysterious 'Black Arts practitioner' go to a dress shop?"

"Probably where they get their robes." Benny began snapping pictures of the haute couture shop, oblivious to his partner's muttering protests.

Both were taken by surprise when the back door of their car opened and closed, and they turned around to find their quarry, arms folded over his chest, calmly sitting in the back seat as if he belonged there.

"Perhaps you gentlemen would care to explain your interest in me? Or is it just fashion which appeals to you?" The blond man spoke with a slight accent and deadly calm, warning flashing in his blue eyes. "Although I doubt that even Vanya's could help your sense of fashion."

Benny looked down at his blue parrots-patterned shirt, jeans and red high-topped tennies, then looked over at his partner's boring gray suit and staid maroon tie and shrugged. "To each his own, pal. At least I look like a guy who hangs out at a novelty shop, unlike some in this car I could mention."

"Touché." The blond inclined his head in agreement, a ghost of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "You do, indeed, Mr. —?"

"Benedek," Jonathan blurted, pointing at his dark-haired companion behind the wheel. "He's Edgar Benedek." He fumbled in his jacket and finally produced his wallet which he offered to the man. "I don't carry a lot of cash —"

A dark blond eyebrow quirked at that, but the man took the wallet and flipped it open. "Jonathan Leonard MacKensie," he read from the driver's license. The picture did match the man, although he wasn't smiling at the moment. "Of Washington, D.C. You have business in New York, Mr. MacKensie?"

"Doctor MacKensie," Benny corrected. "I didn't know your middle name was Leonard, Jack. Named after your old man, huh?"

"Leonard MacKensie. The Noble Prize winner MacKensie?"

"You've heard of him?" Jonathan sounded surprised and the man actually smiled as he returned the wallet, cash and credit cards intact.

"Brilliant man. I've read his papers."

"How 'bout that, J.J.? He's read ol' Leonard's papers. Who'da thunk it?"

"Maybe he's read your books." There was definitely a note of disdain in MacKensie's voice.

"What books have you written, Mr. Benedek? I have a wide variety of interests."

The man turned his intense blue eyes on the journalist, patiently waiting for an answer.

"Benedek isn't limited to mere books. He writes for a weekly paper," MacKensie was eager to point out. "Let's see, what's the latest headline? 'LOCAL COVEN MASQUERADE AS ORDINARY BUSINESSMEN'?"

Both dark blond eyebrows shot up at that. "Local coven?"

"Nah, Jack's got it all wrong, as usual. Think I'd come up with such a boring headline? Not even on my worst day, pal. The day I write stuff like that, I hang up my typewriter."

"And what have we here?" The man reached over the seat and picked up Benny's camera, ignoring the reporter's protests.

Benny and Jonathan watched in stunned silence as the man opened the camera, removed the film and pulled it completely out, exposing and destroying Benny's so-called "evidence."

A brief smile flirted with the corners of his mouth as he returned the camera to its owner. "Nice brand. I prefer a Leica, myself."

The squeal of tires brought the blond man's head around and his right hand reached under the left side of his jacket.

"Is that a gun?" MacKensie's voice squeaked in alarm and he grabbed Benedek's arm. He squawked and ducked down on the seat as a bullet spider-webbed the window by his head.

The blond man returned fire, shouting at Benny to drive. Without a blink, Benedek lurched the rental car from the curb and shot out into traffic.

"What's happening?" Jonathan cried, hands on his head as he dared to look up at Benny.

"I don't know — maybe a rival coven wants to take out the head warlock. Stay down, Jonny!" Benny was concentrating on his maniac driving, weaving in and out of traffic. When Jonathan started to rise up off the seat, Benny reached over and shoved him back down.

Their passenger was sticking his head out the window, returning gunfire. He was apparently amazingly accurate as the front tires of the pursuing vehicle blew, causing it to veer toward the curb, hit it, and then land on a fire hydrant. Water spewed up in a geyser, and people on the street began shouting, covering their heads and trying to run to safety. Benny cheered the action as he looked in the rearview mirror, then turned his attention back to the crowded street in front of him.

"Is it over?" Jonathan ventured, cautiously taking his hands down and giving the impression of a turtle poking its head out of its shell. He peered over the seat at their mysterious hitchhiker who was sprawled on the seat, his head lolling back.

"Head back to the novelty shop." His command was terse, allowing for no argument. The color had drained from his face, and he had his left hand pressed to his right shoulder.

"You — you're bleeding!" Jonathan's voice cracked with horror as he reached over the back seat. "Benedek, he's bleeding! He must have been shot!"

"Good observation, Jonny. Just don't panic." Benny made a sharp turn, causing Jonathan to fall head first into the back seat. "Good idea, Jack. See if you can help him out, willya?"

Apparently taking a muffled response from the topsy-turvy professor for assent, Benedek increased the car's speed.

Jonathan righted himself with difficulty and hastily pulled out his handkerchief, pressing it to the wounded man's bloodied collarbone. "We have an injured gunman in the back of your rental car, and we don't even know his name! Let's not panic — I'm not panicking. We'll be fine, there's no need to panic. I can't believe this is happening —"

"Sorry — for my lack of manners," the blond man told him. "I am — Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin."

Jonathan stared at him, then sighed. "All right, Mr. Kuryakin, try not to talk. Can you hold pressure on that wound while I check your pulse?"

Kuryakin obediently placed one hand on the folded handkerchief and pressed down. "You're a medical doctor, Doctor MacKensie?"

"Hardly," Jonathan answered, unobtrusively placing his fingers on the inside of Kuryakin's wrist and glancing at his watch. "However, being certified in basic First Aid comes in handy when I'm on a dig — or out with Benny."

"I see. In that case, I should — feel better if your friend — could drive a little faster."

"To the magician's shop? You need a hospital, Mr. Kuryakin, not a magic wand!"

The blond man offered a half-smile. "We have a fully equipped Infirmary."

"Who is — we?"

"His fellow warlocks, right? This sort of thing happen to you guys often?" Pausing for a red light, Benny glanced over his shoulder.

"Benedek —"

The blond man ignored Jonathan's groan of protest. "More often than I care to count."

Jonathan paused, and let go of the slender man's wrist. "Really?"

"Yes, but please don't worry. We are — what you might call the — good guys."

"White wizards, huh? Is that cool or what!"

"Benedek, just drive. He needs more help than I can give him!" Jonathan met Benny's eyes in the rearview mirror, then sank back against the seat as they accelerated through the crosswalk when the light changed.

When they reached the novelty shop, the injured man directed Benny to drive around the block to an underground parking lot. He pulled a slim silver pen from his pocket and fumbled with it for a moment, then startled Jonathan by speaking into it.

"Open Channel D, please. This is Kuryakin and I seem to need some medical assistance."

"Roger that."

Kuryakin sighed and put the pen back in his jacket pocket. "Take the lower level ramp, go to the 'closed for repairs' sign, take a right and stop at the wall."

"Well, that sounds like a good place to stop." Benny followed the directions, ending up at the aforesaid wall.

"Honk three times, pause, then honk twice."

"Okey-dokey." Benny honked as instructed, then watched as the wall slowly slid open and a jump-suited man motioned for him to drive forward. "Welcome to the Looking Glass, Jack."

Jonathan stared gape-mouthed as a dark-haired man in a three-piece suit strolled over to the rental car and opened the back passenger door. "I thought you were going to get rid of them, not bring them home for tea," he scolded the blond, ducking his head in to check the wound.

"Thrush had other plans, Napoleon. You might want to contact the NYPD about a traffic accident involving a fire hydrant, about 30 blocks from here."

"We'll do that. Come on, Illya, let's get you inside, hmm?" He helped Kuryakin out of the car and supported the unsteady man. A pair of white-coated medics approached, one of them pushing a wheelchair, and Illya sat down with a grimace. "I'll see you as soon as I get this patched up," he promised, as if it was a mere irritation.

Napoleon nodded and watched as the medics took charge of Illya, soon disappearing into a nearby elevator.

"Well, if he's all right, we'll just be going now," Jonathan ventured.

"Hmm?" Napoleon glanced at MacKensie and Benedek, then smiled briefly. "Ah — I'm afraid I'll have to ask you gentlemen to just step inside for a little while."

"Er — where is here, exactly?" Jonathan asked, trading an uneasy glance with Benny. "Who are you people?"

"The U-N-C-L-E." He held up a gold and black identification card with the name "Napoleon Solo" embossed on it. "We'll answer your questions, and ask a few of our own, if you don't mind. This way, please." Napoleon led them across the underground parking garage to the bank of elevators, pressed the button on an elevator and then ushered them inside it. He leaned against the back wall, arms folded over his chest.

"This really isn't necessary," Jonathan began, his voice betraying his nervousness. "Benedek and I are just happy we could help ..." He trailed off at the look the man named Solo shot him. "After he was injured, I mean." He offered his charming smile that faltered under Solo's glare.

"I believe the situation is of your making, gentlemen. Mr. Kuryakin was investigating the reason behind your surveillance of the novelty shop." The elevator whooshed open and Solo motioned for them to step out first.

"Hold on there, Asmodeus," Benny cut in, putting out a hand to halt Jonathan's progress. "We're not going another step until we get some answers. The U-N-C-L-E my Great-Aunt Fanny. This is really a front for a coven. So we got involved in what? a drive-by attack from a rival coven?"

Solo stared at the journalist and then blinked and smiled at Jonathan. "He's joking, isn't he?"

"Benedek gets some bizarre notions and I can't shake them out of his head," Jonathan apologized. "I tried to tell him this was all nonsense ..."

"Nonsense? We've been whisked into an underground lair — what else could it be, J.J.? Whoaaa, we could be on to something big, Jack! A final battle between the forces of good and evil, the fate of the world depending on us!"

Napoleon Solo picked up his jaw, then shook his head. "This way, gentlemen," he ordered, pointing down the steel corridor. Two men in suits awaited outside the elevator, guns in their hands. "Room one, I think."

Jonathan felt an unfamiliar urge to put his hands in the air and he started to do so, but Benny pulled them down to his sides.

"We are not under arrest, Jon-Boy. These clowns are just trying to scare us."

"Well, they're doing a pretty fair job of it!" Jonathan retorted in a harsh whisper. They were escorted into a room that contained a simple table and two uncomfortable-looking chairs. One man held a gun on them while the second patted them down, taking their wallets. Solo took them from the guard, flipped them open and studied them for a moment, then smiled at his prisoners.

"Gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable." Solo and the two men left, the metal door sliding shut behind them with a menacing hiss.

Benny took Solo at his word, and sat in one chair, tipping it back on two legs and propping his feet on the table. Jonathan began pacing the small room, running his hands through his longish light brown hair.

"Take a chill pill, buds, and relax."

"Relax!?" Jonathan paused and stared at his partner.

"Sure. Don't you know what this room is? Look at that big mirror behind you. Smile, Jonny, you're on Candid Camera."

Jonathan dropped onto the other chair and stared at the table for a moment, then slowly and methodically began banging his forehead on the tabletop.

"I believe his 'volunteering' may not have been completely — voluntary."

Right arm in a sling and shoulder nicely numbed, Illya Kuryakin sat at a table in the darkened observation room, head tilted slightly with his left fist supporting his cheek as he studied the interrogation room's occupants. The dark-haired, sharp-featured one in the wildly patterned shirt appeared to be the outgoing member of the team, while the business-suited one tried to be the rational, thinking half. MacKensie seemed to be outraged by his partner's propensity for getting them into trouble.

"You are unbelievable!" MacKensie was shouting at the nonchalant Benedek. "This has got to be the most outrageous predicament you've gotten us into yet! Doctor Moorhouse is going to kill me!"

Illya turned his head slightly as the door to the observation room opened and Napoleon Solo entered. Two tabloid-type newspapers and dossiers were dropped on the table and Illya looked up at Napoleon. "Getting caught up on your reading?" he asked mildly, craning his head to study the lurid headlines. He pulled his reading glasses from his jacket pocket in preparation for a closer look at the newspapers.

"This is what your friend Benedek does for a living," Napoleon announced, going over to the two-way mirror to watch the mismatched duo. MacKensie was pacing again and ranting at his friend, and Napoleon shook his head. "You do have a penchant for making interesting friends, tovarishch."

"He's a reporter?" Illya began flipping through the first copy of *The National Register*, pausing now and then to read an article and shaking his head.

"A reporter? Well, I would say that's being kind." Solo turned around and faced his partner, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall. "Edgar Benedek is a charlatan anxious to cash in on an uninformed public's hunger for the sensational with his macabre and ludicrous books."

Kuryakin eyed his partner in dumbfounded silence.

"Ah — that's quoting a Doctor Juliana Moorhouse of the Georgetown Institute of Science in Washington, D.C., who apparently knows Mr. Benedek quite well."

"Thank you for clarifying that, Napoleon. It doesn't sound like an entirely un-biased opinion, however."

"That's as it may be, but the basic facts do check out. Edgar Benedek has written nine books on paranormal subjects, five of them making the *New York Times*' bestseller lists. He is also a regular contributor to this tabloid, specializing in the weird and wonderful."

Illya shook his head dismissively. "Scarcely a crime in the United States, as I understand. Something to do with freedom of the press, isn't it?"

Napoleon sighed. "What he writes isn't the problem; it's how he goes about getting his so-called stories. Take his observation of the novelty-shop entrance, which attracted our attention in the first place. Not strictly illegal, if you have a private investigator's license, but neither Mr. Benedek nor his partner seem to qualify on that score."

Illya glanced at MacKensie, one eyebrow lifted questioningly. "How did the son of a Nobel-prize winning scientist end up associating with Edgar Benedek?"

Napoleon followed his companion's glance at the pair in the interrogation room. "Interesting story behind that. Doctor Jonathan MacKensie is a genuine anthropology professor, has taught at the Georgetown Institute for about six years, and by all accounts is a solid, respectable member of the academic community. Until a year ago, when he volunteered to do fieldwork for the Institute's Paranormal Research Unit. Apparently he and Benedek met on MacKensie's first case and have since struck up a working relationship."

"Something tells me there's quite a story behind that meeting." Illya nodded at the two-way mirror. "Now the question is what do we do with them?"

"You'll be surprised to hear that Sir John says it's our problem." Solo flashed a quick grin. "However, he did stipulate that the solution isn't to be of the 'permanent' nature."

"Which means we just let Edgar Benedek waltz out of U.N.C.L.E. HQ? Well, I suppose we could try a little mind-manipulation —"

"With that mind? Somehow I doubt it would be successful. Now MacKensie on the other hand —"

"— would be willing to forget all about it," Kuryakin finished. "I've been listening to their conversation. Although I suppose in MacKensie's case 'rant' might be a more accurate word."

"Benedek seems to be used to it," Napoleon observed, nodding at the reporter who just continued to sit at the table, grinning like a madman.

Illya pulled one of the dossiers in front of him and flipped it open. "I find it hard to believe that Jonathan MacKensie would volunteer for such a project. Napoleon, look at his academic record. Nothing here indicates an interest in anything even remotely 'paranormal'."

"After speaking with Juliana Moorhouse, I believe his 'volunteering' may not have been completely — voluntary."

Illya winced at his partner's idea of cleverness. "Napoleon —"

"She seems quite a strong-willed lady, and if the idea of the paranormal research was hers, I think she could have roped MacKensie into accepting the research. If you read on, you'll see he is currently seeking a research grant for a project of his own."

"Are you suggesting that the department head of a respected university would resort to blackmail?" Illya looked at MacKensie who was now seated at the table, head in hands. "Yes, I could believe that scenario."

"So you think MacKensie would be reasonable and agree to forget he ever heard of U.N.C.L.E. and went on a 'Mr. Kuryakin's Wild Ride'?"

The blond brows drew down at that, and Napoleon grinned.

"I was not driving —"

"No? But I suspect you were in charge. And you did provide a little action." He tapped the sling. "MacKensie did a fair job of field first aid, by the way."

"He's a good man in a pinch," Illya admitted.

"I wonder if he has any control over Benedek?"

Illya gave an inelegant snort. "No one has control over Edgar Benedek. I doubt even your Juliana Moorhouse has much luck there."

"Someone's going to have to, Illya, or we're going to see U.N.C.L.E. splashed all over the pages of *The National Register*."

"Not just U.N.C.L.E., my friend, but the 'Warlocks from U.N.C.L.E.'."

Napoleon stared in horror at his friend as Illya stood up and calmly pocketed his reading glasses.

"Well, shall we see how we're going to have to play this out?"

Shaking his head, Napoleon followed his partner from the observation room and into the interrogation cell.

When the door whooshed open, Jonathan raised his head and then leapt to his feet, trying to keep the table between him and the two men from U.N.C.L.E. Benny, on the other hand, maintained his blasé pose and merely waved at the two new arrivals.

"Hiya, guys, what's shaking? Here to spring us? Told ya there was nothing to worry about, Doctor Jon —"

"Benedek —"

"Have a seat, Doctor MacKensie," Illya invited, pointing to the chair Jonathan had vacated. "It's time we had a little talk."

"Little? Listen, pal, I think Jack and I deserve the truth —"

"Indeed you do, Mr. Benedek," Illya agreed, smiling blandly. "However, the question before us is what will you do with the truth?"

Benny gaped at him for perhaps a second, then shrugged. "Hey, relaxovision, Mr. K. We can work out something. You don't turn me or Jack into toads, and I won't splash this story all over the airwaves. Although I gotta admit it would be great for the talk shows —"

"Benedek, be reasonable! These men are not wizards or — or warlocks!" Jonathan's voice rose on the last word, and he was gripping the back of his chair.

Solo cleared his throat. "Your friend Jack is correct, Mr. Benedek —"

"Jonathan, please," MacKensie muttered, reluctantly sinking onto the chair. "Or Jon. Not — Jack."

Solo and Kuryakin traded glances, then mutually seemed to dismiss the interruption. "We are not — ah — warlocks," Napoleon continued. "The U-N-C-L-E is a multi-national intelligence and law enforcement agency designed to counter terrorism and other threats to the global welfare —"

"Whoaaa!" Benny stared at him, blue eyes wide with revelation. "I shoulda figured it out! The dark suits, high-tech goodies, hidden entrances — you're the guys in black, aren't you? The ones covering up all the UFO sightings, right? This is grrrreat!"

Solo stared at the journalist in disbelief. His own tasteful suit was a navy pinstripe with a red tie, hardly in the same class with his partner's black turtleneck and suit.

Kuryakin rolled his eyes, and his mouth twitched in amusement.

"Oh, no," MacKensie moaned, burying his face in his hands. "Benedek, I swear, I'm going to —"

"Jonny, I admire your skepticism, but even you've gotta admit they're up to something!"

"You're paranoid, Benedek — certifiably!" MacKensie looked beseechingly at Solo. "We don't know anything, and we wouldn't tell anyone even if we did. Please, just ignore him — I always do — and just let us go. Please?" He injected a note of pleading into his voice, and he even tried a shaky version of his usually charming smile, the one that even occasionally worked on Juliana Moorhouse.

Solo tilted his head and studied MacKensie for a moment, then glanced at Kuryakin. "Illya? Would you care to join the conversation?"

For an answer, Illya slapped his free palm on the table and leaned forward into Benny's face. "This is not a frivolous matter, Mr. Benedek. We know who you are and what kind of books you write. Our organization needs privacy in order to operate effectively, and any headline you might write for *The National Register* would seriously compromise that privacy. Agreed?"

"Uh — yeah," Benny stammered. "I could see that, I guess — but — you're just spies? Really? Not anything wonderful like alien bounty-hunters?"

"No!"

Both the visitors cringed at the blond man's emphatic exclamation.

"Run of the mill, garden-variety spies," Solo added mildly. "Although we tend to prefer the term 'intelligence operatives.' We are not under the auspices of the U.S. Federal government, or any one national government, but are a coalition representing the world. And the only UFO I've ever seen turned out to be a hoax, by the way. Just an attempt by a megalomaniac to take over the world."

Benedek, for once, seemed to have no answer, and it was MacKensie who finally ventured, "Is there a pledge of secrecy we need to sign before you let us go?"

"Do you really think a mere piece of paper would be sufficient to guarantee Mr. Benedek's cooperation? Would his word be worth the paper it was written on, Doctor MacKensie?" Illya Kuryakin demanded, blue eyes boring into Jonathan, who gulped and found his smile slipping.

"Then ... what do you plan to do with us?"

"There are people who will know if Jack goes missing," Benny put in, the laughter in his blue eyes fleeing and being replaced by an unaccustomed hardness.

"I'm sure," Kuryakin agreed mildly. "But it's not Doctor MacKensie's trustworthiness I am questioning. Are there people who will know — or care — if you go missing?"

"Yes," Jonathan interrupted before Benny could answer. "I'll know. If you want my silence, both Benedek and I walk out of here."

"I see." Kuryakin's gaze was unwavering. "So you will vouch for your friend, and we can be assured that we will not see any mention of this little — contretemps in Mr. Benedek's paper? No speculations about men in black working out of a novelty shop in New York? Nothing about wizards, aliens or U.N.C.L.E.?"

"Absolutely," Jonathan swore, holding up his right hand like he was taking an oath. "Right, Benedek? Benny?"

"What the hell? Even the *Register's* readers would never buy all this," Benny shrugged. "So where do we sign?"

"Nothing so mundane, Mr. Benedek." Kuryakin's smile was not at all reassuring.

Jonathan's smile faltered. "W-what do you mean?"

From his inside jacket pocket, Kuryakin produced two tiny glass vials and when he pulled off the end-cap, revealed an extremely sharp lancet. "Napoleon?"

Playing his part to perfection, Napoleon laid two credit-card sized pieces of black plastic on the table before the two prisoners.

"What's this?" Benny demanded, looking suspiciously at the two U.N.C.L.E. agents.

"I suppose you could say we require a blood oath. We require a small blood sample, as well as a thumbprint," Kuryakin explained, his mild expression belying the sinister sensation creeping up Jonathan's spine.

"Blood, huh? A primary component in spells." Benny glanced up at Kuryakin, who blinked in confusion. "You sure you're not planning a little voodoo on us?"

"Certainly not. It's simply standard procedure," Illya replied, his eyes narrowing as he studied the journalist.

"Benedek, please," Jonathan began, trying to remain calm. Looking from one agent to the other, he continued, "I, er, I understand about the thumbprint being for identification purposes, but — why do you want a blood sample?"

"Also for identification," Solo answered smoothly. "We like to keep track of civilians who have learned about us. It happens more often than you might think."

Jonathan traded a glance with Benny, then shrugged. "Very well, if you insist." He began to take off his suit jacket, pausing as Kuryakin held up a hand.

"No need for that, Doctor MacKensie, we can obtain the sample from your fingertip." He prepared one of the lancets, then grasped the hand Jonathan extended palm up and quickly drew the blood sample. "Thank you, Doctor. If you'll allow Napoleon to take your thumbprint, please." He met Benny's stubborn gaze. "Mr. Benedek?"

Benny folded his arms. "You can have the thumbprint, but my blood's gonna stay where it is. Got a problem with that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. No blood, you stay here."

"Uh, Illya," Napoleon began in a worried tone.

"You know the rules, Napoleon." The blond man's face was impassive, his voice resolute. "We cannot afford the security risk. I'm sorry, Doctor MacKensie, you're free to go, but Mr. Benedek —"

"Benedek, just let him have the sample! It's not that much blood — you'll never miss it! A vampire takes more!" Jonathan stuck his finger under Benny's nose. "Look, hardly a pinprick! Please?"

"Why?"

"Because if you don't let him have it, you can't leave here. And if you can't leave, then neither can I. And how will I explain it to Doctor Moorhouse? And to Jordy? Don't you have a story due? You wouldn't want me to submit a story under your by-line, would you?"

Benny considered for a moment, then stuck out his finger. "Okay, Bela, just make it quick and painless."

The corner of Illya's mouth twitched as he took the offered digit and took his blood sample. "Napoleon?"

Napoleon quickly took the thumbprint and tucked the plastic bits in his pocket. "All done, gentlemen."

Benny stuck his finger in his mouth, glaring at Illya. "You call that painless?"

Illya shrugged. "It was quick."

"Are you sure you guys are the good warlocks?"

"Benny!"

"Just kidding, Jack — mostly." He grinned as the door was opened by one of the men who had escorted them to the interrogation room. "Well, it's been real, and it's been fun, but it ain't been real fun, Mr. S., Mr. K. Now we gotta check out Central Park for elves. I've heard some of those gnomes can be real nasty types." He waved at the agents and strolled out of the room.

"He's — uh, just being funny," MacKensie assured the U.N.C.L.E. agents, shaking hands with Napoleon and Illya. "Thank you very much. Take care of that shoulder, Mr. Kuryakin."

"I shall," Illya promised. "Thank you for your assistance, by the way."

"Take them back to their car and make sure they get out of the garage safely," Solo instructed the guard. "Goodbye, Doctor MacKensie."

Jonathan nodded and left the room, following Benny and their escort down the corridor.

Napoleon sighed and looked at his partner. "Well, we pulled it off, Illya. You were very convincing, by the way."

"I wasn't on my best form," Illya complained, dropping into a chair and wincing a little as the motion jarred his shoulder. "It's difficult to be threatening with only one good arm."

"Hmm ... You think they'll behave themselves?"

"Perhaps. If not, we'll know where to find them."

"And what are you proposing to do with those blood samples? I don't recall any procedures requiring blood."

Illya grinned and pulled the two tiny vials from his pocket and handed them to his partner. "These? They were just — window-dressing. I thought it might make more of an impression on Benedek than merely signing a piece of paper."

"Window-dressing," Napoleon grumbled, taking the vials and studying them. "That's what I get for having a fashion designer as a partner." He walked over to a small waste basket and deposited the vials. "Dinner?"

"Your treat?" Illya managed a dramatic wince accompanied with a convincing groan of pain as he stood up.

"Hmm, in your delicate condition I'd say some soup and crackers would be about all you can handle, tovarishch." Napoleon offered his partner an arm for support and he grinned when Illya refused it.

"Actually, I think I need a thick, medium-rare steak to build up my blood. And a lovely assistant to cut it for me, of course."

"The steak I can manage, but I think you'll have to find your own 'lovely assistant'," Napoleon warned as they left the interrogation room.