

**THE UNCLE OLYMPICS AFFAIR**

***ACT I: On Your Marks . . .***

"Well, when are you leaving?"

The query caused the pair of agents to pause with Illya Kuryakin's spoon suspended between bowl and lips and Napoleon Solo in mid bite of a club sandwich. Their eyes flicked to each other, certain the other was pulling a joke.

Agent Guy Segil and his partner Sean O'Brien plunked their plastic trays down at the table uninvited and settled in to the available chairs. "Are you going to do it or not? We have to know. If you back out then we're bettin' on Berlin." The intruding partners began to saw at their small steaks.

Illya raised his eyebrow at Solo, who shrugged his shoulder in return as he chewed the bite of sandwich. "What is it we're supposed to be doing?" the blond agent asked suspiciously.

O'Brien continued to saw away on his well done steak. "What? You mean we know something before the CEA and his partner? That's a first!" The two chuckled as they took their first bites.

"It seems that being in a Bolivian rain forest for three weeks has put us behind in the news." Solo said calmly after he swallowed and touched his lips with his napkin.

Another pair of agents stopped behind O'Brien, trays in hand. "Well?" One of them asked. "Is it them or Williams and Wescott in Berlin?"

Solo and Kuryakin glanced at each other again. The Russian's eyes turned stormy. "If someone doesn't tell me what's going on I'll begin to practice Interrogations 101 right here."

It was the visitors' turn to pause. Solo and Kuryakin looked at them expectantly.

"The UNCLE Olympics. Didn't you hear about it?"

Illya rolled his eyes, issued a snort of disgust and continued to eat.

"Apparently not," Solo responded as he picked up his coffee mug. "What is it, exactly?"

O'Brien answered. "Since that Harry Beldon fiasco in Berlin it seems that the head UNCLE honchos feel we need a little team building exercise. A team representing each of the five main headquarters will run a course, sort of a cross between a treasure hunt and an obstacle course. Whatever team gets to the last point first, wins."

"Wins what?"

"Does it matter? The winner proves they're the best. I guess there will be quite a party, too."

Kuryakin continued to eat, unimpressed. Solo nodded his head and looked thoughtful.

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

"You two were voted to represent the North American office."

"Leave the office for just a little while and see what happens? You get elected to all sorts of things," Solo said to his partner.

"The office pool is against you, though."

This comment caused Kuryakin to raise his head. Solo looked surprised. "Who's slated to win?" The Chief Enforcement Agent asked.

"Like I said, Wescott and Williams in Berlin," Agent Segil answered.

"But they've been partnered for less than a year," Solo said.

O'Brien and Segil glanced at each other. "Uh, yeah, but . . ."

"But what?" Kuryakin growled from behind his spoon.

"Um, office scuttlebutt says they're favored because they're a couple of years younger. Not that I believe that, you understand." O'Brien stammered. "I'm bettin' you two all the way!"

Segil dropped his head and began to pay close attention to his meal. O'Brien followed his lead. Neither one of them saw the look pass between the 'older' agents.

"Tell me," Solo asked calmly. "How is this Olympics set up?"

***ACT II: Get Set . . .***

"Basically, that's how it will be run gentlemen." Mr. Waverly puffed on his pipe sagely, one hand behind his back, as he stood in front of the world map looking satisfied. "The first team that gets to the end of the course, wins."

"So, there's five legs to this race," Solo summed up. "Each leg selected and routed by one of the five UNCLE office chiefs."

"Yes. No one but the office chiefs and their immediate staff knows their particular route. No Chief will know what the other Chiefs are planning, or where the routes are. Each team will have to follow clues. It's an exercise in observation, deduction and physical ability."

"And this route covers five continents? Transportation will be available?" Kuryakin asked, still amazed at the whole idea.

"Yes. Each section head is responsible for taking the teams to the next location. First one out of the woods, so to speak, gets the first ride, and so on. We have a neutral party checking to make sure none of the routes overlap or go through the same country or countries."

"It doesn't sound like there will be time to be bored," Solo mused.

Kuryakin glared at his partner. "Are you saying that we're doing this?"

"Why not? It sounds . . . challenging."

"I don't need a challenge."

"Well, there's the prize," Solo said as he turned his attention to their boss. "There is a prize for the winning team, isn't there, sir?"

Waverly raised his bushy brows at his lead agent. "You mean other than the respect of your peers worldwide and office pride?"

"Yes," Kuryakin said immediately.

The old man puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. His eyes sparkled with mischief. "I'll make a deal with you gentlemen. If you win, you may have two days off for each day you're in the race. Paid."

The agents regarded each other momentarily. "Deal," they agreed simultaneously.



They had three weeks until the contest was slated to begin. Solo and Kuryakin worked as usual around the office with an occasional job that took them away for a day or two. The only difference the other office workers noticed was that Solo seemed to be on the phone a lot, and Kuryakin was carrying around more files than usual, but no one

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

could really be sure. Overall, it appeared that the two agents weren't really training in any way. No amount of questions or needling could get either agent to confess if there was any plan. Both agents claimed they didn't have time to give the Olympics much thought. Their apparent lack of interest in the Olympics made world wide betting pool against them grow quite large.

"They aren't even working out in the gym!" O'Brien wailed to Segil at another lunch. "I hear Williams ran a marathon race last week and was back at work like it was a stroll in the park!"

The table full of agents sitting with them nodded; they'd heard the same kinds of stories about the other teams. Solo and Kuryakin were taking this way too lightly as far as they could see, and reluctantly, they put their money on the Berlin team. Mark Slate and April Dancer seemed to be the only agents aside from Solo and Kuryakin that weren't drawn into the excitement of the event.

"You know, you two were the back up team," Segil pointed out. "I'd bet on you two in a heartbeat."

Mark crossed his arms and leaned against the cafeteria wall. "Guess that's a moot point, eh? Never known that pair to turn down a challenge."

"They could at least look interested!" O'Brien moped. "They're going to make our office look bad! Are you betting on them?"

April flicked a piece of lint off her silk sleeve. "Of course! I don't want to face them afterwards and say I bet against them. Call it loyalty."

"I'm more loyal to my wallet," Segil growled as he cleared his tray and left with O'Brien close behind.

Mark gave April a lopsided grin. "I think most of the staff plans on being elsewhere the day after the race ends."

"Good," the trim agent replied, inspecting her nails. "I could use the peace and quiet."

***ACT III: Go!***

It was a week before the race and the final teams were posted. Solo and Kuryakin represented the New York office, Harry Williams and Paul Wescott for Berlin, Caracas had Gabriel Seguin and Jorge Salazar, Nairobi submitted Sule Memeza with Kojo Fasse, with New Delhi's Ron Wang and Bennie Silver rounding out the field. There were no surprises; the reputations of the teams were well known.

Four days before the posted starting date, Solo and Kuryakin were called to Waverly's office. When they had settled into their seats the old man spun the table around and brought it to a rest with plane tickets, some cash, and a world map in front of each agent.

"On your marks, gentlemen." It was hard to miss the sparkle in the eyes of their boss.

"Excuse me?" Kuryakin said as he examined the tickets.

Solo flashed a grin and retrieved his offering. "The game is afoot, I assume?"

The blond agent's head snapped up. "It's four days early."

"Mr. Kuryakin, this organization is renowned for keeping secrets." Waverly patted his breast pocket absently, looking for his pipe.

Solo grinned and leaned back. "The date Illya's referring to was an intentional leak."

"So that's how this game will be played," Kuryakin groused.

"We did say that the course would be secret. That includes the actual starting time." The sage leader abandoned his search and pointed to the world map. "The race starts when all team members arrive here." His finger tapped an area in California. "And leave your guns here, gentlemen."

"San Francisco," Illya said, reading the map as he dropped his shoulder harness. He gave the gun a long last look. "Are they afraid we will shoot our competition?"

The old man raised a bushy brow but didn't grace the question with an answer. "Look for these markers. They will mark the start and end of each leg." Waverly held up a small, pale blue flag that had the yellow globe used in the UNCLE logo imprinted on it. "You have less than an hour to get to the airport. The first team that gets to the end of the course wins," Waverly said with a touch of amusement in his tone. "Remember that you are representing this office, gentlemen."

"So much for packing," Solo mumbled as they rose and headed for the door.

As they raced out of the building the office-wide intercom announced, "And they're off!"

***ACT IV: First Leg – Day One***

Fog threatened San Francisco's airport but hung congenially offshore and allowed the agents' plane to land without delay or diversion. When they stepped from the jet way to the terminal, Solo and Kuryakin scanned the crowd for something, anything, since they didn't have any idea what to look for. A grinning man flashed his UNCLE identification just outside the gate, resolving the quandary.

"Gentlemen," he said cheerily. "You are the final arrivals. The other teams are here in the terminal. I will notify everyone that the race will now begin." Offering no more, the man disappeared into the crowd.

The two agents regarded each other. "Well?" said Solo.

Kuryakin nodded to the exit and began to walk just as their communicator pens warbled, acting as the race starting gun.

A gathering of religious panhandlers partially blocking the hallway marked their first obstacle. "I guess we simply follow normal routine and check the local field office." Illya studied the group of robe-clad, shaved head, tambourine-bearing beggars with open suspicion. One of them offered him a yellow flower with one hand and a donation bucket with the other. "I gave at the office," the agent snarled curtly. The beggar backed off quickly, eyes wide.

"Sorry," Solo said in passing to the frightened Krishna. "He hasn't bitten anyone all day and he's grumpy." He directed his partner to the doors. "Let's go, then." Solo led the way, weaving through the crowd. When they got to the taxi line they saw Wescott and Williams disappear into the lead cab. "They beat us here from the international gates?"

Illya cut the line and quickly opened the door to the first empty cab, Solo on his heels.

"Hey! That's my cab!" yelled a busty middle-aged woman who clutched a small, fluffy dog in one arm. With the other hand tightly gripping her suitcase, she angrily shook the dazed canine in Illya's direction as she berated the pair.

"Sorry!" Solo replied. He jumped in beside his partner and slammed the door. "Good thing that dog wasn't loaded," he quipped as the cab pulled away. Illya just rolled his eyes at him. Solo sat straighter. "You need to get into the spirit of this. I'm not apologizing for you anymore today."

"Fine with me."

When they arrived at the UNCLE field office, two cabs were pulling away from the curb. Their own cab stopped in front of the small bookstore that fronted UNCLE San

Francisco, and Illya noted a small blue flag with a yellow globe printed on it was posted next to the American flag in the display window.

"Shall we follow our plan, or see what the office holds?" he asked his dark-haired partner.

"Follow those cabs," was Solo's reply, directed at their driver. "There's an extra five in if for you if we get to where ever they're going before the passengers are out of sight."

The cab squealed from the curb. "What if I get to their stop before they do?" The driver asked curiously. "I heard their destination on the radio before I picked you up."

The agents looked at each other and grinned. "I think I could get into the spirit of this after all," Illya said happily.



As promised, when the driver arrived at the wharf area there wasn't a cab in sight. "You have about 15 seconds until they arrive," the driver said, his hand out for payment. Solo slapped bills into the open palm and both agents dove from the cab which roared off before the door was fully closed.

"He seemed to catch on quick," Illya noted as he straightened his jacket.

The pair had settled into the shadow of a storage building. The sun was hanging somewhere over the horizon, mired in the incoming fog, and the darkness of night threatened to close in earlier than expected. The bright yellow cabs were easy to spot in the poor light and arrived within seconds of each other.

Solo and Kuryakin recognized Williams and Wescott's outlines as they leaped from the first cab and the brighter clothing and lanky figures of Memeza and Fasse of Nairobi close behind in the second cab.

The New York agents broke cover and trailed the others to the edge of the dock area. They could barely make out the four agents in the fog, who appeared to be searching a small, grassy park area that was situated between the dock and the rocky bay. Solo and Kuryakin circled around the edge of the park, keeping them all in sight. They heard the arrival of the fourth cab in the foggy darkness and saw the fuzzy outlines of what they figured were the remaining four agents spill out.

"All present and accounted for," Solo said quietly. "I wonder if everyone else picked up something from the office." The pair crept in closer to Wescott and his partner, who were in excited dialogue next to what appeared to be a granite marker. Wescott poked at a paper in his hand and looked at his watch. Within moments they took off on foot with Solo and Kuryakin close behind. The other teams were still searching the small park.

The four of them arrived at a nearby ferry station just as a ferry was preparing to leave. Wescott and Williams dashed aboard at the last second and headed into the seating area. Solo and Kuryakin vaulted the closed gate, threw money at the astonished attendant, and moved quickly into the shadows on the ferry. When they crept up the stairs to the seating area, they felt the ferry begin to move and saw the Berlin agents looking out the window toward the dock. The younger one, Williams, sat down, pulled out a paper and began to study it. Wescott cracked a smug grin and waved out the window at the receding dock.

"I guess the others got here too late," Illya surmised.

"I wonder where we're going?" Solo mused.

"I don't know, but I bet that paper they keep looking at would tell us."

Their question was answered nearly an hour later when the ferry docked and the New York pair followed the Berlin agents off the boat. Darkness made stealth easier. Wescott stopped and carefully studied a small, grassy park area adjacent to the ferry dock. When Williams came to him, quiet discussion followed. Wescott pointed at something and they moved off toward the water's edge.

"You know, if we lose them we're basically up a creek without a boat." Kuryakin pulled his coat in tight to keep the fog at bay. "I'd feel better if we had that paper they keep looking at."

"Paddle, not boat," Solo corrected automatically.

The slight pause was accented by Illya's cocked eyebrow. "What's the point of having a paddle without a boat?"

With a heavenward roll of his eyes, Solo dropped the subject of boats. "So we either don't lose them or we get the paper." He nudged his partner, as the Berlin pair seemed to find what they were looking for; they were now moving out of the park at a quick pace. "We're off again. Go see what they found." The dark haired agent followed the retreating pair as the Russian melted into the hazy darkness.

Illya appeared at Solo's side moments later. "It was a plaque on a granite pillar marking where a Sgt. Jose Ortega first stepped foot on the San Francisco bay."

"All right, keep that in mind; the other place had a granite marker, too." Their pace had quickened as they crossed the street and headed down a business area. "I think we may be heading for the train station."

Solo was right and managed to get the ticket agent to recall what Wescott had purchased. Boarding without being spotted was tricky but manageable and they settled into an empty seat one car away from their quarry. "We seem to be headed to Monterey."

"Good. I have time to eat something." Illya stood. "The airline food wasn't enough."

"Fine, but don't get spotted by those two." That comment resulted in a withering look from the blond agent. Solo was undaunted. "They may know we're here all along, you know. Watch out for tricks."

"Tricks. Right." Illya left in search of food. It wasn't long before he returned with a thick sandwich and the news that Wescott and Williams were asleep. "Jet lag from Germany, I suppose. So I took this." He held up a crinkled paper. His eyes glittered with satisfaction.

Solo grinned. "I knew you were a thief at heart, my dear partner. You eat. Let me look." He took the paper and smoothed it out on his thigh. "I can't wait to see their reaction when they can't find this."

Illya swallowed a mouthful of sandwich. "Or this," he added lightly. Solo looked up to see Illya dangling a wallet between his fingers. "I wasn't sure we were going to get reimbursed for expenses by New York, so I thought Berlin should pick up some of the tab."

Solo's grin broadened. "You are a thrifty one, aren't you?"

The paper Illya had liberated from Williams was a list of park names in no particular order. "The cab drivers must have been their source of information." Illya mumbled. "There are no addresses here."



"Let's see," Solo looked at the list in his partner's hands. "I recognize that one." He pointed to the list. "Cabrillo National Monument is in San Diego."

Illya looked thoughtful. "There is a pattern here, besides the parks. The markers at the other two parks had Spanish names. Cabrillo was Spanish, too."

Solo grinned. "I think you got it. Chief Escamilla. He's always bragging about his Spanish ancestors. This has to be his course."

"I agree, but we'd better check the others on this list to be sure. Who would know where these parks are? The library?"

The dark haired agent's eyes glittered. "Our uncle's travel agency. They open before the library." He looked at his watch and pulled out his communicator. "Open Channel D."

A warm and extremely friendly feminine voice purred from the communicator. "Hello, Napoleon. How goes the race?"

"Charlene, my dear!" Illya shook his head in amazement as his partner began a low, flirty conversation that was accented with chuckles and double entendres. The Russian was sure the calls were backing up for Charlene and that her partner in the UNCLE's communications office was most likely glaring at her office mate both in resentment and anger: Resentful she wasn't speaking with the debonair agent and angry at having to pick up the load while Napoleon's time consuming requests for information were eagerly fulfilled.

Apparently, Solo was fully aware of the consequences of his requests. "And when I get back, Charlene, I'm taking both you and Valerie out to dinner to show my appreciation."

A second voice sounded over the communicator. "Thank you, Napoleon! It's nice to know someone out there realizes what we go through here."

"You're welcome, Valerie."

Charlene's tone was pouty. "Not at the same time, I hope. I want you all to myself."

By this time, Illya was slumped back in his seat with his chin on his palm, completely bored with the playful interchange. "Napoleon, hang up before Thrush traces that and we have more to contend with. Your conversation is so long that my babushka could trace it using her divining rod."

Solo smugly ended the call and replaced his pen. "You know as a scientist that your analogy makes no sense."

Illya nodded and a dreamy look came over his face. "My imagination is much more interesting than your conversation."

Solo hesitated a beat. "I didn't realize you had an imagination."

Illya's reply was deadpan as he looked out the window. "Imagine that."

Their exchange was interrupted by the announcement that they had arrived at the Monterey train station. The car had barely come to a stop before the agents were off. The station was fairly empty so the pair made their way to the exit as quickly as they could before the other agents saw them. Illya approached a uniformed officer standing at the exit. Solo stopped next to him and watched the train.

Wescott and Williams stepped off, looking wildly around the platform. Williams' eyes connected with Solo's at the far end of the platform just as Illya handed the wallet over to the officer.

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

"Time to go!" Solo said cheerfully as Illya thanked the officer. They darted out the exit.

"They'll have to prove who they are to get the wallet back," Illya said. "Difficult, when I have all the identification cards with photos." Then he held up a \$10 bill. "The cab is courtesy of Mr. Wescott. And I think our meals are covered for quite awhile as well."

They leaped into the first cab. "I'm glad you're on my side," Solo commented, patting his wallet to be sure.

Wescott's cash lasted all the way through San Diego, Mexico City and San Salvador. The agents were satisfied that their supposition had been correct, as each park they visited held a monument dedicated to a Spanish explorer, but none of the tiny field offices bore the blue and yellow flag.

The travel wasn't too difficult, but constant. They managed with frequent naps and eating on the run. By the end of the second day of the race, they were down to the last two parks.

"Which one is the last one? That will determine the end of the leg." Solo studied the crumpled list. "This park is in Cartagena and the other's in Panama City. They both have UNCLE field offices, if we are to assume that's where the end of the leg flag will be."

Illya yawned. "We've been running backwards in order of discovery and settlement. That would put Cartagena first"

"True, but we've also been running a linear pattern so far. I'd say Panama City first." Solo pursed his lips in thought then brightened suddenly. "But I think you're right. I think it ends in Cartagena."

Illya was silent for a few moments, his eyebrows raised in interest. "Why do you say that?"

"Call it a hunch." Solo waved down a cab. "Plus the fact that I happen to know that Chief Escamilla flies regularly into Cartagena and even has a private plane there. His family has a ranch outside the city, you know."

The blond agent shook his head in amazement as his partner smiled a sly smile. "Some hunch. I take it you've been there?"

"Ah, no. But Rachel in the Caracas office has." He winked at his partner as he pulled open a cab door.

Skipping Panama City completely, the pair found the blue and yellow flag denoting the end of the leg stapled on the tiny Cartagena field office's front door.

***ACT V: Second Leg – Day Three***

An agent from the tiny Cartagena field office escorted the pair to a small UNCLE airstrip.

“Are we the first here?” Solo asked curiously.

“No, you’re not,” the agent replied. Seguin and Salazar should be touching down at the next part right about . . .” He looked at his watch. “Now.”

“How’d they get ahead of us?” Illya growled.

“Seguin has worked for Escamilla before. He probably figured it out. Look at this way: They’ll blaze the trail for us. What about the others?”

Their host grinned. “I hear that Berlin is hot on your tail, Nairobi isn’t that far behind them and New Delhi just took off from San Salvador.” He yanked open the hatch of a small, idling plane and nodded at the pilot. “Good luck, gentlemen.”

The three hours flight let them catch some sleep, and they awoke as the small plane began its descent into Belem, Brazil. It was a clear, humid day, fairly hot for early afternoon when they left the miniscule airport.

“I wasn’t aware we had an office here,” Illya said, adjusting his jacket.

“We don’t. Not a traditional office, anyway. There’s a contact.” He pulled out his pen and began another flirty talk, this time with Wanda while Illya ate an unknown meat on a stick from a street vendor. Solo couldn’t help but notice the purchase and wrinkled his nose in disgust as he chatted. Illya made sure he was in his partner’s line of sight as he snacked. Finally, Solo signed off. “I bet you have no idea what kind of meat that is.”

Illya finished the snack and wiped his lips with a handkerchief. “If the meat doesn’t kill me, this silly contest will. Where are we going?”

Solo tucked the pen away. “To the humble home of Freddie Herrera. Let’s go before you decide to dine of some other disgusting offering.”

After a harrowing bus ride on some very primitive roads, sharing seats with caged chickens and leashed goats, fresh, heavy air greeted them when they finally stepped off the rickety bus.

They found Herrera’s home at the edge of the sea. The breeze was light over the smooth ocean, nary causing a ripple beyond the breaking waves. No one answered the front door, so they went around to where the beach began at the back door. A footpath was trampled in the sand lead to a hammock that sagged between two palm trees. A sole man lazily swayed to and fro in the cotton webbing, causing the droop. He was dressed in loose, casual clothes and had a hat pulled down over his eyes. A moustache peeked out from the edge of the hat.

The agents made their way through the sand to the man. "Freddie Herrera?" Solo inquired.

"Si. I've been expecting you." Freddie pushed the hat back and pointed to a collection of boats pulled on the beach. "Pick one, head south. And look for these." He held up a red triangular flag. "They are about a quarter of a mile apart. Good luck, gentlemen." They turned to go, but Freddie's voice made them pause. Freddie raised a bushy brow, and a toothy smile appeared under his full moustache. "By the way, because the Caracas boys beat you here, that put them neck and neck with Berlin at 2 to 1. You two are next at 4 to 1. Just thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks," Solo said slowly, then he softly said to his partner. "Doesn't sound like there's much faith in us."

Illya grunted in reply, studying the four small outboard boats before them. He wrinkled his nose at their choices.

"How long ago did Seguin and Salazar depart?" Illya asked.

"Oh, it's been nearly an hour." Freddie pulled his hat back down over his eyes. "Good luck."

Illya and Napoleon approached the boats. They were all small, two seater, their conditions running from good to barely floating. Solo immediately zeroed in on the best one and began to push it out to the sea.

"You know," Illya commented, "We could sabotage the other boats."

"We could," Solo replied as he tipped his head toward Freddie. "But we don't have time."

Illya glanced back and saw Wescott and Williams sprinting through the sand to Herrera.

They fired up the engine and followed the red flags into the mouth of the Amazon and into quickly falling darkness with the Berlin pair hot on their tail. The Caracas team of Seguin and Salazar was nowhere to be seen. With the night falling, they had to make a choice - continue on or stay put until daylight. The Berlin pair had dropped from their sight in the murky light a long time ago.

Illya swatted a cluster of mosquitoes. "I'm for finding a bed with a mosquito net. This is ridiculous."

His partner fanned the cloud of pests and looked thoughtful, then perked up. "There!" He immediately turned the bow of the small craft to a flickering light on the bank of the river.



The hot and humid night turned into a hot a humid dawn that promised a blisteringly humid day. The agents would have been in worse shape if Solo hadn't charmed the small shack's occupants into a spirited deal that ended with Solo's travel-worn Italian silk suit and Kuryakin's Woolworth's ensemble being swapped for appropriate jungle attire, mosquito netting, some food and water. The wrinkled patriarch of the home waved happily at them as they pushed off from the muddy beach. Solo's coat hung from his shoulders, several sizes too large, with the sleeves rolled to the elbows.

"I daresay that isn't the look that Valentino was shooting for," Solo murmured. "I wonder if I can log that loss on my expense account."

“Maybe you can pass it off as a loss from the Bolivian jungle affair. You haven’t turned that one in yet, have you?”

Solo visibly perked up as the small engine chugged to life. “Smart Russian. I knew there was a reason to let you follow me around.” Before Illya could respond he asked, “See any red flags?”

“You mean other than your inappropriate depreciations?” Illya squinted at the trees. “There. Keep to the north side of the floating tree trunk.” Illya pointed directly off the bow. “Or whatever that is.”

“It’s a Manatee.”

They gave the slow moving creature a wide berth as it swam lazily through the yellowish waters and tangles of roots. The piggish eye of the massive animal followed them with curiosity. The flags marked a course that carried them steadily deeper into the famous river’s basin, following a winding, watery path that grew narrower and narrower as they were led up a smaller tributary river. As they passed and commented on other wildlife of the area, the two sweltering men tried to figure out which Chief designed this part of the course.

“It’s marked like a cross country race course.” Solo noted his partner’s frown. “Like the Boston Marathon, only through the woods.”

The Russian’s sweaty expression changed to one of distaste. “I never understood running for fun. Now running because your life depends on it, that’s another story.”

Solo wiped his brow for the umpteenth time. “The only Chief I know that runs - or I should say ran - for fun was Giodino.”

Illya frowned again. “Doesn’t he have some sort of knee injury? He uses a cane. Samoy used to be an athlete before he was confined to a wheelchair. I don’t know if he was competition minded.”

After a couple of hours of dodging flotsam, slapping bugs and gulping water, Solo, now red faced from the heat, quickly sat upright. Illya tore his eyes from the cluttered waterway and looked upstream to where his partner pointed.

Between the water-bound and tangled roots of a massive mangrove, a small boat bobbed lazily, barely visible. Instantly on guard, the American quickly maneuvered their craft into a tangle of vines close by and on the same shore. Small, unseen creatures skittered away from the intrusion, and a loud ‘plop!’ marked the dive of something into the water. Illya eyed the brush cautiously while Solo kept the other boat in sight.

“Seguin and Salazar,” Solo whispered. Their attention was drawn a little further upstream by the sound of screeching birds, quite different from the background squawking to which they had become accustomed. “Unwanted intruders?”

“What other kind is there?” Illya growled as he slipped from their boat. Solo followed like a shadow.

The pair followed the noise of the birds. Not far from where they tied up a branch overhung the river, sporting a red flag that drooped in the heavy air. The screeching birds circled the form of a man clinging to the branch with one arm while trying to fiddling with the flag with his other hand.

“It’s Salazar,” Solo whispered. “He’s moving the flag!”

“That’s cheating,” Illya growled. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Seguin has to be around here somewhere,” Solo said lowly. “There.” He pointed to the base of the massive tree where the dark profile of a man was barely discernable in the foliage.

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

After a few moments of silent study, Illya pointed at Salazar. "He's not moving the flag; he's taking down something hanging next to it." They watched a bit longer. "What do you suppose it is?"

"My guess would be instructions. Come on, I have a plan." Solo crept closer, waiting for the delicate moment when Salazar began his backward descent from the overhanging branch. Seguin turned his concentration to verbally helping his partner down. "Let's get the boats." Solo whispered.

They took advantage of the screeching birds and Seguin's divided attention to slip away. They quietly commandeered the better Caracas boat and came up alongside the vessel they had arrived in. Illya untied it and towed it behind them while they cruised toward the overhanging branch. Their intentionally noisy arrival caused Salazar looked up in surprise and fall on top of Seguin.

"Hey!" Salazar said as he scrambled to his feet. "You have our boat!"

"Why, yes I do! And you have something we need, I believe."

Salazar sputtered. Seguin got to his feet and shook his fist. "You can't just leave us here!" He yelled. "It's the middle of the Amazon, for God's sake!"

"Well, technically, it's not even close to the middle," Solo said thoughtfully. "But you're right about one thing; we can't just leave you here. Or can we?"

"Williams and Wescott will be along soon enough," Illya said. "We saw them on the beach. In fact, they should be here at any moment and you will revel in Williams biting commentary of your current position."

"What do you want, Solo?" Salazar yelled angrily.

"Whatever it is you rescued from the tree. Toss it to me and we'll give you the boat."

Salazar and Seguin talked briskly for a moment. "Fine!" Seguin yelled. "Come in closer."

Solo threw their boat into idle. Spotting an appropriate tree directly across the waterway from their victims, he carefully piloted their craft to it and had Illya secure the empty boat to the tree root. It was a short swim from where the two South American agents warily eyed them.

Then Solo motored as close as he dared to Seguin, who tossed the packet to him. It skidded on the water for a second before the four envelopes fanned out on the water's surface. One eventually floated into Illya's outstretched fingers.

"I'm assuming the packets are identical," Illya grumbled, letting the other three envelopes float away in the slow current of the area.

Solo reversed their vessel until they bobbed next to the tied up boat. From the direction they had come on the river, birds began to screech. "Sounds like company's coming. We'd better get out of here," the older agent noted. Illya opened the soggy package.

"Thanks for getting this for us!" Solo called out. He began to pull away when Illya stopped him with a motion of his hands.

The Russian had a twinkle in his eye that immediately made Solo smile. "Well, we have to make sure we get a good head start, don't we?" Illya commented. "And keep the others from getting their envelopes too quickly?" Illya dug into his pocket and pulled out a chunk of smoked meat he'd bartered from the family in the shack. Salazar, who had stripped off his shoes in preparation to swim across the river to retrieve their new boat hesitated, calf deep in Amazon water.

Illya leaned over the edge of their vessel and drummed the water with his fingers of one hand as he scattered the meat over the surface with the other. First there was a splash here and splash there, then the piranha began a feeding frenzy and the water boiled with activity. Illya tossed several handfuls of meat next to the tied up boat that included a large chunk that would entertain the vicious fish for a little while.

Salazar leaped for the shore and profanities peppered the air. As Solo gunned the boat, Illya yelled, "I'm sure you know they prefer fresh meat!"

"Well, that should give us some time!" Solo commented as he pulled away and adroitly dodged the floating obstacles typical of the Amazon. "What's the paper say?"

Illya carefully unfolded the wet missive. "It says to go back to where we started and the first one there gets the fastest jet to the next starting point." He stuffed it in his pocket. "This was a pointless course."

"Not as pointless as you think, old chum. I'm not sure we have enough fuel to get back to the start. There's sure to be some jungle trekking ahead of us."

Illya slumped in the center of the boat. "I knew this was too easy. Couldn't be a simple there-and-back-again, could it?"

"And we still have to figure out who designed this course." The sound of another boat suddenly grew loud as the river opened up. "Looks like company!"

As Solo skillfully zigzagged the peppy boat through the waters, they waved at the Berliners traveling in the opposite direction. Williams' expression darkened, and he punched the gas. Wescott, already looking tall and unbalanced in the small vessel, did not look happy as he scrambled for a better hold.

"I hear Wescott can't swim very well," Solo grinned, sounding a little pleased. "Not that he'd want to, anyway, with your little fishy friends back there. I'm sure Seguin and Salazar will gladly share their packet for a ride to their boat."

Illya gave up a crooked grin and settled deeper onto the bench seat. Solo maneuvered carefully in the again narrowing river, the sound of pursuit distant but nevertheless there. As predicted, they were about three-quarters of the way back along the course when the engine began to sputter. The boat died with just enough forward motion to bump to shore. The other teams' boats closed fast. Solo and Kuryakin had barely disembarked and tied up their useless vessel when Wescott and Williams motored by, waving triumphantly. Seguin and Salazar were seconds behind.

"Well, we were ahead for a little while," Solo commented as they struggled up to drier ground.

"They won't get far. They have smaller engines," Illya said, using a thick vine as a climbing tool. Up on the riverbank, they found a narrow trail that followed the river.

"We need to keep them in sight," Solo reminded his partner.

". . . and look like we're trying to get ahead of them. I know the plan," grumped the smaller agent.

Sputtering noises of dual dying engines gave them the direction they needed on the rugged path. Loud curses marked their targets as they crept through the foliage.

"Damn it! What else could go wrong? Where's Salazar?" Wescott's sharp tone was unmistakable.

"Just ahead," Williams grunted. "We'll catch them."

From between wide, green fronds of native shrub, the New York pair watched as Williams and Wescott paddled to the shore. Neither one seemed too inclined to get into the water.

Wescott continued to grouse. "I hate the water."

Illya and Napoleon looked at each other and then to the sky, fully aware of what was coming next – the growing humidness was hard to ignore. Before the Berlin pair fully beached their dead boat, a typical downpour of rain forest proportions rained from the sky like a suddenly opened dam.

"Shit!" Wescott spat, sliding on the mud of the shore and falling on his butt. The New Yorkers work grinned happily at the Berliner's discomfort.

Williams, his eyes alight with humor, offered a hand to his partner. "Come on, Paul. Let's get the job done. Salazar and Seguin aren't that far ahead."

The dark haired New York agent, his head a wet mass, leaned into the slight blond. "All we have to do is let them lead the way." When Illya nodded acknowledgement water dripped copiously from his bangs. He swiped his vision clear and rose to follow Wescott and Williams.

No other comments or grumbling was heard. The Berliners put their head down and powered on through the forest with Solo and Kuryakin in their wake like misty shadows.

Rain poured down relentlessly for what seemed like hours. The wildlife in the jungle was quiet and out of sight, waiting out the familiar wet conditions. Soon the downpour would stop as suddenly as it started and the agents wanted to be as close as possible to at least one of the two sets of agents ahead of them when the sound killing rain ceased.

After a while, when it seemed like they were breathing water like some land-trapped fish, the New York pair came to a halt. The Berliners had disappeared before their eyes in the mix of rain and humid fog.

"Where'd they go?" Solo peered between the wide leaves of a climbing vine, Kuryakin panting at his side. "According to my bump of direction, we are nearly where we want to be."

"Herrera's place should be over the next rise," Illya agreed quietly.

Solo continued to squint into the curtain of rain. Kuryakin sidled up next to him. Shoulder to shoulder, they tried to find their mark in the steamy terrain.

"I don't like this." Illya mumbled. "I can't hear a thing with this blasted rain."

For several endless minutes all they heard was the pounding of the rain on the forest as they crept forward. Visibility was rain blurred and any hope of tracking by sound marred by the thrumming downpour.

Then out of nowhere, they were both flattened and pinned by a great, slimy weight. Solo grunted in surprise and Illya gasped, the air knocked from his lungs. Raucous laughter cut through the rain.

"There ya go, boys! Our gift to you! See ya later!" William's voice was loud and close, somewhere above them. The great snake writhed, as agitated as the men it knocked flat when it was pushed from its resting spot on a low branch..

After untangling themselves from the annoyed snake - a goat sized bulge in its middle indicating a recent meal and resulting lethargy – the cursing New York agents pursued the Berliners with reckless abandon.

"How'd they manage that?" Solo yelled, his skin still crawling from the encounter. Unconsciously, he brushed his arms where the scaly varmint had touched bare skin as they crashed through the brush. Snakes were not on his list of favorite things.

"Doesn't matter," Illya snarled in response. "Revenge is what matters now."



Distracted from his heebie-jeebies by the tone of Illya's voice, he managed to sputter, "Again, I'm glad you're on my side!"

They topped the next rise and the rain stopped as abruptly as it had started. Steam rose from every surface and the panting pair paused and looked down the slight hill, through thinning foliage. Their bump of direction proved to be correct; the familiar forms of Wescott and Williams were visible as they ran toward Herrera's humble home. Beyond that, the agents saw four pontoon planes bobbing in the water.

Williams was limping as he ran.

"Come on," Solo barked. "I'd like to arrange a limp for Wescott, too, before this is over."

"Now there's incentive," Illya snarled as they dashed down the hill in third place.



Solo and Kuryakin's pontoon plane landed several minutes behind that of the Berliners just off Suriname. Seguin and Salazar were long gone. From their landing spot, the teams were individually ferried to a nearby airstrip in their order of finish. Solo and Kuryakin were the third pair to be escorted to their own small jet, complete with pilot. South America disappeared below them as the jet angled up to cruising altitude.

Sighing tiredly Solo began a visual search of the interior from his seat. The pair was damp, dirty, unshaven and riddled with insect bites. All Solo wanted was to be clean again, and the best he could do at the moment was push the small lavatory sink to its limits. His partner studied the outside through the jet's small window.

"We aren't landing too soon if we're leveling at this altitude," Illya pointed out.

"Fine with me. There's time to wash up and catch some sleep." Solo unbuckled and headed to the small bathroom.

Illya slid the window shade down and ran his fingers through his still damp hair. "What do we have to work with?"

After giving the lavatory a cursory glance, Solo began to peel off his wet and filthy jungle wear. Curious, he headed to a small closet next to the bathroom and stuck his head inside. His voice was muffled as he replied. "There are clean clothes and some food in here." He straightened up and triumphantly, his fingers gripping the sleeve of a white shirt in a happy display of discovery.

Illya left his seat next to the window and gave the closet a quick visual once-over. He nodded with approval. "Basic items, but serviceable and just enough to stave off starvation."

"Sounds like your apartment," Solo quipped as he slapped his wet clothes on the floor and hustled to clean up.

***ACT VI: Third Leg – Day Five***

The agents were not only able to clean up, change and eat, but also sleep for several hours before the pilot woke them with the news of their final approach. An eerie twilight – indistinguishable between sunrise or sunset – tinted the sky outside. Illya studied the landscape below.

“England. We’re headed into Heathrow,” he noted.

Solo leaned over and after a moment, nodded in agreement. “This could be anyone’s leg of the course. Are we in agreement that the last one was designed by Giodino? That would leave Waverly, Samoy and Davisson.”

Illya hesitated then nodded shortly just before rubbing still tired-looking eyes. “I’d say pencil him in. I didn’t see anything that would make me think otherwise or indicate anyone else.”

The wheels of the craft touched down and the jet was efficiently taxied and parked. The thump of the portable stairs’ arrival was in conjunction with the pilot’s throwing open the door.

“Good luck, gentlemen,” the pilot said, eyes sparkling as the agents topped the steps. “You two are third in the pool at 9 to 1 now.”

Illya snorted and started down followed by Solo, who threw the pilot a grin. “Guess we should get going, huh?”

“Remember our plan, Napoleon,” Illya said lowly. “We’re right where we want to be.” The blond agent caught sight of the Berlin team just ahead and his eyes narrowed. “But we may have to step up a place.”

Solo caught the slight tightness in his partner’s voice. “Do I hear a vengeful tone?” he enquired as they increased their speed and hurried into the terminal.

“Let’s just say the snake incident has reshaped my battle plan.”

Solo and Kuryakin weaved their way through the crowded terminal toward the front, the smaller blond leading the way. Just as Illya saw Wescott push open the doors to the outside, Solo grabbed his partner’s arm. Illya turned to protest but when he saw the huge grin on Solo’s face, he followed his line of sight instead. There, at the head of the taxi line outside, stood a pair of mini-skirted stewardesses, chatting gaily.

“Come on,” Solo urged, taking the lead. Just as the next taxi stopped for the ladies, Solo slipped between them and the car, graciously opening the door for the startled women.

“Napoleon!” The redhead squealed, throwing her arms around the agent’s neck.

Usually armed with a depreciating remark about these typical encounters Illya instead smiled hugely at the turn of events. For once, his partner’s libido might actually

get them somewhere! As Solo did a quick introduction of his partner and the redhead reciprocated with hers, he ushered the women into the cab with practiced smoothness.

Illya made a point to find Williams and Wescott at the other end of the long taxi line with his eyes. Their gazes met and Illya gave them a quick wave before disappearing in the taxi.

“HEY!” Williams shouted, just as the taxi door closed and cut short the conversation. Solo gave the driver the address to the London office and the women’s hotel, then chatted charmingly with redheaded Britta. Illya chuckled and then turned his attention to the brunette Angela and enjoyed the ride.

They piled from the taxi amidst apologies and promises at the front steps of U.N.C.L.E. London’s false storefront. Two sets of pouting lips were the last thing the agents saw as the taxi pulled away. Solo watched the taxi depart as he straightened his tie with a sigh. He heard Illya’s footfall on the cement steps, then a quicker than expected return clatter. He turned.

“That was fast,” Solo said, frowning. Illya pointed at the front of the building and Solo refocused his attention. Posted just below the familiar flag in the window was a piece of paper. “What’s it say?” he asked.

“It says the meeting has changed to the mansion by the SOE office.”

Solo blinked. “Any mansion in particular? I know the SOE is no Baker Street. There are houses near there?”

Illya brushed by his partner and flagged down another taxi. “I happen to know just where they’re talking about. Montague Mansions was a residential building on a street near the OAS offices. I don’t know what its address is, but it’s walkable from the OAS building”

“Well, how fortuitous for us.” the CEA said with a grin. “Things are looking up!”

They jumped in the taxi and Illya gave the address of 64 Baker Street. “I wonder how far ahead Seguin and Salazar are,” the Russian mused. “I’d feel more comfortable if they were at least in sight.”

They rode along in relative silence for a bit before Solo nudged his partner. “Ask, and you shall receive,” he said, pointing to the sidewalk. The two of Caracas agents were walking quickly, dodging around the slower pedestrians. “We’re on Baker Street, but it looks like they don’t know what they’re looking for, exactly.”

Illya snorted. “Driver, pull around the next corner.”

Solo tsk’d, lips pursed as he thought as the taxi turned the corner then came to a halt. He peeled off a bill and paid the driver. “Hey!” the driver protested. “This is American money!”

The two agents leaped from the vehicle. “And well worth your while to exchange,” Solo said quickly. “I nearly doubled your fare.” Any further protest died on the cabbie’s tongue as he regarded the bill then stuffed it in his shirt. The driver pulled away before the door was completely shut.

Illya gave the departing taxi a glance. “Looks like he was afraid you’d change your mind,” he noted. Turning his attention to the building, he elbowed Solo. “That way,” he said.

They trotted down the street and Illya stopped in front of a red brick building with a sign that read “Closed for Renovation” on the front door. A small sign attached to the entry gate said ‘Montague Mansions’. Illya pushed the gate open and went up the stairs, Solo on his heels. Illya pushed open the front door and they stepped into a musty

smelling lobby. Pausing just inside, the agents surveyed the foyer. It was fairly empty, except for a tattered wing chair at the opposite end. The lofty cathedral ceiling made long echoes of their footfall on the dull marble floor.

“There’s something stacked on the chair,” Solo noted, heading to the sole piece of furniture.

When they reached the chair they saw that there was a short stack of that day’s edition of the London Times on the worn chair seat. The agents looked at each other, and then back at the papers. Illya picked up the top copy.

“There’s something written here,” he pointed out. On the upper right corner of the front page, a line of numbers and letters were neatly hand written. All five copies of the newspaper had the same mysterious numbers. Illya was instantly intrigued. “Obviously a code of some sort.”

“Obviously,” Solo agreed, looking at the rest of the papers. “We could make these other copies more, um, difficult to locate . . .”

Illya, frowning, was quickly going through the rest of the paper as he replied. “That would be against our plan to lag behind,” he replied absently, totally engrossed with the enigma in his hands.

“True,” Napoleon said, “but we may need some time to work out the code.” Illya didn’t reply, his expression one of total concentration. “Correction,” the older agent continued, “we may need time while you work out the code.” Still getting no reaction Solo decided to make a decision for them. He grabbed the stack of papers and moved to the entry way, where he peeked out a filmy window. “And we need some time. Memeza and Fasse are coming fast - I haven’t seen them since California. Illya, let’s go!”

Solo knew they needed some time; three other teams were closing in fast. He glanced at the papers in his hand and grinned with sudden inspiration. Confirming with a glance that the ceiling height soared to its highest just above his head, Solo threw the papers up in air with gusto. Then he grabbed his partner’s elbow and dragged him out the door as the pages of four newspapers fluttered down around them like gigantic snowflakes.

“Stash that out of sight and let’s go!” Solo snatched the paper away, folded it once and stuffed it inside Illya’s jacket, then pulled the door open.

The pair of agents dashed outside and down the stairs, passing the shocked pair of Nairobi agents. They hit the sidewalk and Solo pushed his partner south just as he saw the Caracas pair spot them from across the road. Seguin and Salazar sprinted across the street, nearly getting mowed over by a southbound bus. The scene gave Solo an opportunity, and he seized it.

As the Caracas agents pounded up the stairs of the Mansions hot on the Nairobi agents’ heels, Napoleon shoved Illya through the now gaping crowd and onto the bus which had screeched to a stop in the middle of the street to avoid the nearly flattened jaywalkers. Solo appeased the startled bus driver with a handful of currency. “There’s more than enough there. Better keep to your schedule, wouldn’t you say? Move it, man!”

The surprised driver nodded after a moment, and put the bus into motion.

Solo collapsed on the back seat of the bus, just behind his partner. He twisted around and glanced out the rear window for signs of the competition, and smiled smugly to himself when he saw the frowning Memeza burst out of the building. Illya pulled the newspaper from his pocket.

"Well? Any inspiration yet?" The senior agent puffed, shooting his cuff absently to neaten his appearance.

"Maybe. Give me a moment. I haven't exactly had a lot of time to study this." The newspaper in Illya's hand was crinkled with abuse and tattered about the edges, but the mysterious hand-written code on the front page was still intact. Solo could tell by the tilt of his partner's head and the distant look in his clear, blue eyes that his mind was focused and working.

The depth of Kuryakin's concentration was underscored when he didn't give the disheveled bum that rose from a nearby seat and plopped down next to him a glance. Illya continued to trace the code lightly with his finger, his mouth set in a hard line. After a moment of watching, the unsteady bum blinked, bleary-eyed, at the blond agent and his paper and leaned in a bit closer.

Solo stifled a choke as the bum's odor floated in his direction and leaned back in his seat. He watched, amused, as the wildly unkempt man mirrored the blond agent's concentration. Solo discretely covered his nose to block the alcohol and body odor that emanated from the drunk swaying next to his partner and waited for the inevitable confrontation.

After a few moments the drunk waved a shaky finger at the headline. "You need me to read that for you, young man?" The drunk slurred amiably in what Solo determined was Danish. He'd mistaken that Illya's extended concentration was on the headline banner.

Kuryakin twitched and his eyes shifted sideways immediately. "No, thank you," he replied in English as his eyes raked the stranger. Solo knew his partner's suspicious nature and that the blond agent was trying to discern if the bum persona was actually a disguise. It was very difficult to keep from laughing as Solo watched the interaction.

The bum noticed the once over, too. "I'm sorry if I insulted you," he said huffily, also in English, blowing sour breath in the blond agent's face with each word. Solo marveled that Illya didn't recoil.

"I'm not offended, simply repulsed." Illya replied flatly.

The bum scratched the stubble on his cheek, oblivious to the insult. "It's just that you looked puzzled. Like you can't read the Queen's English." The words were slurred to the extreme. "And I thought, for a little loose change, I could read it to you."

"No, it's . . ." Suddenly, the Russian's eyes widened. He quickly patted his pockets with one hand and pulled out a handful of change and motioned the bum to take it. "Here. Now leave."

The drunk's rheumy eyes brightened. The appearance of sparse, yellow-coated teeth from under a bushy, unkempt moustache indicated a smile. "As you wish, mate!" He took the change without hesitation and moved to the front of the bus for a fast escape before his benefactor changed his mind.

Curious, Solo opened his mouth to speak but he didn't have a chance. His partner's hands were moving quickly as they leafed through the newspaper, folded it back and snapped it into a more compact shape. Solo leaned forward onto the back of his partner's bus seat.

"I didn't see it earlier. Here, look." Illya smoothed the paper over his lap, the daily crossword puzzle clearly visible on top. Solo peered over his shoulder. Illya tapped one of the clues. "The code on the front corresponds with the daily puzzle. 'A' means across, 'D' means down." He began to fill in the blanks with remarkable speed.

Solo raised his brow. "I only know one person who would have the clout to get the London Times to do that," Napoleon mused.

Kuryakin canted his head in Solo's direction and their eyes met. They both grinned and said in unison, "Waverly." Illya added, "And Mr. Waverly resided at the Mansions at one time." Blue eyes immediately returned to the puzzle. By the time they made it to the area of the train station, the puzzle was complete. Illya had darkened the outline of the responses that corresponded with the handwritten code, which resulted in a blocky zigzag pattern.

"Clue 2A definitely is the start. It refers to the address of the SOE office." Solo was amazed at the speed in which his partner had completed the necessary puzzle blanks. "But the rest of the clues seem to be random answers."

"I don't think it's just the answers that matter." Illya tapped the puzzle with his pen. "I think the direction of the boxes matters, too – perpendicular is north or south, vertical is east or west."

Solo mulled that one over. "And . . . ?" A roll of his wrist indicated that his partner should continue.

"I think the answers tell us how far to go in a certain direction." The bus shrieked to a stop as if on cue. "And which direction to go." Illya stuffed the paper in his coat, stood, and looked expectantly at his partner. "I also believe that when we get to these locations, the addresses will be the degree of travel to our next location. This time, we go 24 degrees for 5 kilometers."

Napoleon pursed his lips in thought as he also stood. "How did you get that out of . . . that?" He waved a finger at the paper sticking out from his partner's pocket.

Illya's grin was lopsided. "The theme of the puzzle was 'Orienteering an Adventure'. We need a map, a compass and a protractor."

Solo slowly shook his head in amazement as they climbed down from the bus. "Smart Russian," he said with a grin while pulling his communicator from a rumpled pocket. "Or we can speak with someone who has a map, a compass and a protractor."

Illya rolled his eyes, knowing exactly what sex this contact would be.



One passage across the Channel and nearly a pair of days later found the agents in the middle of southern Italy. Illya was leaning wearily against the portico of a small shop on a street busy with foot traffic. Napoleon smiled into this communicator as he said, "Ciao, Teresa," then smarty closed the device.

"Well, not only do we have the final location of this little stroll across Europe, I have confirmation that the lovely Amazon trek was courtesy of Giodino. With Waverly being responsible for this leg, that leaves Davisson and Samoy's courses."

Illya stifled a yawn. "And how did Teresa confirm that Giodino designed our jungle tour? Did she ask him?"

"Nothing quite that direct. Apparently the piranha incident brought a chuckle or two to the morning briefing in Caracas and one of the agents relayed a humorous story about his run in with the little devils while he was marking the course. The next time Teresa called Caracas, the story was repeated to her." Solo's smug look at finding this bit of information made Illya snort.

“Finally. Something positive for me from one of your encounters,” he grumbled. “Where’s our final stop after we head . . .” Illya glanced up at the address painted on the store front. “. . . 157 degrees for . . .” he looked back at the crossword puzzle. “85 kilometers?”

Waverly's leg had so far proven to be both mentally and physically tiring. Staying in constant motion for nearly two day was beginning to fray the agents' resolve. Twice they'd seen two other teams, and twice they'd resisted the urge to sabotage their progress - it simply would take too much energy. The old man in New York was making them focus. Solo figured they were neck and neck with at least one team, and fighting to stay there.

“Teresa says that reading ends in the very small town of Nor.” Solo took Illya’s elbow and dragged his weary partner to the small rental car.

Illya paused at the side of the car and cocked his head at Solo, his eyes indicating deep thought. “I guess I should have known.”

Solo frowned as he shoved his partner to the car, and climbed in himself. “Should have known what?”

“The cities we’ve passed through. The course we’ve taken. It’s the same course Waverly took in World War II. I remember Nor from his personal files. He first met some of his SOE contemporaries there.”

Arched eyebrows indicated Solo’s surprise. “You got into the old man’s personal files?”

“Of course. Wasn’t that the plan?” Total innocence radiated from the Russian’s features as they climbed into the small compact car.

“Well, yes, but . . .” Solo chuckled at the audacity as he started the car.

“But what?”

“I’m just surprised it wasn’t noticed.”

“It was,” Illya said.

Hands on the steering wheel, the older agent again regarded his partner. “It was?”

“Yes, it was. Remember when Agent Segil got pulled into Waverly’s office a few days before we left?”

Solo blinked. “Yes. He got put on some God-awful surveillance duty.” He stared at Illya for a moment then cracked a grin. “You used Segil’s security codes to get Waverly’s file, didn’t you?” Laughing as he threw the car into gear, Solo added, “Remind me to change my codes when we get back.”

Illya shrugged nonchalantly, laid his head back and closed his eyes. “What ever you’re comfortable with.” A small smile pulled at one corner of his mouth as he added in a near mumble, “Wouldn’t make any difference.”

Solo darted through traffic like a rabbit on the run. “Then remind me to always stay on your good side.”



The tiny town of Nor was nothing more than a collection of farms. Where the north and west running roads crossed, there was a tiny building that served not only as the post office and general store, but was apparently the location of the part time field

agent's office, too. The agents saw the now very familiar blue flag tacked to the doorway just as their car sputtered to a stop, fuel spent.

"Buon, signori!" A small man with a large mustache greeted them, grabbing their hands in turn and issuing enthusiastic shakes. "You are the first to arrive! Now come, choose your vehicle."

Solo broke into a smile. "Italy must mean a Ferrari," he said happily to his partner as they rounded the corner of the building. He came to a dead stop. Illya, following closely, bumped into him. The younger agent peered around his motionless partner.

"Or a Vespa," Illya mumbled.

"Come, come!" the Italian agent urged. "This is the best one. Very reliable and quick." He stood next to a bright and shiny cherry red Italian motor scooter.

Illya shoved Napoleon forward. "Let's go, Napoleon. Where to?" The question was posed to the mustached native.

"All the way to the sea, gentlemen, all the way to the sea!" he beamed with enthusiasm. "And now that you are in the lead, you're at 3 to 1!"



The Vespa was as torturously slow as it was uncomfortably small. Although the ride to the sea was short as the crow flew, the winding road at least doubled the mileage and travel. Any appreciation of the pastoral countryside was lost on the road weary agents. When their trip ended at a busy dock lined with several sleek yachts, instead of being delighted, they became suspicious.

"This can't be what we're looking for," Solo mused, eying the vessels with longing appreciation. "It's not like the old man to be so generous. There's couple of very nice boats there."

"Gentlemen?" a soft voice breathed from behind. They turned in unison. "Are you the agents from Nor?" The raven haired maiden's shapely form was made apparent as the offshore breeze pressed her thin, white dress to her body, making the pink of the bikini underneath very clear. Her accent was thick Italian.

"Yes, we are." Illya confirmed, seeing that his partner was unable to speak through his wide grin.

The young woman took the Russian's elbow and swept her arm toward the dock. "Then choose a boat."

Solo immediately brightened up and offered his elbow. "Since I am the more experienced sailor, I think I should pick the boat. Plus, rank has its privileges." The woman dropped Illya's elbow and dazzled Solo with her smile. "Lead the way!" he said cheerily, all his previous leeriness gone.

Illya was quiet as they walked to the docks, noting that his partner was heading to the closest boat. He processed the girl's words, and then took a closer look at the small crowd that had appeared on the other end of the short pier. Napoleon kept up light and cheery banter with the woman, oblivious of what his partner had just figured out about the assembled people waiting for them.

"Napoleon," Illya said, his partner ignoring him. "NAPOLEON!" His change in tone made Solo pause, annoyance written clearly across his face.

"What is it, Illya? Can't you see our boat awaits?"



The dark haired beauty stood by the older agent, her eyes glittering. “Miss,” Illya started. “You said to pick a boat.”

“Yes, I did,” she replied.

“So, a particular crew goes with a particular boat? And those people make up the crews?” He pointed at the small crowd.

“Yes, that is correct,” she giggled.

Napoleon’s expression turned confused. “What are you driving at, IK?” he asked lowly.

“Napoleon, come here.” Illya stepped back from the charming lady and motioned Solo to approach. The older agent balked, giving the lady on his elbow a longing look. “Napoleon!” Illya snapped.

Solo finally acquiesced, giving the lady a kiss on the hand as he stepped away. His smile dropped when he reached Illya’s side. “This had better be good,” he growled lowly.

“Did you really look at the boats?” the blond asked shortly.

“Well, no. Not really.”

Illya smirked. “I didn’t think so. I just want to clarify that we do, in fact, want to follow our original plan. If so, we need to allow ourselves to be overtaken by the others. We shouldn’t be in first place at this point.”

Solo’s brown eyes narrowed. “True. So what’s that got to do with which boat I pick? We can let boats pass whatever boat we’re in.”

“Tell me which boat is the best and which is the worst. And ignore the distraction.” Illya crossed his arms expectantly.

Solo slowly turned and studied each of the small yachts in turn. “The best one is the one closest to us; I’ve always wanted to try that particular craft. The worst one is the one at the far end. It looks seaworthy, but that brand doesn’t have the best engines and tends to drag.” He turned to the girl. “Are all the boats originally equipped?” he asked the dark haired beauty.

“Yes, they are,” she replied.

“Then the fastest one is this one,” he pointed to the one he was headed toward. “And the slowest one is on the other end. Right?”

“Right,” the girl giggled.

“The other boats are pretty equal in performance, so,” Solo took a step toward the best boat. “Why not enjoy the trip?”

Illya’s hand on his elbow stopped him. “Exactly my feelings.” Then the younger agent turned to the girl. “Which crew goes with the fastest boat?” Illya asked next. Solo’s eyebrows rose in interest, and his eyes followed the young woman’s pointing finger.

“The green suits crew that boat,” she said, smiling.

The older agent finally turned his attention to the assemblage. The green suited ones were in the back of the group. Now that Solo’s keen eye was not distracted by the pretty woman in pink next to him, he noticed that the green suits in the small gathering were not bikinis. Those suits were snug and European in cut, but they graced obviously male bodies.

On closer inspection of the group, Solo noted that the individuals in red suits were women, but quite a bit older than Solo – and had leathery skin and sizeable muscles. The yellow suits were younger but . . .

Solo squinted at them. “Um, why are the women in the yellow suits wearing tights?”

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

“Those aren’t tights,” their guide informed them quietly. “They don’t believe in shaving.”

“Ah,” Solo nodded, taking a step back and now critically eyeing the group. “And the blue suits?”

“Well,” their guide sighed. “They weren’t always women . . .”

Solo backed up again and bumped into his partner. “I just wanted you to pick the right boat,” Illya said lowly. Then in louder voice, said, “I believe our lovely guide here in pink probably commands the slowest boat. Am I correct?”

The woman smiled a breathtaking smile. “Why, yes,” she said, eyes dancing.

Illya shoved his partner into the woman’s arms. “We don’t want to be first anymore anyway, do we?” he said with a bemused grin.

Solo suddenly became quite cheery again and wrapped his arm around the soft, tan shoulders of the pink bikinied woman. “Slow is just what we need at the moment. And here I thought the first to arrive was supposed to get the best transportation.”

“That was never stipulated but merely assumed. Leave it to Mr. Waverly to make a point about making assumptions and for making sure we’re on our toes up until the very end,” Illya commented as he took the arm of another pink bikinied crewmate.

“Very true. For once, though, I think we finally won a hand he dealt us.” Solo happily added.

At sea, the New York agents made a point of looking alarmed when the Nairobi team and their green-suited crew overtook them. When the next team pulled alongside Solo and Kuryakin didn’t bother hiding their feelings about the delightful distractions on deck - when Williams and Wescott sailed by, they simply kept their arms around the tiny waists of the closest crewwoman and waved.

When they reached the end port in Greece late the next day – well fed, rested and thoroughly relaxed - they saw the two boats that had beaten them at a dock. Bobbing contentedly in the harbor with the pink clad crew, Solo and Kuryakin took the time to discuss their next step.

As they did so, the radio operator swayed along the deck from the cabin and took the blond agent’s elbow. “Just thought you’d like to know that you’re now at 7 to 1,” she purred. “And the boys from Nairobi are just entering the harbor.”

Illya raised an eyebrow. Solo turned his head and nuzzled the ship’s captain. “I say wait until we’re 11 to 1,” he murmured.

The radiowoman smiled prettily at the Russian, who returned it with his own lopsided grin. “For once, one of your plans doesn’t sound painful for me,” he said dryly, capturing a pink bikinied waist.

***ACT VII: Fourth Leg – Day Seven***

After being met on an eastern Greek pier and sadly bidding farewell to their bevy of crewmates, Solo and Kuryakin found transportation to Athens in the form of a private plane. When they finally stepped foot in the UNCLE office, they were met with a mix of grins and sneers.

"You're in fourth place," a surly young man stated in heavily accented English as he handed them the tickets to their next ride. "The rumor mill predicted you wouldn't pass up the women on the yachts. The only team it looks like you'll beat is the New Delhi team and that's because Bennie broke his leg in Brazil."

Solo opened his mouth to rebut the comment, but Illya snatched the folders from his partner's hand and quickly perused the destination. "Baghdad?" he said with a trace of exasperation. "By cargo plane?"

"That's what you get for being in fourth place," their greeter snarled in reply. "I've lost a bundle on you two."

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," Solo replied, grabbing back the ticket folders. "We're still in the running."

The young man snorted and mumbled something in Greek. Illya pushed Solo out the front door and he began to look for a taxi.

"What'd he say?" Napoleon asked.

"Something about aerodynamic pigs," Illya said distractedly, intent on flagging a ride.

They caught a cab quickly and headed to a nearby NATO airbase in relative silence. Being fairly relaxed from their yacht trip, the cargo plane trip wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as it could have been. They were even able to catch a nap. The heat of Baghdad made itself known even before they landed as the fuselage of the plane slowly became unbearably hot. When they finally touched down and the unloading ramp was lowered, the agents were ready to get on with the race.

Immediately flagged to a waiting jeep, the pair were hustled off to the edge of the city and the bank of the Tigris river. They were dumped unceremoniously next to two boats, each loaded with one set of diving equipment. Looking at each other with a sigh, the team took the better boat and began heading southeast with the current.

"Do you suppose this is a clue?" Illya asked, holding up a bright orange plastic flag from the bottom of the boat.

Napoleon snorted, rolling up the sleeves of his khaki shirt. "You're a spy and you can't recognize a clue when you see one?"

Illya wound up for a repartee, but his eyes were attracted to something else. Napoleon noticed his partner's sudden change of attention and twisted around to see an identical orange plastic flag bobbing on a buoy anchored near the bank. Solo motored over to it, fighting the current of the river to keep the boat near the flag.

"Do you think they expect us to dive in this current?" Napoleon mused.

"It could be done. The diver would have to keep a hand on the anchor chain and follow it down . . ." Thinking, Illya looked down river.

"But that would take a lot of time."

"Yes," Illya agreed. "We shouldn't fall too far behind. We have to have some sort of idea where the others are, don't you think?"

"Well, that's not going to happen if we jump through every hoop thrown at us," the older agent commented. "I say we just find them. I'm not in any mood for diving."

"Me either. And if the others took the time to do the dive or dives, we're that much closer." Illya settled back into the depths of the small boat and waved his hand downstream. "Home, James."

Solo chuckled and hit the gas, sending the boat south toward the Gulf at top speed. After a few minutes, they spied another buoy with a boat struggling to stay alongside. This buoy sported a lime green plastic flag.

Solo squinted into the wind. "Looks like Fasse." As they sped past, a diver's hand broke the surface of the water next to the buoy, a lime green plastic flag in its grip. The masked face that broke the surface shortly thereafter and the boat's driver stared at the New Yorkers as they flew by.

"Diving for markers? What other silly tricks will they have us do?" Illya yelled into the wind.

"I have no doubt there's more hoops to be jumped before this leg is over!" Solo yelled back.

"I guess it's a moot point that we may need those flags," Illya commented.

"That's not what we were told," Solo said. "Stick to the plan, partner!"

The two of them passed two more flag-decked buoys without slowing. After nearly two hours at full throttle Solo aimed toward a dilapidated, empty dock. A flaming yellow flag was hanging miserably on the end of the dock, sagging in the heat. One boat bobbed from one of the pilings. Beyond the dock was sand, rising from the banks' edge into a sizeable dune. Parallel lines of fresh footprints lead to the top of the dune's ridge.

With ears still buzzing even after the boat's motor was shut off, the agents quickly tied off at the dock and headed for the dune on wobbly legs. Just before reaching the top, they fell to their bellies and crawled the rest of the way. When they topped the ridge their next mode of transportation was immediately in their sights.

"Camels!" Illya groaned. "I have no desire to ride another camel in my lifetime!"

Six animals stood placidly in the small kraal. Sun – friendly robes were draped on the top of the fence. Two camels were outside the pen, an agent decked in the traditional robes already astride one of the beasts. The other robed agent was just starting to climb on his kneeling camel as Solo and Kuryakin watched.

"Come on, Lawrence," Solo chided. "Let's play this out. Look! If Wescott can do it . . ." the words were just out of Solo's mouth when Wescott – the mounting agent - fell off the humped animal as it stood up. They could hear muffled shouting and instructions as Williams circled his beast around and offered encouragement. Wescott limped after

his creature as it tried to rejoin his kraal mates and the loose critter seemed to become agitated with the pursuit.

“Doesn’t look like Paul’s leg is getting any better,” Solo mused lightly as the Berliner tried to recapture his ride. Williams moved his animal to block the loose camel’s retreat. Apparently miffed at the intrusion, Wescott’s camel craned his head around at the Berliner’s approach and let fly with an impressive ball of spit.

“Hm. Bull’s eye. That camel is a better shot than Wescott,” Illya noted dryly as Solo guffawed. In the distance, the stricken agent swiped at his face and leaped at the trailing lead line as the camel tried to dart by him. Williams managed to rein around and head off the beast, bringing it to a stop, but not before it dragged his partner a short distance. “This alone is worth the whole trip!” the blond agent added happily.

The spirited ‘discussion’ with the irate camel that followed had the observing agents wonder who would win in the end. Finally, Wescott got on – and stay on - the animal. Solo and Kuryakin voiced disappointment simultaneously that their entertainment was over as the two mounted agents urged the lumbering animals into an ungainly gait and headed south. Solo nudged his partner. “Let’s go,” he said, rising.

“Must we?” Illya said with disdain.

“I don’t see any other way, partner. Sorry, but we can’t outrun ships of the desert.”

“All right. But no ‘dress’ jokes.”

“How about ‘pretty’ jokes?” Solo threw his hands up in surrender with the Russian’s icy glare. “Sensitive, aren’t we? Come on, let’s move.”

Luckily, the mounts they caught in the kraal were more even tempered and easily mounted and they were soon rolling across dry desert, robes fluttering in the hot breeze. Four fresh sets of camel tracks dictated their direction.

“How do we know this is the right way?” Illya asked after a few minutes.

“Well, if it’s the wrong way, we’re all going to be in trouble. I would assume that Seguin and Salazar got some sort of directional instruction since they were the first to get here.”

“So, any feeling as to who is responsible for this leg yet?” Illya inquired. “Samoy or Davisson?”

Solo shook his head. “Could go either way.”

After several hours of steady travel, the rolling dunes flattened out in a peeling, checkerboard pattern of dry ground. At the other end of the flat, the agents could barely make out the figures of the other four agents.

“We’re catching up,” Solo commented.

“I just hope we’re catching up in the right direction,” Illya grouched.

“You have control issues, you know that?” Illya’s eyes narrowed with Solo’s glance. “We’re all in this together. Now keep your baby blues open. It looks like we’re coming to a village or something.”

Sun faded tents rippled in the hot breeze and appeared to be floating on a shimmering horizon. The orb in the sky was just beginning its descent toward night, and the shadows were still very short. The agents’ camels hurried their pace, obviously heading home.

Kuryakin’s forehead crinkled with suspicion. “What could possibly be our next feat out here? Surviving sunburn?”

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

"Which your nose has failed miserably to do, I might add," Solo commented, resulting in his partner readjusting his robe.

Their four footed vehicles rolled into the very center of the small gathering of tents and came to an abrupt halt. Illya and Napoleon gratefully slid from their backs and tried not to waddle to the big man regarding them from across the compound. The man was standing next to a pole with a bright blue plastic flag drooping from top. As the agents approached, he wordlessly handed them a smaller version of the plastic flag and bladders of water. They drank greedily.

Kuryakin stared at the colorful rectangle as he wiped his mouth. "Why do I get the feeling that we are supposed to have more of these?"

"The weight will just slow us down. Come on." As Solo spoke, the big man indicated with a slight tilt of his head where they were to go. Snaring Illya's robe sleeve, Napoleon walked briskly despite the heat.

"Oh. Great," the Russian growled when he saw their next mode of transportation.

"At least it's a smoother ride," Solo quipped as they slipped under the rope rail of the makeshift corral and found themselves among a small herd of desert rough Arabian horses. The older agent pointed to the far side of the corral; a hoof prints were clear in the sand, leading into the desert and toward a distant mountain range. "That a-way, Tonto!"

Illya took the lead in selecting and saddling their mounts. As he did so, the rest of the herd drifted in his direction and collected around him as he worked, getting in the way and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The small blond had to shoo them away more than once.

They ignored Napoleon. "It seems you have a fan club," the dark haired agent noted. He just got an icy glare in response.

Finally, they lead the horses away from the rest and mounted up. "Oooo," Napoleon groaned, shifting uncomfortably in the saddle. "Car seats never seemed luxurious before." The big man appeared from the tent and handed him fat leather bag, then gave each of them a bladder of water.

"That had better be food. Come on. This is getting very old." Illya legged his mount into a ground eating lope, not bothering to look back to see if his partner followed.

"Why so grumpy?" Solo asked when they finally stopped for a breather. It didn't matter which way he shifted in the saddle; there was no doubt he was going to be very sore tomorrow.

"Because this is silly. There's no point."

"Maybe that's the point," Solo said with a grimace, trying to relieve some pressure on his private parts. "To wear us down and make us complacent."

Illya didn't reply and turned a more critical eye on the path ahead. Napoleon knew that the comment struck home. They urged the horses into a walk.

"Psychological warfare," the Russian said lowly.

"Pretty much. And look there," the older agent pointed ahead. "I think we're gaining ground."

They had been riding steadily for nearly two hours, running the game horses, then walking, then running again. The animals were very hearty and willingly kept a brutal pace. Now, on the horizon, they saw a small cloud of dust twirl toward the heavens just before the distant sound of engines found them.

"Looks like we're changing mounts again," Solo said. Illya merely grunted.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up the lathering horses and turned them over to a pair of waiting boys. A bright red plastic flag hung on a short pole and one of the boys shoved a smaller version in Illya's hand. He squinted at the object, and then crumpled it in his hand.

"I'm going to find the party responsible for these flags and introduce them back into. . ."

"Well, this looks fun!" Solo interrupted, balancing their next mode of transportation on its two wheels. "Off road motorcycles!" Illya snorted, stuffed the red plastic bit in his waistband, and took his own vehicle in hand. They could hear the sound of engines fading in the distance, heading directly for the brown foothills.

After gulping water offered by the horse boys, both men gritted their teeth as they settled onto the skimpily padded seats of the motorcycles. Kicking the engines to life and satisfied with their sound, the New Yorkers released the clutches and ploughed through the sand and into the next leg of the course.

It didn't take long to reach the next flag. The agents parked the motorcycles with the four others at a shiny green flag and stepped aside.

They were on the edge of a canyon with walls that gently sloped to a wide valley floor. Illya pushed his partner down.

"What?" Solo yelped, surprised.

"I saw a flash of something down there," the smaller agent said lowly, eyes locked on the valley floor. He glanced at the base of the flag's pole. "What's in those bags?" he asked.

Solo followed his partner's line of sight and saw a pile of bags that he had first assumed were rocks. He reached over and picked one up, and smiled at the familiar shape he felt inside. "Binoculars. Here," he handed one bag to Illya and got another for himself. They both studied the valley floor.

"I see Wescott. He's to the right, behind that rock formation. He doesn't appear to be too happy," Solo noted.

"I see Salazar and his partner. They look like they're pinned down behind that low ridge to the left.

"The end flag is on the other side of the canyon, on the ridge top. And I think I see our next ride."

Illya lifted his glasses to the top of the canyon wall where he saw the flag in question and just beyond in the folds of the desert terrain . . . "Rotor blades? Helicopters!" His voice took on a happier tone.

"Finally, something that makes you happy," Solo mumbled. "But it seems too easy."

The observation was immediately punctuated with the sound of gunfire. Both agents' hands immediately dropped to their waists and found only half full water bladders.

"I wouldn't think we'd need our guns. This seems very familiar, tovarisch." Solo's burned face cracked into a bright smile.

After a moment, sparking blue eyes met dancing brown. "Yes, it does. I daresay this part looks suspiciously like the course from survival school training."

"And has Cutter written all over it," Solo gloated. "Cutter and Samoy are old buddies." His smile turned thoughtful. "I never could figure out that one."

## THE UN.C.L.E. OLYMPICS AFFAIR

Illya snorted and dropped his glasses. "I know. A retired Marine from the west and a spiritualist from the east; an unlikely friendship." He turned to his partner. "If this is Samoy's leg, then that means the final leg is Davisson's."

"Exactly!" Solo smile re-ignited. "Which means it ends in the Saychelles! White beaches, pretty ladies, games of chance . . ."

"With the ladies or the casinos?"

"Does it matter?"

Illya eyed the New York C.E.A. "You're sure about your intelligence on Davisson?"

Solo chuffed dryly as he began to peel off the desert robes. "I'm sure. His assistant Nadine already had her swimsuit and plane reservations."

"Which you got from office gossip and travel requisitions from your 'contact' in Nairobi." Illya robe fell to the ground and he gingerly touched his burned nose.

"We all have our ways of getting information. I'm lining up a date with Nadine as soon as we're out of here." Solo turned his attention back to the valley floor.

Illya tilted his head downward. "First we need to get by that."

Solo's eyes were alive with mischief. "No, first we need to engage the rumor mill by using all that." He indicated the course with a tilt of his head. "Make the others think we're out of the running; that'll really push the odds against us. If I remember correctly, there's a small air strip just south of here. Skipping the last leg entirely should put us at least 14 hours, and possibly a full day, ahead of everyone else."

Solo saw his partner frown. "I still have this nagging feeling that we're cheating somehow."

Napoleon got to his knees and turned his attention to the valley. "I remember Samoy telling me once that Westerners thought too literally. Thinking spiritually, the sprit or the challenge was clear in the single rule given to us at the beginning."

"The first team that gets to the end wins." Illya quoted. "I see your point. I should know better than to encourage Western thinking." He wiped his hands on the remains of his pants and also turned his attention to the valley. "The only bad part about this plan is giving Williams the satisfaction that he's beaten us - no matter how short lived the feeling will be."

With a serious expression on his face, the senior agent dramatically took his partner's shoulders in his hands. "Sacrifices must be made for the greater good."

Illya smirked. "You mean for our monetary good."

"I think I finally have you thinking like a decadent westerner!" With a congratulatory slap to Illya's shoulder, Solo rose.

"Being my superior does not mean you can insult me," Illya snorted as he followed suit.



The last shot had been close. Williams hugged the boulder and squinted into the glare coming off the surrounding rocks. "We'll have to low crawl," he said to his partner.

Williams, huddled two boulders away, nodded tightly. "We're not even half way across this valley and it's taken us nearly an hour. Why don't we simply knock out the obstacles?"



"Because that would make it too easy for the rest to follow us. I think we're ahead of Seguin and Salazar now. Trying to go around has got them pinned down over by that cliff. I'd like a nice head start out of here."

"Good idea."

A fresh burst of gunfire behind them caught their attention. Both agents turned to see a familiar blond dive to one side on the gentle down slope behind them.

"Damn. Kuryakin's coming down the valley wall. I thought we'd have more time."

After a short pause, Williams spoke. "Well, as we low crawl, we can trigger the guns to keep them pinned."

"Good idea - and it'll keep Salazar and his partner pinned, too. We'll take turns - I'll go first."

Wescott threw himself flat and began to drag himself along the ground as Williams followed. They took turns throwing rocks at the hidden automatic guns to make them fire. By the time they cleared the gun bunkers, Wescott was gloating. "They haven't moved! Grab some stones; we can keep triggering them while we figure out this next part."

Williams watched the other agents' progress and occasionally tossed a few stones to fire off the guns. Now that they were in it, the Berliner saw that this valley was perfect for this kind of course. The canyon walls grew steeper on either side, making this narrow section the only way to get to the other side. He shook his head and laughed as he visualized Jules Cutter designing the traps. The man was a masochist. A nudge from his partner got his sore and tender body in motion.

"I'm sure there's some of those disguised pits Cutter's so fond of around here. We have to move slowly. He hides them well. Try to erase our footprints as we go. I don't want to leave a trail they can follow."

Williams could see the other teams were closing in but they still had a good lead. Eventually, he was too far to trigger the guns so he concentrated on covering their tracks and trusting Wescott completely to find their way safely.

They were almost across the deceptively open space when Wescott caught William's arm. When the younger agent turned to his partner, there saw an evil gleam in his eye. "Over here," Wescott said lowly. "And stop covering our tracks." They worked their way behind a small dune and stopped. "There's a good sized pit there, I'm sure." He pointed at an area to their right.

Williams frowned. "There is?"

"Look." Wescott picked up a small handful of sand and pitched it in the area he indicated. Instead of landing on solid ground, the grains caused the ground to trickle away into a hole. "He's a master, Cutter is. This whole area here is nothing but covered pits, and I want the others to find out the hard way."

"So, you want our tracks to lead right into one?"

Paul Wescott grinned. "Exactly."

It wasn't hard to arrange.



"Something's wrong," Illya puffed, taking a break huddled next to a dune. He held a restraining hand on Napoleon's arm as the dark haired agent settled next to him with a sigh. "Their tracks are visible."

Solo squinted at the barely discernable marks in the hard packed sand. "Looks like they tried to cover them, though not as well as they have been." He noticed the set of concentration on his partner's face. "What?"

"I think we're being led into a trap." The sweaty Russian indicated the poorly covered tracks that set off to the right. "I think there's a pit there."

After a quick study of the ground, Solo grinned. "Then it's show time!"

Illya's face screwed up in disgust. "This will be humiliating."

"That's the point, partner. Look, Williams and Wescott are just approaching the canyon wall. They can see us perfectly. And the others," Solo glanced back. "Well, they think they're concealed, but they're not that far behind us. Wait a few seconds until I'm sure they can see us. Now remember, you have to look convincing."

A short snort was Illya's response. "Don't worry. It won't be a stretch to show how painful this whole experience has been."

Solo patted his back. "That's my boy; always the team player. Ready?"

Illya nodded and they ventured right. Instantly, the ground gave away beneath them and they hit the bottom of the pit hard - the grunts of pain were very real.

Coughing and unable to speak from the dust that followed them downward, Solo poked his partner and then pointed up. Illya grabbed his knee and began to writhe on the ground.

Two heads peeked over the edge. "Bad luck there, Solo!" Salazar's distinct accent was edged in laughter. "Looks like you're trapped for awhile!"

Seguin's voice joined in. "Your partner looks to be down for the count!"

Clearing his throat of dust, Solo glanced at this partner and headed off the smirk on his face at the deadly glare Illya was giving the South American team as he convincingly gripped his imaginary injured knee.

"Well, the least you could do is send a medical team down," Solo croaked. "The communicators don't work down here."

The Caracas team disappeared from their sight, but their laughter could still be heard. "Sure!" one of them yelled back. "We'll get right on that!" The laughing faded into the distance.

Illya released his knee and sat up. "I don't think they plan on helping," he stated pointedly. "So, do we stay here and wait for Memeza and Fosse to complete our humiliation or get moving?"

Solo settled back against the wall of the pit and studied his fingernails with a frown. "I don't know about you, but the shade down here feels great. Shall we wait a bit and be totally convincing?"

Mirroring his partner's position, Illya instead let his eyes drift shut. "Wake me when it's time to go."

The sky was noticeably darker when the Nairobi team poked their heads over the edge. Again, laughter told of their withdrawal.

Illya glared at the patch of sky. "Whatever happened to lending a helping hand?"

Stiffly, Solo stood. When they heard the distant sound of a departing helicopter a little while later, he offered his cupped hands to his partner. "This is all the helping hand you can expect. Don't fret; we'll have the last laugh."

"We'd better," the smaller man grouched. Illya placed his foot in Napoleon's hands and was launched to the edge of the pit, solidly in 4th place.

***ACT VIII: Final Leg - Day Ten***

Williams stumbled from the small boat into the surf, tow rope in hand. The salty water burned the open cuts that criss-crossed his legs and forearms but he ignored the sting with a smug expression.

The last pair of days had been the most brutal of the entire race and every muscle in his body made that fact very clear. Somehow, the Caracas team had managed to close the gap to mere minutes, and were, at the moment, paddling furiously from the drop boat just off the coast.

It would be futile, Wescott knew, and his lip curled into a feral smile. He gave the bow of the boat a sharp tug as he noted a distant, dun colored roof peeking through a line of palm trees. "Come on, partner, let's hit it! That's got to be the place."

They stumbled over a small dune and spilled onto the pristine white sand of a small cove, ignoring the gasps of surprise from the tourists that dotted the beach in bright, white lounge chairs. The agents read the crowd quickly and didn't perceive any threat. The building was tantalizingly close now, just beyond the tourists.

Agent Williams' and Wescott's breathing was rapid and they were slick with sweat, but their satisfied grins belied their exhaustion as both agents staggered up the beach. As they cleared the small dunes that embraced the cove the sound of the surf faded behind them, replaced by faint music and the peal of laughter from where they hoped was their final destination.

"It's a resort," Williams panted.

"Of course it's a resort," Wescott snapped. "That's practically all there is on these islands!" He glanced back at the open ocean. "Seguin's not far behind. Let's move."

"We're home free!" Wescott grinned as he pointed to the familiar blue and gold flag pinned to the stairway that led from the beach to the building. Re-energized, they trotted up the sand-encrusted walkway to the bottom of the stairs, where they stopped.

"There's no welcoming committee," Williams said lowly. "Maybe this isn't the end."

"It has to be," Wescott growled, pointing at the familiar marker stapled to the staircase. "The flag is posted. Come on, let's go around the building."

They could see from where they stood that the lobby of the building – a small hotel - was empty. Instead of going inside when they topped the four steps, they circled around one side of the building following the sound of music. The wood deck squeaked beneath their feet as sandy water squooshed from their shoes with each step. Paul Wescott unconsciously combed his hair with his fingers and stopped Williams with a raised arm as they approached the final corner of the building. Jazz music and typical

pool noises lightened their spirits. "Straighten up, Harry, and comb your hair. There will be pictures, I'm sure."

They took a moment adjust what was left of their clothes and rid their faces of the dirtiest spots. With nods of approval after a quick inspection, they stood up straight, smiled, and strolled confidently around the last corner to begin their winners' celebration.

And stopped in their tracks.

"Well, look who finally made it!" Napoleon Solo, resplendent in a white linen jacket, matching fedora and slacks leaned back comfortably in the shade of a bright striped umbrella. Sitting at a glass table next to him looking totally out of place but completely relaxed, was his blond partner, wearing a form fitting black t-shirt, black pants and sunglasses. He was tapping his toe to the beat of the music. Both of them held frosty drink glasses and were accompanied by tanned beauties in colorful sarongs.

Scattered behind the relaxing agents were numerous couples and a pair of scantily clad waitresses expertly balancing umbrella'd drinks on trays. Swimmers frolicked in a pristine pool. There was a momentary pause in activity as all eyes turned to the travel-worn pair. Wescott recognized the five section chiefs and their wives lounging poolside and suddenly felt very out of place.

The bedraggled pair turned back to the New Yorkers.

"How did you . . . ?" Williams sputtered.

"You were way behind us!" Wescott roared.

"Please, Mr. Wescott," Gabhail Samoy of the New Delhi office said in his sing-song voice. "Let's not ruin the atmosphere with shouting. We will hold the hors d'oeuvre until you are cleaned up." The crowd turned back to socializing amongst themselves.

Paul sputtered in utter confusion. Harry looked thoughtful.

"You heard the man," Kuryakin grinned. "But hurry, will you? I'm starving. Haven't eaten for nearly an hour now."

"But how did you get past us?" Wescott's voice was controlled, but still edged in anger. "The last we saw you two, you were stuck in a pit in Iran!"

Solo smiled. "That's true. You must have gotten caught up in the competition and forgot the mission."

"Mission?"

"The part where you're we're supposed to get to the end." Illya said.

"End?"

"Yes. It didn't say you had to complete the course. Just get to the end. You let your competitive spirit override your duty to complete the mission."

Wescott flushed red. "But you had to complete the course to complete the mission!"

Chief Escamilla stepped forward with a toothy smile and motioned with a hand for Williams to lower his voice. "Mr. Wescott, please. Recall what you were told at the beginning of the race."

Illya quoted, "'The first team to get to the end wins.'"

Solo continued. "So instead of physically conditioning for the run of the course, we investigated the creators of the course. I'm sure you're familiar with the 'know your enemies' creed we always follow as UNCLE agents?"

Williams blinked, his thoughts finally coming together. "So, you figured out who designed each leg, and through conjecture and fact gathering figured out who designed the last leg and where it would end."

"Using office gossip, travel chit requests, and interrogation. We followed a simple paper trail." Solo's eyebrows arched questioningly at Wescott. "You did learn those techniques in training, right?"

Wescott sputtered and took a step toward the reclined agents. Escamilla stepped between them and deftly turned the Berliner back toward the resort building. Williams had a lopsided smile that acknowledged the genius of the New York team's style.

"Like I always say, Paul," Solo paused to sip his drink. "Old age and treachery win over youth and exuberance every time. Now go on." His nose wrinkled in distaste. "You definitely need a shower."

When the two disheveled agents were finally escorted from the area, Solo sighed. "Just imagine how angry he'd be if he found out that we purposely lagged behind to increase the betting pool."

"I think he has enough to mull over for the time being." Illya stretched out his legs and looked as relaxed as Napoleon had ever seen him.

Solo mirrored the stretch and glanced at the pool. "You know, partying with the bosses wears thin after a day."

Illya glanced at his watch. "Mark and April should be here soon with our share of the pot." He put his arm around the waist of the girl next to him. She beamed at the agent. "That may be more entertaining, but I think we can make do until they get here."

Solo grinned and patted his date's knee. "Definitely. Glad to see you're finally thinking like me, Tovarich." He shook his head and leaned back in his lounge chair. "I still can't believe the small number of people that bet on us."

"And I am one of that group, gentlemen." Mr. Waverly, with his wife on his elbow, strolled to where his agents were relaxing. "I had total faith in both of you and made that clear with my wager at the start of each leg. The 45 to 1 odds at the start of the fifth leg was a surprise bonus."

"Yes, and thanks to you, Alexander and I can take that cruise we always wanted!" Mrs. Waverly smiled happily at the two men and patted her husband's hand. "Come, my dear. These young men have other things on their minds."

Waverly's bushy brow rose a millimeter as he examined the group. "Yes, I'm sure you are right. Enjoy, gentlemen. I'll see you in New York in about three weeks."

Solo raised his glass and tapped it to the rim of the glass belonging to his sarong-clad date. "To the old and the treacherous."

Illya raised his glass and met his partner's eyes with a smug smile. "Since you are old that would make me treacherous, wouldn't it?"

Scowling at the remark, the senior agent replied, "Did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?"

***FINIS***