

THE IN LIEU OF GOLD AFFAIR

BY [LAH](#)

Late Summer 1968

U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York City

“Gentlemen,” Alexander Waverly, the head of the North American division of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, addressed his top operative field team as they sat across from him at the huge revolving table that served as his desk. “This is an issue of the highest priority. As you undoubtedly know, drug testing before Olympic events will now be mandatory for all athletes, starting with the summer games commencing next month.”

“Definitely a good thing,” forwarded Illya Kuryakin.

“Will you be preaching the same message once all those Soviet Bloc female athletes have to give up their medals for taking enough testosterone to almost qualify as males?” Napoleon Solo teased his Russian friend.

Illya gave his partner a withering glance. “Those athletes work at developing their musculature to best suit the rigors of their various sports, but they are all most definitely female.”

“Ah,” acceded Napoleon. “I’ll assume then you’ve personally checked out that surety and thus will consider my doubts put firmly to bed.”

Illya rolled his eyes heavenwards. This was one of those times when he was sorely tempted to jab outright at Napoleon, “*Yes, my friend, I do have a sex life. It’s simply not as prodigious as yours. But then Brigham Young with his fifty-five wives did not have as prodigious a sex life as yours.*” However, since he was currently attending a mission briefing in the office of his top superior, he restrained himself and instead only commented coolly, “I am happy to have put your mind at ease.”

Napoleon picked up on the unspoken criticism, and smirked knowingly in response. Verbal baiting and snarking were normal ways he and Illya interacted with one another; yet was there absolutely no doubt of their true friendship or of their complete trust in one another.

“If we could return to the business at hand, gentlemen,” scolded Mr. Waverly.

“I can well understand that this testing could turn into an international powder keg if not properly handled,” Solo re-donned his Chief of Enforcement mantle.

“Exactly, Mr. Solo,” Mr. Waverly acknowledged the quickness of his CEA to accurately assess the supreme political delicacy of the situation.

“But how exactly does it involve U.N.C.L.E.?” asked Illya more directly.

“We have information that suggests Thrush has every intention of making a concerted effort to light that powder keg,” revealed the U.N.C.L.E. Chief.

“Do we know what sort of concerted effort?”

“That we do not, Mr. Solo.”

“So we need to watch for Thrush’s next move?”

“Precisely, Mr. Kuryakin, and we need to watch from close at hand. So I am assigning a contingent of Section II agents to the upcoming Olympic Games in Mexico City, with you, Mr. Solo,” Waverly moved his gaze once more to the dark-haired agent, “in charge of that contingent.”

“Yes sir. How are we to keep our cover discreet?”

“You aren’t, Mr. Solo.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“We want Thrush to know U.N.C.L.E. is very much in attendance at this Olympiad, so none of our agents will be in disguise or undercover,” explained Waverly. “You go in as yourselves, the athletes will be briefed as to who you are, and Thrush will be pushed into a position of having to deal with the fact that we know something of their plans. Since they have no positive means of determining exactly how much we know, the possibility they will try an alternate strategy that is not as well organized as the original one they have prepared works in our favor.”

“We will all be, more or less, crouched fowl, sir,” Illya felt the need to vocalize this undeniable point.

“Sitting ducks, Illya,” Napoleon automatically corrected his friend’s attempt at the American idiom.

Waverly glared at the Russian agent from under the impressiveness of his bushy eyebrows.

“I believe it far too public a venue for even Thrush to turn into an open shooting gallery. However, should that risk of over-exposure prove insufficient as a deterrent, I trust my agents are sufficiently trained to capably handle any inevitability, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“Yes sir,” acknowledged Illya with just a bit of combativeness evident in his tone. He was not at all comfortable with the ‘straight to the fore’ setup of this venture.

“Look at it this way, Illya:” proposed Napoleon with one of his most mischievous smiles as a devious twinkle sparkled in his dark eyes; “we’ll get to mingle with bodily toned and physically fine-tuned athletes while showcasing our secret agent status as a turn-on for them.” How he did love to playfully rag on his sexually ascetic partner.

Illya rolled his eyes again as Mr. Waverly harrumphed noisily.

“I also expect my agents are sufficiently trained to steadfastly maintain every aspect of their professionalism,” the Old Man censured Solo in turn, “despite the various enticements presented during this undertaking.”

“Yes sir,” the CEA responded easily. With so much international politics on the line, Napoleon had no intention of being anything less than strictly professional in such regard and he was sure his chief understood that. But teasing Illya on this score had been within the moment just too big a temptation to resist.

Waverly nodded shortly before bringing this initial briefing on the mission to a definitive close with his dismissive “That will be all, gentlemen.”

Act I: Banners waving above bullets fired

Five Weeks Later Mexico City, Mexico

Napoleon Solo stood within the impressive structure of the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez watching a group of female Australian swimmers run through trial meets in the pool. Their coach was continually shouting instructions about what needed correction in their individual styles and how to best approach the new touchpad timers that were being used for the first time in an Olympic setting.

It was four days before the official start of the Games of the XIX Olympiad, but many of the athletes were already present and practicing, attempting to accustom themselves to the peculiarities of the various sports venues and the high altitude of the location. The Games would go on despite the fact that six days ago in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas at least forty-four civilian protestors and bystanders had been killed (many more deaths were claimed but remained unverified) and hundreds injured by an armed government militia. The stunningly brutal event was to become known to the rest of the world as the Tlatelolco massacre and to the Mexican people themselves as “La Noche Triste”.

The sanctioned government stance was that student protestors in various apartment buildings in the square had opened up sniper fire from windows onto the martial security troops. U.N.C.L.E. had its own information regarding the episode of course, and what that revealed was nothing quite so cut-and-dried. Waverly’s sources indicated that the snipers were actually members of the Presidential Guard who had been instructed to fire on the military forces in order to provoke them. U.N.C.L.E. could say nothing publicly to dispute the Mexican government’s official position however, and privately the organization had concerns that Thrush might have been party to the whole intrigue.

And that was not the only source of tension during this supposedly sport-focused event of friendly athletic competition. In August several Warsaw Pact countries had invaded Czechoslovakia. The intention of that invasion had been to stop the political liberalizations of Alexander Dubcek. It had done exactly that, but at quite an expense of world political opinion. Though the larger western nations, including the United States, were not in a position to offer more than verbal criticism since more might have led to all-out nuclear war, nations within the Warsaw Pact itself were bolder.

Albania simply withdrew from that military alliance. In Poland, Ryszard Siwiec set himself ablaze during a Warsaw harvest festival in protest of his nation’s participation in the invasion. Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania gave a fiery speech in Bucharest condemning the Soviet foreign policies that would later become known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. Even East Germany and Russia itself were not free of protestors regarding the incident. Though these were hushed quickly, thus without gaining much worldwide attention, and subsequently punished harshly by their respective governments. Yet again U.N.C.L.E. used its own sources of information and therefore knew more than the world at large.

Thus the in-the-know organization realized there were now several ready hotbeds Thrush could exploit with possible skullduggery concerning drug testing of athletes at these Olympic Games

in Mexico City. This was truly a situation of banners flying above bullets fired in several locations around the world. And thus Solo's intended initial team of a dozen senior Section II agents to "make a presence" at the Games had ballooned to eighteen such agents. These fourteen trained men and four trained women made the rounds of the various Olympic venues, never hiding from the athletes or Olympic officials their attachment to the international peacekeeping agency that was U.N.C.L.E.

Solo himself found his own preference led him to spend the bulk of his time at the site of the scheduled swimming and diving competitions. Though he joked to the rest of his team it was the "swimsuited lovelies" that drew him there, there was far more to his fascination than that.

Water as an immersive primal force had always brought out a panic in him that he had long since effectively schooled into hiding. Though he adored sailing upon its surface, whether that surface was glassy smooth or white-capped rough, physical submersion in any large body of water genuinely terrified him. He had learned to swim and scuba-dive in an active attempt to conquer this overarching fear, becoming competent enough in those disciplines to enable him to pass U.N.C.L.E. requirements on this score with no problem. Yet dread of the water remained always with him, stashed quietly away beneath his outward nonchalance.

Only Illya had ever correctly deduced that clandestine anxiety he concealed so well. Only Illya had ever dared to call him on it, as he had privately here when Napoleon had stated he would take charge of patrolling the swimming and diving venue...

"Wouldn't you feel more comfortable taking a station at one of the track and field venues?" Illya asked bluntly. "You were, I know, a competitive runner in your secondary school and college years and, truth be told, the female runners wear barely more than the swimmers," his friend then sought to blunt the sharp edge of his question.

Napoleon eyed his partner warily. "What makes you think I would be uncomfortable in the swimming venue?" he inquired in turn, the tentativeness in his voice very much not in his usual confident vein."

"Napoleon," Illya answered straightforwardly, "having a particular personal trepidation doesn't make you weak. And I think you handle your uneasiness about submersion in water remarkably well."

"Then let me continue to handle it in my own way," Napoleon responded more brusquely than he intended. But Illya's connection to his inner soul sometimes did disconcert him...

"Usted es uno de ellos, ¿no?¹" a feminine voice broke through into Napoleon's thoughts. "Los agentes del Tio?²"

"Yes, I am one of them," Solo replied automatically in English. "Napoleon Solo," he introduced himself as he produced his U.N.C.L.E. credentials and handed the gold card to the owner of that voice.

The woman was young, surely no more than in her early twenties. Pretty: with wavy dark hair that fell softly about her shoulders, enormous dark eyes that reflected the sunlight in golden

¹ You're one of them, right?

² The agents of Uncle?

glints, a most generous mouth with pleasingly full lips, and possessed of a delicately slight body firmly ensconced in a sturdy metal wheelchair.

“I am Devesa Aguilar,” the girl enunciated carefully in English as she returned the card to him. “I have been...” she frowned for a moment as she sought the right word. “Questing?” she guessed, “for one of your group.”

“Searching,” Napoleon in turn guessed at her meaning. “Podemos hablar en español³,” he noted with one of his most charming smiles, seeking to put the girl at ease.

“No, I prefer we speak in English,” she assured him. “I need the... exercise?”

“Practice,” corrected Napoleon with another smile.

“Si, the practice,” seconded the girl with an emphatic nod of her head accompanied by her own brand of brilliant smile.

“So why have you been searching for an U.N.C.L.E. agent?” asked Solo as he sat on a nearby bench to put himself physically on level with her. “Simple curiosity?” he teased gently.

“No, no es curiosidad,” she commented with a quick shake of her head. “I have a... suspicion... about something.”

“What sort of suspicion?” queried Napoleon much more seriously, his agent mode now engaging into full gear.

Devesa Aguilar ran her eyes about the area, taking in the flock of athletes and their coaches at one end of the pool.

“Let us get away from the crowd,” she proposed to Solo. “Please to follow me?”

She began to wheel herself toward the locker rooms and Napoleon rose and trailed her, never letting down his guard. Once inside, the young woman maneuvered to a small alcove that was somewhat secluded from the main of the area. Then she turned her chair back to face Solo.

“I am one of the... youth volunteers for the Juegos Olímpicos,” she explained briefly. “I do some little errands to be part of the experience. You understand?”

Solo nodded. “I know that is generally done during every Olympic Games, yes.”

“So one of these errands...” She hesitated as she sought to give her revelation a coherent sense of direction. “The kits for the drug testing: they are distributed to the various venues each day. But today we were a few kits short here at the swimming venue. However, the selective testing was already in progress, so – as not to have the athletes wait unnecessarily – I was sent over to Gimnasio Olímpico to retrieve the extra supply they had at the volleyball venue there.

“Cinco... five kits were needed,” she continued after taking a quick breath apparently to calm her nerves, “but I took six, since they had that many to spare and I wanted to insure there were enough for all the testing here. While I was bringing them back – I had them stacked in my lap,

³ We can speak in Spanish

you understand?” she queried as she made a quick gesture indicating her lap as a suitable carryall because of her seated position in the wheelchair.

Napoleon simply nodded his grasp of the situation and let her continue her story without verbal interruption.

“While I was bringing them back, I took a turn too sharp and one fell to the ground. The case popped open, making that kit unusable for testing purposes. So I stowed it to the side of the others and delivered those with unbroken seals. I then went to dispose of the unusable kit in the receptacle designated for this purpose. However, upon lifting the case from my lap I noticed that the sample jar for collection of the urine... the glass had broken. But the shards looked... extraño. No hay bordes afilados⁴,” she abandoned English temporarily for her native tongue when the correct words eluded her. “All rounded,” she then furthered in English as she used her hands to suggest a circle.

The young woman removed a small pouch from her belt. “I kept them all because that seemed so... odd,” she finally recalled the proper English word. “And then I thought to myself I should give them to some authority, so I sought out one of you.”

With that she handed the pouch to Napoleon. He opened the drawstring and peered inside. Cautiously refraining from in any way touching the broken bits so as not to contaminate them, he gently shook the contents from one side of the bag to the other to get a better look. They certainly didn't seem to have splintered in a normal pattern for a glass jar.

“I'll have them tested,” he promised her, “and I thank you for bringing this to our attention, Miss Aguilar.”

“Devesa;” she amended, “please to call me Devesa, Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon again smiled one of his most charming smiles. “Only if you call me Napoleon.”

A wide grin appealingly upturned her generous mouth. “I would be honored to be permitted such informality,” she assured him.

The cavalcade of motion within the Auditorio Nacional was orderly but nevertheless nonstop. Athletes moved from one gymnastic apparatus to the next in measured succession, each practicing team made aware of its next progression in the circuit via the instructions of various coaches.

The eyes of Illya Kuryakin were currently pinned on Mikhail Voronin of the Soviet Union as he worked the still rings. The muscular power of the famed gymnast was evident in every skill he attempted on that difficult-to-master apparatus. Illya knew well just how arduous and physically sapping was the achievement of such perfect positions on the rings. In his early college years, he himself had competed nationally at gymnastics. Yet he had never competed on an international level simply because he had lacked the necessary upper body strength to make a commanding presence on rings or pommel. His outstanding eye-hand coordination had made him more than competent on the high bar, parallel bars and vault, but it had been in floor exercises that he had really excelled. On the mat he had been a wonder to behold, his innate agility and cat-like grace making him a natural at that discipline.

⁴ No sharp edges

Serious thought had been given at the time to adding him to the Soviet Union's international gymnastics team as a "specialist", someone whose position was predicated on his particular talent on a single apparatus. However it had been feared, even was he to compete to the highest level in floor exercises and make more than respectable scores in high bar, parallel bars and vault, his poorer showings in pommel and particularly in rings would result in a lower overall placement in worldwide competitions for the team as a whole. So he had been passed over for that honor and instead had embarked upon an entirely different life. A life that had granted him access as a student into the highest strata of Western academia and then into Soviet naval intelligence and finally into the enforcement of world order within the ranks of U.N.C.L.E.'s elite Section II field operatives.

Sometimes, though truly not very often, Illya wondered what his life would have been like had he become one of his nation's Olympic heroes. With that in mind, his gaze slid over to the mat used in floor to watch Sawao Kato of the vaunted Japanese men's gymnastics team perform his exercise. The man was sharp and precise; his somersaults all vaulted high and landed cleanly, his handstand steady as a rock and all his balance moves unerring. Still, as Illya watched, he couldn't resist thinking to himself, *"I could have bested him."*

This thought brought a half-smile to the lips of the Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent, something that did not go unnoticed by a cluster of men in dark suits, the KGB special services "protectors" of the Soviet gymnasts. Illya sensed one of these men move quietly close to where he stood. Sensed rather than saw, for his eyes never left the performance of Kato on the mat. Yet he was a highly trained U.N.C.L.E. agent, much more highly trained than anyone in the KGB, and he was thus attuned to shifts in his surroundings almost on a cellular level.

"We are much aware of you, Kuryakin," said the man in English in a tone that amounted to little more than a whisper, definitely meant to be heard by Illya alone. "Know we will not permit you to contaminate the minds of our athletes with any Western propaganda."

Illya turned very slowly and pointedly to the whisperer. "I am a citizen of the U.S.S.R.," he pronounced evenly in Russian. "What makes you think I would choose to forward Western propaganda to other Soviet citizens?"

The KGB man snorted. "As I said, we are aware of you," he reiterated purposely in English. "You retain your ties to the Motherland by the thinnest of threads. Make no mistake in understanding that we are wise enough not to trust you."

Illya was saved from the indiscretion of voicing an acerbic comeback by the insistent two-tone warble of his communicator. "Kuryakin here," he answered that importunate electronic summons, his own tone definitely a bit testy.

"Is it untimely interruption of your musing on bygone days that is making you so snappish, Illya?" came Napoleon's teasing voice through the transceiver.

"I am not snappish," declared Illya bluntly and perhaps just a bit more brusquely than before. He did so hate to be caught out betraying an unprofessional humor on company time.

"Have it your own way, my testy Russian friend."

"Is there a point to this conversation, Napoleon?" Illya demanded in some frustration.

“My, my, such a tart manner of speech to use with your superior. Is that a manifestation of the ‘I am unapproachable’ technique favored in Soviet espionage circles?”

“Napoleon—”

“Aren’t there any comely Russian very-much-female gymnasts in ready ogling distance so to mitigate the sourness of your mood?”

“Napoleon—”

Sensing his friend’s tolerance was about at the breaking point, Napoleon finally got down to the reason for his communication. “I need to know if Section VIII personnel have finished setting up the mobile lab facilities yet.”

“They completed the setup earlier this morning. The trailer is now onsite in the back parking lot of the Olympic Village.”

“Meet me there in ten. I have something that merits technical investigation. Solo out.”

Kuryakin disassembled his pen as he remarked coolly to the KGB operative who had been taunting him, “Duty calls: a fortuitous turn in events to abruptly end this distasteful conversation between us.”

“For the present, Kuryakin. But I have no doubt we will ‘converse’ again, and every hope it will prove just as distasteful to you.”

Illya purposely ignored the man’s self-satisfied smirk as he made his own way toward the locker room exit of the gymnasium. However, that smirk did secretly eat into his composure. Thus, with his mind preoccupied by unvoiced bitterness at his treatment by his supposed countryman, he nearly knocked down a young woman who had been quietly scrutinizing the practice going on in the gym from a position just to one side of the locker-room door.

“Excuse me,” Illya apologized in Russian, thinking the girl to be one of the U.S.S.R. women’s gymnastics team watching her male colleagues practice.

“I suppose I must,” retorted the girl somewhat hostilely, likewise in Russian. “After all, my people have been given only the perforce ‘choice’ of excusing Soviet aggressive behavior.”

Startled by the remark itself as well as the sheer resentment in the vocal tone of the speaker, Illya stared into the face of the young woman. He recognized her as the highly decorated Czech gymnast Věra Čáslavská.

“Wonderful.” Illya mentally assessed the situation with an inward huff, *“my own people now account me too little Soviet, while the people of other countries still account me too much Soviet.”*

Kuryakin’s contact with Čáslavská did not go unheeded by the KGB man, Tymur Sidorov. Not close enough to hear what was said between the two, that contact only served to put Sidorov on further alert against the Russian-born but American-entrenched U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Act II: Ingenuity à la Thrush

The mobile lab U.N.C.L.E. had set up was very much an up-to-date facility. They could test for things even most stationary labs couldn't handle. U.N.C.L.E. just had that kind of efficiency. And too they were accustomed to Thrush science involving not only the unusual, but the completely unexpected.

The man in charge of that mobile lab, Dr. Nen Isis, was a technician well-known to both Illya and Napoleon. He was good and he was thorough, but he was also somewhat proprietary regarding who got to do what in any lab in which he was in charge. He liked and respected both Solo and Kuryakin, but he was adamant that Illya not ignore protocol and take to performing experiments himself. After all Kuryakin was Section II, not Section VIII. Thus to Isis, physics degree or no, Illya had no place running important tests on what might serve as scientific evidence of a Thrush plot. Therefore he determinedly shooed both enforcement agents to the sidelines as he and his underling technicians set up the necessary experiments to determine the unique properties of the glass from the shards of the broken urine collection jar.

"And you got this from one of the hospitality volunteers?" questioned Illya as both agents attentively observed as the techs worked.

Napoleon nodded. "Name of Devesa Aguilar. Young: early twenties, maybe less. Paraplegic. I don't imagine she would have any type of underground connections, but I've already requested Section IV run a security check on her just in case."

"Look at this," Nen Isis now purposely sought the attention of the Section II men. Once he had that attention, Nen placed a small flake of the broken glass on a round metal plate. He then picked up a tuning fork and struck it against the counter holding the plate, causing it to emit a rather uncomfortably pitched sound. The flake of glass on the plate released a small spurt of vapor and then went inert once more.

"What was that?" queried Napoleon.

"A case of ingenuity à la Thrush," replied Nen. "The vapor is a synthetic concoction that, when mixed with the ammonia in human urine, provides the proper molecules to imitate the toxicology of rather large doses of ephedrine."

"So all Thrush has to do is arrange for samples stored in jars made of such glass to be exposed to a sound of a certain pitch—"

"And they have created solid evidence of doping," the tech finished off Illya's statement.

"And the odd way the glass splintered?" questioned Napoleon with a raised eyebrow.

"An unfortunate side-effect from Thrush's perspective, though a fortunate one from ours," forwarded Nen. "Micro-electrodes, undetectable to the naked human eye or even under moderate magnification, are imbedded in the glass to provide that sound-trigger. Yet, even as tiny as they are, they disturb the pattern of the glass sufficiently to cause breakages to always occur in a fixed perimeter around them."

"Making the resulting pieces always appear to have smoother edges than would normal shattered glass," noted Illya with a short nod.

“Exactly, Mr. Kuryakin,” the tech endorsed the agent’s voicing of the obvious conclusion, though he was less than happy not to be given the chance to voice this himself. After all he was the Section VIII man in charge.

“Ingenuity indeed,” marveled Napoleon. “The overall achievements of Thrush scientists never fail to amaze me.”

“Just think if they would put their ingenuity toward the overall betterment of humanity,” remarked Illya somewhat facetiously.

“There’s just so little profit in that, Illya,” countered Napoleon with a playful smile.

Illya harrumphed noisily. “Little profit and no chance for a personal sphere of power,” he furthered his partner’s statement.

“Oh, I don’t know,” suggested Napoleon. “Mr. Waverly seems to have quite a personal sphere of power for a good guy.”

“Yes. Hopefully he’ll always be inclined to keep his power pointed toward the best interests of mankind,” deadpanned Illya, perfectly aware of his partner’s mischievous attempt at ragging on the idealistically proprietary nature of Nen Isis.

Napoleon winked and Illya smirked as that ‘Section VIII man in charge’ cleared his throat and purposely moved off to perform other experiments, vigilantly maintaining the personal sphere of power that of course he manifested solely as one of the good guys.

“So the bait has been offered?” one Thrush asked a colleague.

“Offered and taken,” replied the other.

“I still am not certain it is a good idea,” the first voiced personal doubt of the altered plan. “After all the time and effort that went into the invention...”

“It is the best idea at this point,” voiced the other in absolute certainty. “U.N.C.L.E. was on to our intentions and—”

“They knew no specifics,” insisted the first.

“So we provided them with some specifics,” spoke the other authoritatively. “Thus they now will not look for a threat from another quarter.”

“You assume they will not.”

“A plan involving no high technology will fool them.”

“Briefly.”

“Long enough so that it is of no matter. Once a log has rolled its way down river, it becomes very difficult to catch and bring back to the point of origin.”

“I had more faith in our original plan,” insisted the first.

“In truth that plan had too much of our signature on it,” forwarded the other. “In this case we need to be discreet and not paint attacking birds on all our paraphernalia.”

The first Thrush was taken aback by this boldness on the part of one yet so untried in the ranks of the supra-nation. To criticize the usual calling cards the underground group inevitably put upon its own machinations was to pass judgment on Central and the Supreme Council itself. And that was something a Thrush never did... if that Thrush wished to remain a living Thrush.

“Step lightly upon such traditions of the Council,” warned the first.

“I step not at all,” finalized the other.

No more was said on the subject nor needed to be.

Tymur Sidorov was a man who held a sensitive position. He recognized with unerring acuity how his agency, the Soviet Union’s Committee for State Security, was viewed by the world at large. Still he was himself an honorable man. He honestly and firmly believed that the communist way of life within his native country was endangered on many fronts. He had certainly personally uncovered plots and machinations enough over the years to justify that belief.

While recognizing that the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement had garnered during its term of existence a sterling reputation that even his own government respected, Tymur was less than willing to accord the most acclaimed Soviet addition to that international organization the same respect. In short, he had suspicions regarding the loyalty of Illya Kuryakin to his Soviet roots. Entrenched in the heart of the capitalistic United States, partnered with a hedonistic American, ties to his GRU past necessarily severed, Kuryakin had little left in his current life to serve as a reminder of his nationality or socialist upbringing.

Tymur understood the potency of the present, how it could overwhelm the past and create a false sense of a sure future. But he was himself KGB and thus knew the future was never certain. He had accepted that when he had accepted his role as an agent in the internal security group. And maybe that was why his personal tolerance of U.N.C.L.E. was less assured than the state tolerance of that agency by his government. U.N.C.L.E. attempted to bring about the possibility of a secure future, but Tymur instinctively sensed in his gut such could never be.

He had a vague conception of Thrush, the supposed continuously ingenious, technologically advanced and self-servingly power-hungry underground supra-nation that U.N.C.L.E. made its primary mission to battle on every front. However, Thrush was very much a personally unknown commodity to him and thus something less to be feared than Western bigotry against Eastern communism or the self-righteous surety of those dedicated to lofty aims like the principles espoused by U.N.C.L.E.

Perhaps such idealism should simply be acknowledged and excused with a knowing shake of the head by those of a more pragmatic bent. Yet, in Tymur’s experience, idealists often proved dangerous. So ignoring their optimistic reaching for impractical objectives was surely not the wisest course for a pragmatic man. In fact such could prove an unexpectedly destructive course. Thus did Tymur privately wish that the top agent of Soviet origins within U.N.C.L.E. itself was someone who could be counted on to forward his own country’s practical best interests. Illya Kuryakin did not strike Tymur Sidorov as such a one.

In his mind Tymur systematically lumped Kuryakin with all the dewy-eyed idealists of U.N.C.L.E. And tacitly, for to openly voice such a question was also not the wisest course for a pragmatic man, Sidorov pondered just how long it would be before the unreliability of all such idealists and their patronizingly high-minded goals was made apparent to his government's powers-that-be.

Act III: Everyone has a story

Napoleon watched with an amused smile playing at the corners of his mouth as Nen Isis made his way into the athletes' entrance of the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez at the side of the wheelchair of Devesa Aguilar. In the week-and-a-half since the discovery of the Thrush plot involving the urine analysis jars, the unlikely pair had become quite an item. It had started out with Nen asking to meet the sharp-eyed young woman who had taken note of the odd shatter-pattern of the glass from one of the jars. Napoleon had readily obliged the request, pleased that Devesa was getting some personal recognition for her quick-witted decision on bringing the seemingly innocent occurrence to the attention of U.N.C.L.E. But the senior agent had never expected the Egyptian lab technician and the Mexican hospitality volunteer to hit it off so well.

"Ah, the constant surprise of romance," Napoleon spoke quietly under his breath. The secret sentimentalist in him was quite taken with the very improbability of the duo.

Nen bid Devesa temporary adieu as he bent to her seated height and placed a brief kiss on her lips before exiting the swimming venue.

Napoleon's smile broadened as he walked up to Devesa. "I see the mutual admiration society is still in full swing," he cheerily greeted her.

Devesa blushed prettily. "Si, I do admire Nen. He does important work in a field that would be open even to one of my limited physical abilities."

"Considering a new career path then?"

"I could be persuaded," allowed Devesa.

"I'm sure that he is responsible for such a possible occupational consideration on your part has provided a definite boost to Nen's ego."

"Sometimes people need that," suggested Devesa with surprising seriousness. Then her tone lightened once more as she teased the suave agent, "After all, we are not all as self-confident as you, Napoleon."

"Touché," acknowledged Solo with another charming smile and without a hint of malice.

"A little secret: I adore your self-confidence," the young woman acknowledged in her turn, a charming smile of her own drawing her lips upward.

"And I am flattered by your 'adoration'," jauntily stated Napoleon. "However, let's not give Nen any cause for jealousy, eh? He might, in such a personal cause, come up with a devious scientific method to inflict upon me chronic dysentery or something of a similar uncomfortable and embarrassing nature," he noted with a mischievous wink.

Devesa, her delight with this relaxed banter very real and very comfortable, laughed lightly. Napoleon Solo was certainly someone very easy with whom to talk.

“Does he know about me?” the young woman finally asked the U.N.C.L.E. agent from seemingly out-of-the-blue. But Napoleon was not at all flustered by the question. He had expected her to ask it sooner or later.

“About the accident that put you in that wheelchair?” elaborated Napoleon before shaking his head in negation. “Personal backgrounds of innocents peripherally involved in mission scenarios are provided on a need-to-know basis in U.N.C.L.E. There was no reason for Nen, as the head of the mobile lab here, to be in the loop with regard to your personal history.

“He hasn’t asked you himself?” Solo then queried a bit curiously.

“I think he doesn’t want to risk upsetting me.”

Napoleon nodded. “I can understand that. Have you decided to share it with him?”

Devesa shrugged. “Everyone has a story, Napoleon. I’m not sure in the end any of them are as important as what is happening with us in the present.”

Napoleon knew Devesa Aguilar’s story... or at least he knew the simple facts of it. The emotions that accompanied those facts were another matter entirely.

She had been a champion diver, a hopeful for Mexico’s Olympic team, when at sixteen a miscalculated trick had resulted in her hitting the diving platform with her lower back. The immediate outcome had been several cracked vertebrae and nerve damage that had resulted in paralysis from the waist down. The vertebrae had been surgically repaired, but the nerve damage had not been something surgery couldn’t fix. Over time that damage had self-healed to the point that she now had some minimal feeling in her lower limbs, but honestly minimal was very much the operative word. Walking was out of the current realm of possibility for her and probably out of any future such realm as well.

She never seemed resentful of what had happened, even here at an Olympic Games, a setting where she had once hoped to compete as a medal-contending athlete. Yet Napoleon recognized something underlying her current personality: a sadness definitely, but something more. Uncharacteristically for the emotion-perceptive agent, he simply couldn’t put a finger on that something more.

“Nen has a story too, you know,” Napoleon sought to make the young woman more secure with revealing her own past to the man who seemingly was more than merely a friend to her.

Devesa nodded. “He has told me about living on the streets in Cairo as a boy, existing from hand to mouth. Homeless, unwanted, unseen. Reveling in his own talents as a pickpocket. Seeking no more future than to someday run his own gang of top thieves and having money enough to buy others’ consciences at will.

“And then how, as an arrogant sixteen-year-old thug, he was caught in the robbery of a necklace from a wealthy socialite. Yet instead of seeking prosecution against him, she took a sexual shine to him and asked the court to make him her ward. The court was glad to be free of another pesky young street thief and so agreed to the unorthodox arrangement. He resented

the compulsory setup and the lustful lady; yet the schooling she provided in an attempt to make him more socially presentable at her side opened up his mind to the world of science. That is what won his heart even though his 'benefactora' couldn't. In the end she gave up on him, but he could not give up on science, pursuing scholarships wherever he could as he worked all kinds of odd jobs to make enough to keep together body and soul. Eventually his determination prevailed and his deep love affair with science provided him the means for a new life within U.N.C.L.E."

"Nen does have quite a colorful past," conceded Napoleon.

"And a solid present and a rosy future," added Devesa. "There is indeed much to appreciate in him."

"And you have decided you are just the gal to show him that appreciation, huh?" pressed Napoleon mischievously.

Devesa smiled widely. "When he takes me into his lab and explains this or that to me, he is always so proud of it all," she told Solo straightforwardly. "And I am so proud he wishes to share his pasión with me. That is a rare thing en mi experiencia."

"Rare and wonderful," agreed Napoleon, knowing it was unlikely he would ever be able to so fully share his own passion. The ideals of U.N.C.L.E. held him fast, even as science held Nen Isis. But always in the pursuit of such ideals there were compromises that had to be made, compromises that sometimes haunted him. Yet those haunting compromises were something that must forever remain solely his own, something that could not be shared even with a great love. Something that would always keep him a bit separate from any such love.

"While you, mi querido," Devesa sought to bring back the playfulness of the conversation, "never lack for personal apreciación."

"Do tell," prompted Napoleon with a twinkled-eyed chuckle.

"Surely you've heard all the supposedly sport-focused señoritas within this very venue tittering about how they wish you would go beyond casual flirting with them."

"Duty first," stated Solo as he playfully gave the Boy Scout three-fingered salute.

"Ah, but your due diligence disappoints so many."

"Well, maybe I'll catch up with one or two of them after the close of the Games and before my return to New York," bantered back Solo with a devilish wink. "Though likely it's merely the scent of adventure that intrigues them and that will, unfortunately for me, be all worn away by such time," he finalized with a mock sigh.

"Come closer so I can check out the potency of that scent of adventure."

With another chuckle, Napoleon leaned down to her seated height, turning his head obligingly to the side so she could sniff at his neck.

"Hmmm... smells more like Eau Sauvage to me."

“You, señorita, have a very discerning nose,” granted Napoleon good-naturedly as he stood upright once more.

“Amongst other talents,” Devesa asserted with a naughty grin.

“Talents our Nen of the colorful past will come to know well, I presume?”

“That is most definitely the plan,” she rejoined with yet another grin. Only there was something less playful and more resolute about this particular grin.

Napoleon could not say why that grin bothered him. He just knew something about it did, and he was definitely a man who valued the unprocessed force of his gut instincts.

Since the discovery of the altered urine analysis jars, the U.N.C.L.E. onsite mobile lab had been serving as a secondary clearing house for all drug testing samples. Firstly to insure no rigged jars had gotten beyond that lab’s initial inspection of the unused kits, and subsequently to insure no other “technological footsie” was played with the actual samples. Though in general most of the countries participating in the Games of the XIX Olympiad took no issue with this new policy, there were some that wanted their own assurance of U.N.C.L.E.’s testing procedures. One such country was the U.S.S.R. Thus did Illya find himself serving as “escort” to the KGB agent, Tymur Sidorov, during his tour of the mobile lab.

“Your Mr. Waverly certainly took his time approving my inspection of the lab facility,” complained Sidorov quite expectedly from Illya’s viewpoint.

“It wasn’t approval that caused the delay,” advised Illya matter-of-factly. “We have been willingly providing protocol visits to the representatives of various countries for the past week. However, since the U.S.S.R. insisted this tour be singular to you alone, it was decided it was more in line with U.N.C.L.E. principles to complete all the multi-national tours before arranging for private ones for any individual nation.”

“So, Comrade Kuryakin, you criticize our government’s need to verify these lab testing procedures fully, without the possible distraction of other participants in the ‘tour’, as you call it?”

“I criticize the policies of no government in this regard, Comrade Sidorov,” rejoined Illya neutrally, carefully maintaining a rein on both his temper and his natural sarcasm. “I simply state the facts.”

Tymur narrowed his eyes as he gazed intently at Illya. “Facts can be manipulated,” he reminded the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

“By all sides,” Illya in turn reminded the KGB agent. “Let us not keep Dr. Isis waiting further and thus longer away from the main of his work with regard to the sample testing.”

Sidorov harrumphed his displeasure at Illya’s polite but nonetheless pointed dismissal of his grievance with regard to the later-than-desired scheduling of the lab inspection. However, he did have that inspection itself to complete, as well as a report to write up afterwards for his superiors on what he observed. Thus there was no more time for raising protests. He simply would insure his report was exceptionally meticulous in every detail.

“Let us begin then,” Sidorov agreed tersely.

Obligingly Illya climbed the couple of steps that led up to the security door of the trailer housing the mobile lab. He pressed his thumb to a keypad, sounding an audible click.

“Fingerprint lock?” questioned Sidorov.

Illya nodded shortly as he opened the door to the trailer and stood aside to let the KGB man precede him inside the premises.

A short two-tone alarm sounded as Illya followed Sidorov within and a recorded female voice noted: “Two entrants into the lab premises. Please note: two human entrants on one passcode entry sequence.”

As the door closed and auto-locked behind the two men, Illya pressed another keypad to one side of the inner portal.

“Two entrants on one passcode entry sequence confirmed as secure by Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin, Number 2, Section II, North America,” he spoke into a small microphone on that keypad.

“Voice print matched to fingerprint: Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin, Number 2, Section II, North America. Two entrants on one passcode secure,” again came the recorded female voice in response to Illya’s procedural message.

“Most expert,” Sidorov conceded the hi-tech efficiency of U.N.C.L.E.’s entrance security.

“We like to impress our guests,” deadpanned Illya.

“And if you hadn’t confirmed the entry as secure? Or if your voice didn’t match the fingerprint?”

“The alarm would have become a constant annoyance and every tech in here would have had a gun trained on the entrant or entrants,” spoke out Nen Isis as he approached Kuryakin and Sidorov. “All scientific personnel inhabiting this, or indeed any U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab, are qualified as mid-level sharpshooters. And that, I do assure you, is all the skill needed to fire a sleep-dart on target at such close range.

“I am Dr. Nen Isis, the technician in charge of this lab facility,” Nen furthered as he most perfunctorily extended his hand to the Soviet KGB man.

“Tymur Sidorov,” replied the other man as he accepted Nen’s hand and shook it briefly. “You are Middle-Eastern?” he inquired of the U.N.C.L.E. tech.

“Egyptian,” specified Nen. “You take issue with my nationality?” he then queried with a noticeable harshness in his tone.

Tymur shook his head. “No issue. I merely wish to have all information accurate in my report.”

“Oh? The Soviets are inclined toward accuracy of information in their accounts now?” Nen asked with seeming ingenuousness. “It didn’t seem much of a concern in the commentary they offered on why they drove those tanks into Czechoslovakia.”

Illya loudly cleared his throat as non-verbal warning to Nen regarding the voicing of such baiting comments.

Turning to Illya, Tymur demanded, “Comrade Kuryakin, does this ‘lead technician’ reflect the standard perception of Soviet policies within your agency?”

“My perceptions are entirely my own, Mr. Sidorov,” replied Nen before Illya could intervene.

“And I suggest you keep them to yourself, Dr. Isis,” Illya brusquely chastised the Section VIII man. “As you are well aware, U.N.C.L.E. as an organization does not share these perceptions of yours, and at the moment you are standing solely as a representative of the organization. Be advised I will be reporting to Mr. Waverly this inappropriate outburst on your part and will recommend that he take disciplinary action in such regard.”

“I understand your position, Illya,” Nen acknowledged in a subdued tone.

“My position is U.N.C.L.E.’s position,” pointed out Illya bluntly. “The Command always refrains from making condescending judgments regarding the internal doctrines of state governments. We take the greater world view, Nen: never forget that. Now, walk us through the procedures used to analyze the urine samples procured for athlete drug testing.”

The rest of the inspection tour proceeded without further diplomatic incident, but Illya was well aware how badly Nen’s blatant voicing of his own mindset regarding the recent Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia had reflected on U.N.C.L.E. as a whole. Whatever had the man been thinking? Nen Isis had never before shown any such overt prejudicial leanings. Of course everyone in the employ of U.N.C.L.E. had personal feelings about this or that. However, all staff – not just enforcement agents – knew, had it drummed into their consciousness when they first were accepted into the ranks of the organization, where to draw the line between those feelings and the overall guiding principles of the Command. Whatever had possessed Nen Isis, a dedicated member of U.N.C.L.E. for some years, to suddenly cross that line?

At the end of the tour, Tymur stated to Illya, “I am impressed with the technical aspects of your organization, Comrade Kuryakin, but less so with its personnel. Can I trust that you will in fact report Dr. Isis to your superior, making known his discourteous remarks regarding the Soviet government? Or does Western cronyism prevail within the ranks of U.N.C.L.E.?”

Seething under the implication that he would let pass such an egregious faux-pas in order to demonstrate some ‘chummy’ sense of fellowship with his U.N.C.L.E. colleague, Illya responded shortly, “I will send you a copy of my report to Mr. Waverly on the matter.”

Sidorov nodded. “Do so,” he exacted rather commandingly.

“It is standard procedure in such a case,” finalized Illya rather acerbically. He had had about as much of the civilly censorious presence of Tymur Sidorov as he could stand. “Good day to you, Comrade Sidorov,” he pointedly made it apparent his current contact with the Soviet was at an end.

The KGB man offered a slight bow in acknowledgement of the dismissal even as a gallingly self-satisfied smirk stretched his lips.

In addition to his personal report to Mr. Waverly, Illya had as well brought the diplomatic indiscretion of Nen Isis to the attention of Napoleon because Solo, as Chief of Enforcement, was his own immediate superior as well as the head of operations for the multi-Section mission at the Mexico City Olympic Games. Napoleon was not sure what to make of the incident. He

had known Nen Isis for years, as had Illya. Both agents considered the technician a casual friend, and certainly the Egyptian had never even once hinted to either of them that he held any grudge against the Soviet Union. Accordingly Napoleon set up a private talk with Nen in an attempt to ascertain exactly what had resulted in the man's uncharacteristic outburst.

"My distaste isn't for any particular political system," Nen revealed during that private interview with Solo. "It's rather with a wrong to one nation being glossed over as the right of another. Damn it, Napoleon, the governments of the world barely blinked an eye at that Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and that purposeful blindness extended even to U.N.C.L.E. itself. Why do you suppose that was? Because Czechoslovakia is technically part of the Communist Bloc and thus supposedly Russia's to control as it will? The Command's view should be broader than that. We should have protested vociferously and insistently. We should—"

"And what makes you think Waverly and the other Continental Chiefs didn't do that, Nen?" interrupted Napoleon. "We aren't privy to every clandestine persuasion brought to bear by the five top administrators of U.N.C.L.E."

"If that is so, it should have been done publicly, not in secret. The U.S.S.R. deserves open censure not only for the invasion itself, but also for dragging its reluctant Warsaw Pact allies into that incursion into Czech territory."

"Censure of what kind, Nen?"

"Public embarrassment," declared Nen readily. "I'm not saying an outright war or even a covert police action was warranted. I'm not saying U.N.C.L.E. should have broken off ties with the U.S.S.R. What I'm simply saying is there should have been a sharp slap on the wrist audible enough to make the Soviets blush in shame for at least one moment."

"That would be playing with fire, Nen," Napoleon sought to make the man see reality. "Sometimes the most effective remonstrations are made behind closed doors."

"That's rhetorical bullshit," Nen rejected such precautionous logic. "I've known you for years, Napoleon, and I know you have a firm grasp on idealism, a death-grip one might say. Thus I can't believe you really ascribe to this political pussyfooting—"

"The world is what it is, Nen," Napoleon cut short the other man's impractical spiel. In truth he sometimes was as frustrated as Nen with the necessities of global politics. Still, his belief in the Command's dedication to doing the most possible to alleviate any tense world scenario remained unshaken. "U.N.C.L.E. does the best it can to keep order and balance while aiming to make that world a better place. But compromises are sometimes required to that end."

"Fine," came Nen's bitter retort. "I concede, albeit reluctantly, the possibility that U.N.C.L.E., because of its unique position, needs to compromise on occasion. But in this case **everyone** compromised: from the U.S. government to the United Nations. And I just wanted my feelings known about that sort of carte blanche granted the Soviet Union with regard to other countries within its direct sphere of influence."

"The time to make known those feelings was not, I strongly repeat, **was not** when you were acting as a delegate of the Command with an emissary of the Soviet government. If you understandably had wanted to broadcast and debate those personal feelings with your buddies

over a beer or two, or even in private with Mr. Waverly himself, you would not have put U.N.C.L.E. in the awkward position you did today.

“There is a time and place for everything, Nen,” chivvied Solo as he dauntingly demonstrated every ounce of his authority as Chief of Enforcement and head of the Mexico City mission. “Your breach of that simple guideline means disciplinary action against you **must** be taken by the Command. I will inform you of Mr. Waverly’s decision with regard to your remaining in charge of the mobile lab here as soon as he has communicated it to me.”

In threats of the first magnitude, Napoleon – as head of assignment – would simply have pulled Nen from management of the mobile lab on his own say-so. But this situation was hardly that. Basically it was a case of an U.N.C.L.E. representative opening mouth and inserting foot. And on more than one occasion Mr. Waverly had been able to soothe the offended party or parties in such circumstances without needing to jeopardize the efficiency of an active mission by the removal of key personnel. And Nen Isis was certainly that. He had been chosen as head of the mobile lab here in Mexico City because of a unique set of scientific skills as well as past management experience in such ventures. Thus, for the present, Solo had decided to let Waverly act as sole arbiter in the affair rather than exercise his own immediate onsite power.

“Years ago,” forwarded the Egyptian somewhat musingly at the realization Napoleon was magnanimously permitting his future status to rest in the hands of the highest authority of U.N.C.L.E., “the entire judicial system of my native country chose to ignore the impropriety of the request by a wealthy woman to make me her ward. Though they were undoubtedly aware for what purpose she asked for that position to be granted her, no objection was raised; no impediment forwarded; no sense of shame bestowed upon that woman. Being party to such silence and tacit acceptance in this more global and thus important bias is something it simply was not in me to stomach. Please include that in your briefing of Mr. Waverly on this matter.

“I will respect his final decision even as I respect the necessity of you calling me out on the carpet, Napoleon,” acknowledged Nen with professional aplomb. “However, that respect does not change my own perception of what I did as perfectly within my rights as a human being who saw injustice and chose in this instance not to feign ignorance but rather to say something.”

“This was not the primary or even the secondary plan,” noted the first Thrush in some aggravation.

“But it works to our advantage,” pursued the other Thrush. “Think on it: We can now impugn the vaunted worldview impartiality of those in the employ of U.N.C.L.E.”

“I admit that has certain attractions...”

“Central will be enthralled by those attractions,” guaranteed the other.

“Do not presume to fully understand the mindset of Central or the Supreme Council,” advised the first Thrush.

“It sometimes behooves us to make such presumptions in order to think on our feet, as it were.”

The first laughed lightly. “A strange metaphor you draw.”

The other shrugged. “I make no retreat from reality and expect none from others.”

"I have taken note of that," approved the first.

"Then take note of this as well: I have no qualms about making free use of any advantage offered by circumstances. Those who are wise never look a gift horse in the mouth."

"A time-honored adage to be sure."

"That became so because it is unerringly true."

Act IV: Becoming wise

Napoleon made his way into the protected floor area of the Auditorio Nacional, raising his hand in greeting to his Russian colleague as he did so. Illya noticed a somewhat strained look about the eyes of the other man and registered the fact his very pulchritude-conscious partner had not sent even a single glance in the direction of the quite lovely Věra Čáslavská as she ran through a practice of her balance beam routine.

"You've heard from Waverly regarding his decision then?" questioned Illya as he quickly made his way to the side of the American.

Solo nodded. "Nen stays on in charge of the mobile lab for the remainder of this mission, but the Soviets have been granted 'at will' admission to the lab as a concession for agreeing to that maintenance of Nen's position."

Illya whistled low. "Mr. Waverly had to do some fancy horse-trading it would seem."

Solo nodded once more. "And what will happen to Nen upon our return to New York is still very much up-in-the-air."

"Deprogramming a possibility?"

"I'm going to be brutally honest and say I don't know, Illya, and that I really don't want to know."

Illya nodded his understanding of his friend's conflicted feelings on the matter.

"So you're here at this ungodly hour of the morning...?" prompted Illya.

"To gather up one Tymur Sidorov of the KGB and provide him the VIP treatment, including getting his fingerprint and voice pattern encoded into the lab security mechanisms."

"I don't envy you," commiserated Illya.

"A hard man to like I take it?" questioned Napoleon.

"He is very... Soviet," Illya decided upon the most concise explanation.

Napoleon laughed lightly. "Then I imagine my American charm will roll right off his back."

Illya let his lips curve slightly upward in one of his infamous half-smiles. "Napoleon, I've never known your 'American charm' to roll off anyone's back. And definitely, American or not, he will prefer you as guide to me."

Napoleon raised one eyebrow in his partner's direction. "He has a problem with Mother Russia providing an agent to U.N.C.L.E.?"

"He has a problem with that agent provided to U.N.C.L.E. seeming less a zealous citizen of Mother Russia than he would prefer."

Well aware the American CIA kept covert tabs on Kuryakin despite his diplomatic immunity because of his status within U.N.C.L.E., Napoleon couldn't help but comment, "Damn Illya, you get it from all sides, don't you?"

Illya shrugged. "Hazards of the game."

"Remind me again why we stay in this profession?" asked Napoleon only halfway in jest.

"Because we're masochists of the first order, Napoleon; why else?"

"As Chief of Enforcement, I'll take that explanation under executive advisement," stated Napoleon with a little smirk.

"There's Sidorov," Illya pointed out the KGB man who had just come into the auditorium through the athletes' locker entrance shepherding several the U.S.S.R's women's gymnastics team.

"Like Daniel into the lions' den," muttered Napoleon before he moved off with easy grace toward Tymur Sidorov.

"You were right to stand up for that in which you believe," Devesa Aguilar boldly asserted to Nen Isis as the two lay together on the bed in her modest hotel room near to the Olympic Village.

"I know that," agreed Nen, "but I was wrong too. Wrong to put U.N.C.L.E. in such an untenable position. Wrong to force Mr. Waverly to bargain with the Soviet government. Wrong to jeopardize the outcome of this mission."

"You are not an enforcement agent, Nen," Devesa reminded her lover as she idly caressed one of his ears. "Surely even Mr. Waverly cannot expect you to be bound by the same constraints."

"Of course I am bound by those constraints!" defied Nen, somewhat insulted by Devesa's offhand assertion. "I am U.N.C.L.E. no less than any Section II or Section I."

Suddenly the door crashed open and the couple turned to face several men boldly brandishing Thrush rifles. Nen instinctively reached toward the nightstand for his small sidearm, not an U.N.C.L.E. Special to be sure, but nonetheless potentially lethal.

"I wouldn't if I were you," spoke out the main Thrush as he pointed his weapon directly at Devesa. "I have no qualms about shooting an invalid, so don't imagine me particularly compassionate in that vein. One wrong move and the girl is history."

With a scowl, Nen grudgingly left his gun in place as another of the intruders moved forward into the room. That second man quickly scooped up the weapon from the nightstand as a third man walked around the bed to the side where lay Devesa and placed his rifle uncompromisingly against her temple.

“Now,” stated the first Thrush as yet another of his fellows quietly closed the door to the hotel room, “you will do as I say, Mr. U.N.C.L.E. tech, or your girlfriend will too soon inhabit an early grave. You understand me?”

“What do you want?” queried Nen.

“I simply want you to make an exchange.”

“Of what?”

“Urine samples. You were a pickpocket in your youth so I hear, Dr. Isis. So you should have no trouble covertly replacing the jar I will provide you with that of a certain athlete.”

“Which athlete?” Devesa asked, less stunned by everything going on around her than Nen would have imagined she would be. Apparently she was a woman who could keep her head in a crisis, and that at least could prove in her favor in this perilous situation.

“Věra Čáslavská,” responded the first man with a truly ugly grin.

Devesa gasped her shock.

“Oh now señorita, is that any way to react to your boyfriend making an idealistic statement against Soviet aggression through action rather than mere words?”

“Whatever are you talking about?” Nen demanded to be told.

“Inefficient U.N.C.L.E., unable to fully control the idealism of its members,” taunted the Thrush. “How embarrassing this will be when it gets out the lead technician of its mobile lab unit switched urine samples of a celebrated Czech athlete in an attempt to make it all look like a Soviet plot. The governments of many nations will have to question their support of such a lax organization.”

“Why would anyone believe that?” questioned the foolishly naïve Nen.

“Because you will, as lead technician of that U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab, declare it a Soviet plot of course. You see the timing is perfect as the Russians are today to be granted ‘at will access’ to your lab. And as well Čáslavská must today provide a sample for drug testing before her competition.”

“I won’t do what you ask,” bluffed Nen.

“You will because we will have the señorita in our constant care,” reiterated the Thrush, “and our care can itself grow so incredibly lax when we don’t get what we want.”

Illya had been correct in his assessment of Tymur Sidorov; the KGB agent was indeed very Soviet. Thus he hadn’t been exactly enthralled by Napoleon’s “American charm”; yet Sidorov had obviously appreciated the fact Waverly had assigned the head of U.N.C.L.E.’s Olympic mission as his guide into the security access process. Undoubtedly the Soviet felt such a demonstration of priority was proper and well-done. He therefore was unerringly polite and expressly cooperative with Solo during the entirety of the procedure, something the CEA had much appreciated.

Now, as Napoleon sat drinking a well-deserved cup of coffee at a table in one of the many cafes that had sprung up around the Olympic Village, U.N.C.L.E.'s head of the Mexican Olympic mission allowed himself to relax just a tad. Currently there was a three-hour downtime within the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez as the venue was prepared for a diving event after several swimming competitions had concluded. However, as soon as he finished his coffee, Solo would be off and about, checking with the Section II agents at other sites, insuring no Thrush activity was suspected.

The insistent two-tone of his communicator interrupted his brief respite and, with a resigned quirk of his lips, Napoleon removed the pen from his inside jacket pocket and assembled it for transmission.

"Solo here."

"That self-righteous Ruskie you gave access to my lab this morning has made his nation's intended use of it, Napoleon," came the voice through the unit's speaker.

"Nen? Less umbrage please and more information."

"He switched the vials. Thus now the sample of one of the star Czech athletes is showing positive results for ephedrine."

"We have no proof the KGB agent was responsible for the switch, Dr. Isis." Napoleon recognized the second voice emanating from the communications console in the U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab as that of Lynda Sachlin, another of the half-dozen techs assigned to that facility.

"I don't need any proof beyond the obvious fact that no sooner was the Soviet given free access than the sample wound up contaminated," Nen spoke bluntly.

"That's less than fact, Nen," Solo reminded the other man.

"But more than speculation," supplied Nen.

"Lynda," Napoleon sought to get a less prejudiced view of the situation from the other lab tech, "give me the actual facts."

"The urine sample coded as being that of Czech gymnast Věra Čáslavská showed on routine second testing to be contaminated with a rather massive amount of ephedrine," detailed Lynda concisely. "But Napoleon, I did the first test earlier on that sample myself and it was clean."

"Could you simply have missed the evidence the first time around, Lynda?" Solo straightforwardly asked for unvarnished honesty from the tech.

"Well, no one is perfect, but I've been at this a long time," Lynda responded. "And thus I am completely confident missing that much of any drug in a sample just isn't something I could have done."

"Could Thrush possibly have sneaked by one of their specialty jars?" Napoleon wanted to rule out this possibility.

"It's not one of those rigged jars, Napoleon," Nen interjected flatly into the communicator conversation. "I am telling you that KGB flunky did what his government asked him to do and switched the sample!"

This was not good no matter from what angle you looked at it. Either Thrush had somehow infiltrated the U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab. Or Nen was right and the Soviet had pulled a fast one.

Napoleon knew Sidorov had shown up on his own at the mobile lab some time after his security clearance had been initiated, supposedly to insure the true extent of that clearance. So it was of course possible the KGB man had made the apparent switch at that time. But something about the whole setup stank of Thrush droppings to Napoleon. And something Mr. Waverly had forwarded in the original briefing on this mission kept repeating itself in Solo's head: "...the possibility they (sic Thrush) will try an alternate strategy that is not as well organized as the original one..."

But then there was the third possibility Napoleon truly didn't even want to consider, but as head of this assignment he was well aware he needed to do so. Nen had already expressed strong feelings about the Soviet government needing to be embarrassed on a world stage for their actions in Czechoslovakia. What if switching the vials on one of the Czech athletic stars of these Olympic Games and then publicly pointing the finger at the Soviets for that foul deed was Nen's personal way of doing just that?

Taking a deep breath, the CEA did what he knew he had to do at this precise moment of uncertainty in the matter.

"Nen, I am doing this for your own protection," stated Napoleon candidly into the communicator. "As of this moment, you are removed from your position within the U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab facility. Please hand in your credentials to Lynda and leave the premises immediately. Consider yourself confined to your hotel room until I advise you otherwise."

"Fine, Napoleon: Sweep it all under the rug like a good little Waverly boy," Nen threw out the insult with uncharacteristic disdain for the other man.

Napoleon blinked once in shock before addressing Lynda in a tightly-controlled, no-nonsense tone. "Accept Dr. Isis' credentials, Dr. Sachlin, and delete his data from the security access protocol. I will stop by the lab to verify and sign off on that data deletion. You are for the interim, Dr. Sachlin, in charge of the mobile lab unit until officially relieved of said duties by either myself or Mr. Waverly directly."

"Understood, Mr. Solo," acknowledged Lynda in a completely professional manner.

"Solo out," Napoleon ended the communication with the lab and then opened a channel to his partner stationed at the gymnastics venue. "Ilyya, we have a situation," he informed the Russian. "There has been an incident involving switched urine samples in the mobile lab and Nen may have gone rogue."

"We have quite the situation here as well, Napoleon," Ilyya informed the American in turn. "It seems Tymur Sidorov was just personally delivered a rather cryptic handwritten note by none other than Devesa Aguilar, who then quickly made herself scarce in the crowd. I quote that note: 'We know you, as a lackey for your government, are responsible for the switch.' So I

suppose the switch mentioned in this note can be taken to mean that of a particular urine sample?"

"Yes, the sample of Věra Čáslavská."

"You jest."

"I wish."

"This is preposterous!" came the enraged voice of Sidorov through Illya's communicator. "You accuse me of such lame-brained skullduggery?"

"Neither myself personally nor U.N.C.L.E. organizationally accuse you of anything, Mr. Sidorov," Napoleon tried his best diplomatic manner. "Be assured we will get to the bottom of this."

"And had best keep any unjustified accusations out of public hearing while you do," Sidorov spoke straight to the point.

"You have my word on that," pledged Napoleon.

"Then we shall see just how much your word is worth, Mr. Solo," declared Sidorov, "yours and U.N.C.L.E.'s."

"Please allow me to speak to my agent again, Mr. Sidorov, so we can commence the process of containing this situation." Napoleon's quiet staccato tone warned Illya that his partner was far angrier than anyone else, including the temperamentally huffing Sidorov who reluctantly handed Illya back his communicator, would ever guess.

"What are your orders, Napoleon?" Illya sought to soothe Solo's entirely justified but rigidly controlled ire by himself smoothly acknowledging his confidence in the other man's ability to handle with dead-on composure what had just evolved into an even more politically tense mission.

"Quietly arrange for Miss Čáslavská to provide another urine sample for drug testing," Napoleon required. "Tell her the lab accidentally broke the vial or spilled some of the contents leaving an insufficient amount to perform accurate tests. Use any ruse that will work except the truth."

"She won't be pleased to have such a request come from the likes of me," advised Illya. "To her I am more Soviet agent than U.N.C.L.E. agent"

"Then use that to your advantage, Illya," suggested Napoleon. "Be put out that you are the one being made to ask. Seem upset with U.N.C.L.E. for placing you in such an embarrassing position. Squirm a little if she hints U.N.C.L.E.'s acceptance of Soviet personnel has resulted in the organization possibly gaining in overaggressive clumsiness. Let her smirk sanctimoniously at your expense. Milk her distaste for all things Soviet for everything it's worth, Illya. Go for an Academy Award with this performance."

"Understood," promised Illya, though he personally found the prospect a good deal less than pleasant. Yet he was an U.N.C.L.E. agent first and foremost; thus he knew where his duty lay, even if such duty occasionally painted him in an unflattering light. "And you, Napoleon? What is your next move?"

“I suspect a private conversation with Señorita Devesa Aguilar might prove enlightening, and I believe I know just where to find said lady at this moment. Solo out.”

Nen Isis had no clue why the Thrush who were blackmailing him slipped a note under the door of his hotel room, where he had obediently returned upon Solo’s dismissal of him as lead tech in the U.N.C.L.E. lab, with information to meet here at this precise time. He had imagined the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez would be too crowded a place for Thrush to further show its hand. Thus he was surprised to find the swimming venue virtually deserted. He made his way to the locker area without being asked for any identification, something he also found odd. Once within the closed-to-the-public space, he found Devesa seated in her wheelchair within a side alcove.

“Are you all right?” he asked with real concern as he rushed to her, kneeling before her chair and pulling her upper body gently into his embrace.

“They did not hurt me,” she assured him. “They merely had me deliver a note to the KGB agent.”

“Now isn’t this a cozy picture,” commented Napoleon. He had made his entrance into the area without the pair taking any note of it.

Both turned to face the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

“They forced him to do it,” Devesa defended Nen before any question could even be asked.

“They who?” demanded Napoleon.

“They us, Mr. Solo,” spoke the lead Thrush as he made his own appearance from behind a set of lockers. An impressive rifle with its standard Thrush infrared scope resided at aimed ready within his hands.

“Thrush,” acknowledged Solo evenly. “I thought the scenario had the unpleasant stickiness of bird doo-doo all over it.”

“Now, now, Mr. Solo, do mind your manners,” chastised the man with a sly smirk as another Thrush crowded in and removed Napoleon’s Special from his holster and his communicator from his inside jacket pocket.

“No doubt you have more weapons hidden on your person, Mr. Solo,” acknowledged the first Thrush, “but I will remind you that the lady is an easy target in that chair and assure you that she will suffer mightily if you deign to try anything heroic.”

“Threatening the handicapped?” quipped Solo coolly. “Do you make a habit of scaring little children too?”

“When necessary,” retorted the Thrush.

“What is going on here?” demanded Tymur Sidorov. The Soviet had come to this venue seeking out Solo to make his complaints to him personally. Now Tymur had wandered in on a situation he completely had not anticipated.

“Welcome to the all-encompassing arms of Thrush, Mr. Sidorov,” Napoleon acquainted the KGB man to what organization the group of half-dozen specialty-rifle-toting thugs, all dressed in the uniforms of Olympic maintenance personnel, held allegiance.

“He’s KGB, so surely armed,” noted the lead Thrush to the others. “Get his gun.”

Sidorov was relieved of his sidearm and a small pistol he kept in an ankle holster hidden by his pant-leg as well.

“I’m sure Central would dearly love to talk with you, Mr. Solo,” the first Thrush allowed, “but we are pressed for time at the moment and must complete another agenda. Therefore, compromises need to be made. So unfortunately we will have to defer on granting the Supreme Council your conversational company.”

“Isn’t it rather cavalier of you to so blatantly disregard the best interests of Central?” questioned Napoleon, not so much as an eyelash portraying any inner trepidation as to what his current fate might be.

The Thrush shrugged. “One can only do as much as one can do. And now,” the man turned his attention to the still kneeling Nen, “you will make a choice, Dr. Isis: your life or the girl’s.”

“What do you mean?” queried Nen somewhat shakily.

“Thrush’s most sincere wish at this moment is to discredit U.N.C.L.E. under the watchful eyes of the many nations gathered here. To do that we need to make it apparent the organization lost control of one of its own who made it his personal agenda to try and humiliate the Soviet government because of his frustration with how the world at large and U.N.C.L.E. itself responded to the Czech invasion. Thus his convoluted and ill-thought-out plot to have a known Czech athlete test positive for drugs and then have it revealed the sample in question had been switched by a Soviet presence. Sadly, however, it all comes to naught, and thus in despair he takes his own life, a further black mark on the reputation of U.N.C.L.E.”

“No, leave him be!” protested Devesa as she reached out toward Nen and drew him to her once more.

Napoleon though watched her eyes rather than listened to her verbal protest. Those dark eyes of hers were... complacent was the only word he could think of. They totally belied the anxious tone of her voice. And the look in those eyes of hers provided the final detail that set in motion everything clicking in perfect sequence within his head, like the audible sound of the tumblers in the correct combination of a vault lock.

“You want me to commit suicide?” questioned Nen as he steadfastly pushed himself from Devesa’s clinging embrace and rose to his feet.

“For a cause you understand,” supplied the Thrush. “And for the lady.”

“And I have your word you will let her go if I do this?” Nen demanded.

“Thrush doesn’t have any honest words, Nen,” Napoleon reminded his colleague.

Napoleon felt a rifle barrel pressed against the back of his skull. “Shut your mouth, Solo,” came the command of the Thrush behind him.

Quickly and unexpectedly dropping his head back, Napoleon whacked the man’s gun hard. The rifle was propelled forcibly downwards as Solo’s own vision blurred with the force of the blow to his skull. His options, however, had been severely limited. The rifle’s subsequent single expelled bullet expended itself into the concrete floor, several stinging cuts from the resultant scattering of cement shrapnel the only human damage it wrought.

Suddenly everything was a whirlwind of action as the KGB man managed to elbow the weapon of his watchdog out of the way. But Sidorov was almost immediately thrown hard to the concrete floor by another Thrush and knocked unconscious. Nen threw his body over that of Devesa, protectively covering her, and then suddenly he was sliding off the chair, a bullet in his chest from the small pistol the young woman held with practiced ease within her hand.

“You little Thrush witch!” Napoleon registered her action as his vision cleared. He lunged forward to grab Devesa. A blow to the side of his head from the butt of a Thrush rifle rendered him unconscious as well.

“This isn’t what we planned,” admonished the first Thrush.

“Esto es aún mejor⁵,” the other nonchalantly assured him.

Illya managed, though the artifice Napoleon had suggested, to get Věra Čáslavská to provide another urine sample for drug analysis without causing an outright international incident. After personally delivering that sample to the U.N.C.L.E. mobile lab, he attempted to raise Napoleon on his communicator. There was no response to his numerous electronic summonses, so he headed off to the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez in search of Solo. Some inner instinct guided him there, that impulse perhaps a mental extension of his deep connection with his partner.

He was aware of the downtime for the venue of course and thus had not expected to find it much inhabited, but it really appeared completely deserted and that he did find odd. Passing through the outside athletes’ entrance directly into the locker-room area, a low moan caught his attention. He followed that sound to its source: Nen Isis. The man was lying on the ground, a bullet wound in his chest and a small caliber handgun clutched convulsively in one hand.

Kneeling beside the semi-conscious man, Illya quickly assembled his communicator. “Open Channel E: Emergency.”

“Channel E open,” came the voice of a local U.N.C.L.E. operative over the transceiver.

“I have a man down in the Olympic swimming stadium locker room,” Illya reported with brisk efficiency.

“Acknowledged,” spoke the operative with just as much brisk efficiency. “Will advise local medical personnel to send an ambulance.”

⁵ This is even better

“Better hurry,” exacted Illya as he glanced knowledgably at the blood spurting from Nen’s chest with every beat of his heart. “Kuryakin out.

“Illya?” a dazed Nen recognized the agent’s voice.

“Nen, what happened?” Illya asked as he stuffed his communicator into his shirt pocket and pulled off his jacket. He bunched a quantity of the material of the suit coat within his hand and pressed it as hard as he could to the wounded man’s chest.

“Don’t waste your time, Illya,” Nen gasped out painfully. “I’m a goner. But they took Napoleon and that KGB guy, both still alive I think.”

“Where were they taken?” questioned Illya succinctly.

Nen shook his head and then coughed uncomfortably. “Devesa,” he managed to wheeze out.

“Miss Aguilar? They have her too?”

Nen laughed, a sound that came out as hollow and harsh as any death rattle. “More like she had me... by the balls,” he chastised his own past gullibility. “Devesa...” he repeated in a barely audible voice. “She’s Thrush,” the last word came out in an elongated final rush of breath.

Illya reached over and closed the eyes of his colleague in a comradely gesture of farewell.

Suddenly a female scream echoed through the venue. That was quickly followed by male shouts of “Madre de Dios!” and “Dios tenga misericordia!” Knowing there was nothing more he could do for Nen, Illya rushed out into the main pool area to find several venue workers staring up at the 3-meter diving springboard. His vision followed theirs and what he saw almost dropped his heart right down into his toes. There suspended from either end of a rope draped with fulcrum precision over the board were his partner and Tymur Sidorov.

Both suspended men had been stripped to their undershorts and were at the very least unconscious. Single deep puncture wounds in the centers of each of their hands and feet slowly trickled blood into the pristine water of the pool below. Their wrists were tied, palms outward, behind their backs and weighted with sandbags. Their ankles had been given the same sandbag treatment. Their entire bodies from shoulders to ankles were as well tightly wrapped in a crisscross lattice of coarse braided rope. Additional circlets of that same rope had been wound around their heads across their foreheads. A makeshift banner fashioned from a white shirt was attached by one fully extended sleeve to the corded web around the back of each dangling form, thus stretching the main fabric of the garment taut between them. That improvised sign proclaimed in deep red letters: “The balance of compromise is blood. Such is the wisdom of Isis.” Illya didn’t need to actually examine the cloth to realize it was written in actual blood, Nen’s blood.

Without his suit coat to hide his holstered sidearm from ready view, Illya was quickly identified by a hysterical Mexican venue worker as likely part of the security forces at the Games. She spoke to him in a non-stop tirade of Spanish, Illya catching that the woman saw the horrible display as a blasphemous take on the crucifixion of Christ. The Russian thought her imagination a bit too vivid, but he had to admit the pierced wounds in the palms and feet of both men, as well as the bristly rope bands about their heads, did lend some credence to her terrified exclamations. Thus in this display did Illya see the hand of Devesa Aguilar for on the whole

Thrush was not prone to religious references. Yet Devesa was a Hispanic Catholic with all the pious trappings that entailed. Though why she should choose to use her familiarity with those trappings in such a perverse interpretation was completely beyond his comprehension.

Illya put in a call for backup and the workers called for emergency crews, but getting the two men down was certainly going to be a challenge. The position of both was so minutely balanced, cutting down one would likely result in the other taking an energetically propelled freefall into the water of the pool below. That definitely worried Illya for he knew of Napoleon's inherent fear of submersion. It was a fear he controlled, but it was still there. And in this present situation Napoleon would have no governance over his own body as he plummeted into the water.

"How would they have been gotten up there in the first place?" Illya inquired in Spanish of a man he assumed, because of the way he was issuing orders, was the supervisor of the maintenance crew.

"There is a mobile platform that can be extended over the pool on level with the diving board. It is used to facilitate standard repairs and safety checks."

"Then get it extended out there," ordered Illya. "We have to get those men down!"

"If it were only so simple!" exclaimed the supervisor.

"Meaning?" queried Illya tersely.

"That folding platform: it is motorized," the man explained, "and the motor has been shorted out and severely damaged. Sabotaged."

"Then get it fixed pronto," demanded Illya.

"We don't have all the needed electric parts onsite, señor. It will take hours to get them here from the supplier."

"Those men might not have hours!" Illya snapped. "We don't know how seriously either one of them is hurt."

"I am well aware of that, señor. One of the rescue workers is going to try moving out onto the springboard directly, but—"

A drawn-out groan caught both men's attention. From his position on the pool deck, Illya gratefully witnessed Napoleon's eyes slowly open, then close once more, and finally open again in a true return to consciousness.

"Napoleon," he called out to his friend, "how badly are you injured?"

Napoleon seemed to concentrate on his predicament for a moment and then answered, "I don't think too badly, Illya. My hands and feet sting like the devil. My wrists and ankles are numb from the weights and I might have some bones broken or dislocated. One of my shoulders aches pretty abominably. And I'm a bit woozy from a couple of cracks to the head and likely a whiff or two of that noxious Thrush knockout gas. At least my nauseous stomach is giving me that strong impression. But I don't feel any torso wounds or internal injuries."

“That is good to hear, my friend,” Illya kept his voice as calm as possible, realizing that just because Solo didn’t immediately feel any pain he associated with life-threatening injuries didn’t mean they didn’t in actuality exist.

“Thrush does like to hang us U.N.C.L.E. agents up like drying sausages, don’t they?” Napoleon injected a bit of his usual wry humor into the situation.

“That they do,” acknowledged Illya.

“No originality,” criticized Napoleon.

Illya swallowed hard. Damn, how he wished Thrush had truly had no originality this time.

The springboard creaked ominously as the still-unconscious but thankfully alive KGB man twisted slightly in discomfort and moaned softly.

“There someone else up here with me?” questioned Napoleon at the sound of the moan. He of course couldn’t see the other man from his own position as both of them faced away from the width of the springboard and thus away from each other.

“Tymur Sidorov,” Illya provided the needed information.

“Roped along by the KGB. Whatever will Mr. Waverly say?”

Illya wasn’t fooled by his partner’s steady stream of banter. He knew that Napoleon had taken in the view of the deep water of the Olympic pool several feet below him.

A rescue worker attempted a slow crawl out onto the already overstressed springboard. Again it creaked, much more ominously than before. He crept a bit further out onto the bowed length. The creaking intensified.

“Back off;” Illya shouted up to the man, “that isn’t going to work.”

The worker took that advice to heart and accordingly backed off the tautly shivering board the way he had come.

Illya considered the options. There really weren’t many. They had to get the two men down and right now he had no clue about the physical condition of the still unconscious Sidorov. He spoke hurriedly and quietly to the maintenance supervisor who nodded and signaled over the rescue team lead. Then the supervisor conferred further with the emergency worker as Illya presented the only possible solution under current circumstances to his perilously dangling partner.

“Napoleon, we are going to send rescue swimmers into the water and then I am going to shoot through the upper portion of the rope from across the pool.”

For a long moment Napoleon said nothing and then he responded with what Illya recognized as enforced self-control. “Okay. But I might make a bit of an inelegant splash wrapped up and weighted like this.”

Illya smiled in spite of himself. “We will all refrain from scoring your diving technique.”

“Promise?” prompted Napoleon, and Illya knew what he was really asking for was a promise he wouldn’t drown.

“Scout’s honor,” Illya used the pledge his partner gave him so often.

There was a moment of silence that Illya recognized as Napoleon mentally preparing himself for this particular trial.

“You may fire when ready, Gridley,” Napoleon made known his preparedness.

“I have to take Sidorov down first, Napoleon. He’s still unconscious and might be seriously hurt.”

“Understood,” Napoleon acceded to this reality.

Illya assembled his U.N.C.L.E. Special into full carbine mode as the rescue swimmers splashed into the pool. Finding the best location on the pool deck for the aim, he sighted his shot on the scant ten or so inches of two-inch thick rope that cleared just above Sidorov’s head.

“Illya,” Napoleon addressed his partner after raising his eyes to gaze up at the short expanse of rope that cleared above his own head and, assuming Sidorov’s position to be much the same as his, mentally assessing how small a margin for error the other man had to make his shot a non-lethal one.

“Yes, Napoleon?”

“Remind me to put a commendation in your file for engaging in all those extra sharpshooting sessions on the firing range this month.”

Illya’s little half-smile crept unexpectedly onto his face. “I certainly will.”

And then Illya took his first shot. It was a direct hit and the pierced rope lost most of its fibrous stability, swinging both suspended men around wildly. The second bullet completely severed the rope and Sidorov slid feet-first into the water, the fabric of the crude shirt banner tearing loudly as he descended. Rescue swimmers were there immediately to raise his head above the water line and pull him toward the edge and then out of the pool.

Meanwhile the unanchored rope exploded over the violently freed springboard like a stretched rubber band that was forcibly released. Napoleon momentarily flew upward and outward and then splashed down hard into the pool, the sandbags dragging him under immediately. He gasped and swallowed water: not the best reaction. He tried to hold his panic in check as the uncoiled rope lashed out around him, temporarily scattering the rescue swimmers. He pushed up with his feet from the bottom of the pool, the chlorine painfully bathing his open wounds. The sandbags seemed to glue him to the bottom as he fought to break his head above the surface. He felt his wrists suddenly cut loose from the down-dragging weights. Strong arms then surrounded him from behind and lifted him bodily until his head was raised above the water line.

“Relax Napoleon.” Illya’s voice had never sounded so welcome in Solo’s ears. Reflexively Napoleon coughed up some of the water he had swallowed as the Russian further reassured him, “I’ve got you now.” And, if Illya had him, Napoleon implicitly trusted that the surrounding

hostile liquid environment would not forcibly steal his last breath. He felt all sense of panic drain away, almost as if it was slowly oozing out of his very skin.

Several of rescue swimmers aided Illya in guiding Napoleon to the pool edge. They lifted him carefully out of the water, mindful of the sandbags still tied to his ankles. He was laid down on the concrete deck of the pool and medical personnel began to cut away the cocoon of rope and check out his injuries.

Dripping water with every step, Illya went and retrieved his Special from where he had dropped it at another point on the surrounding deck of the pool. He disassembled the extensions, stowing the extraneous pieces of the semi-automatic in a leather pouch fitted for that purpose. Routinely he reloaded the P-38 with a sleep-dart cartridge as he returned to Napoleon's location amidst the paramedics.

Napoleon, at last fully freed from the casing of rope, was making wobbly attempts to sit up despite the protests and restraining hands of the medics.

Illya knelt beside Solo. "You certainly know how to make yourself the center of attention," he teased.

Unexpectedly Napoleon grabbed the Special Illya still held casually in his relaxed hand. Solo flopped hard onto his belly and fired in the same motion toward the nearby locker-room entrance. Illya turned a startled look toward his partner as Napoleon, adrenaline rush expended, collapsed face-down onto the deck, breathing unevenly. Illya eased the gun from his friend's now lax fingers, feeling the stickiness of blood from Solo's wounded palm upon the butt of the weapon. The medics were carefully turning Napoleon once more onto his back as a heavy thud resounded from the area where the senior agent had so recently aimed his shot.

"I believe we just tagged our Thrush femme fatale," Napoleon explained shakily as one of the paramedics hand-signaled for a stretcher.

Walking to the locker-room entrance, Illya saw the unconscious form of Devesa Aguilar lying on the ground in front of her wheelchair.

"You're lucky I had reloaded a sleep-dart cartridge after I disassembled the carbine," commented Illya as Napoleon's stretcher was brought toward the locker-room exit.

"I aimed for her knee, Illya," stated Napoleon as the stretcher bearers temporarily halted near Illya's location to permit the two agents a brief conversation, "hardly a kill shot. Sleep-dart or live bullet, I knew she wouldn't feel it either way."

"Seems you deserve commendation on your own sharpshooting skills," Illya jested easily.

"You really didn't think I was going to let you make a shot like that without getting some comeuppance, did you?" taunted Napoleon with one of his brilliant smiles.

"I truly should have known better," deadpanned Illya.

A quick grimace cut short any possible good-humored gloating on Napoleon's part. Taking note of the pained reaction of his friend, fleeting as it was, Illya lightly squeezed the other man's arm before brusquely ordering the medics to get him to a hospital. Napoleon's stretcher then was

brought out through the locker rooms and loaded into a waiting ambulance near to another vehicle that carried the lifeless body of Nen Isis.

In the end the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico City were not without their share of political controversy.

Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos medaled in the 200-meter track event and defiantly displayed a Black Power salute during the playing of their country's national anthem at the subsequent awards ceremony. Both athletes were suspended from the U.S. team and banned from the Olympic Village.

Hans-Gunnar Liljenwall, a Swedish modern pentathlete, became the first athlete at an Olympic Games disqualified for testing positive for performance enhancing drugs. Unexpectedly the drug in question was none other than simple alcohol as Liljenwall admitted to having "two beers" prior to the pistol-shooting portion of his competition. His Swedish team subsequently had to return their bronze medals in the event.

Celebrated Czech gymnast Věra Čáslavská won five medals, four gold and one silver, during the course of the Games. She made further history by turning her head down and away during the playing of the Soviet national anthem, in silent protest for the recent Soviet invasion of her country, at the awards ceremony where she received her silver medal in balance beam. Her last gold medal, in floor exercises, wound up shared with Soviet gymnast Larissa Petrik after the judging committee startlingly stated they had originally scored the base value of Petrik's routine too low. Again, as the Soviet anthem was played during the awards ceremony, Čáslavská turned her head down and away in civil protest. It was a demonstration for which she ultimately would be forced to pay by her government with retirement from her sport and limitations placed on her personal freedoms. But at this moment, as the XIX Olympiad was brought to its official close, she was the undisputed queen of the Games.

As Napoleon Solo – Chief Enforcement Agent in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement – stood on the sidelines of the Estadio Olímpico Universitario on this October night watching all the spectacle of the closing ceremonies, he couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. Another Thrush plot had been stopped dead in its tracks and the world was again safe from the machinations of the supra-nation at least for a little while. The incident within the Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez had been willingly kept from the public by both the Mexican government and the International Olympic Committee. "Technical issues" was the only official explanation given for the usual three-hour downtime of the main water sport venue extending to double that timeframe during one particular day of competition. And the only casualty of the whole affair had been an U.N.C.L.E. technician, Dr. Nen Isis, whose unexpected naiveté had cost him his life.

Napoleon felt more than a little responsible for Nen's sad end. He should have put two and two together sooner with regard to Devesa Aguilar. But her handicap had blinded him to the possibility of her being anything other than an innocent. His empathetic nature in this instance had sold him short, and Nen Isis – a good man, an honest man – had wound up paying in full. Napoleon Solo would never forget that mistake or its human price tag.

In his own regard, physically Napoleon had been, as usual, very lucky. A single hairline fracture to one of the small bones of his right foot did not even require a cast, just the necessity of using a cane for added support in walking while the bone mended. The puncture wounds to his hands and feet, though deep, had proven uncomplicated. He suffered no nerve damage and the

perforated flesh had thus required only standard sutures to facilitate full healing. A transfusion had immediately replenished the diminished blood supply those wounds had caused. His concussion had been slight and a dislocated left shoulder easily (if painfully) popped back into place by the medical professionals.

The KGB agent, Tymur Sidorov, hadn't fared quite as well, though his injuries were hardly life-threatening: two broken ankles, a nerve-damaged wrist, a severed tendon in one hand that had required surgical reattachment, and a moderate concussion. He too would readily heal, albeit it with the loss of some mobility in his right hand.

As to why the Thrush contingent had not killed both himself and Sidorov before "hanging them up to dry", Solo could only speculate. Illya had mentioned to him that, when she had first come out from under the effects of the sleep-dart, Devesa had been somewhat disoriented and muttered as if issuing instructions, "They need to be hanging when you shoot. You will aim for the left side of the chest, near the heart." With his Catholic upbringing, Napoleon had been able to interpret the peculiar way the Hispanic woman, with a similar upbringing, had wished to slaughter him and Sidorov: she had wanted to complete her warped interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ.

Likely those venue workers not Thrush plants had returned sooner than expected, thus cutting short the finishing symbolic details of the scenario. Solo also had no doubt the ultimate kill-shots to the chests of himself and the KGB agent would have been inflicted with his own unrecovered U.N.C.L.E. Special: a final touch to assure blame for the bloody and offensive exhibition was, within this very Catholic nation, placed squarely on the shoulders of the Muslim Nen Isis. Thus would ire against an U.N.C.L.E. that seemingly had failed as an organization to control one of its own take on the added fervor of religious indignation.

Devesa Aguilar was indeed a "strange bird" who apparently had wanted to make a grand statement to Thrush, into which organization she had been but recently recruited, and perhaps to the competitive sporting world at large. What exactly that statement was intended to be, Napoleon really wasn't sure, but maybe that was because Devesa Aguilar wasn't herself truly sure. He had sensed no resentment in her with regard to her sports-related paralysis and that seemed to hold true. She didn't resent some wrong done her; she simply wanted to be seen once more. She had missed the spotlight. She had hungered for the return of attention. She desperately wanted to be something more than ordinary. And she had imagined that would again become reality in some form if she made the powers-that-be in Thrush stand up and take notice.

When Solo had ultimately questioned her in her holding cell in the U.N.C.L.E. auxiliary office here in Mexico City, Devesa's only remark in this regard had been, "Loss of acclaim is like dropping from a great height. You will scabble any way you can to stop the freefall. But unless you have settled for a steel rod in your spine in lieu of a gold medal, you could never understand."

However in the end her defiance of Central had cost her. When it came time to make their escape, none of her supposed colleagues bothered to insure she made it with them. Camaraderie was not something that generally prevailed within the ranks of Thrush. She had been left behind because she was a burden they didn't want to carry, in more ways than one.

Napoleon sensed his partner, Illya Kuryakin, make his way to his side. He knew Illya had been on the other end of the arena talking with the temporarily wheelchair-bound Sidorov. About what, he hadn't a clue. The two Russian "comrades" had scarcely gotten along.

"Sharing Soviet secrets?" teased Napoleon as he tapped his cane lightly against one of Illya's calves.

"Sorry to disappoint," Illya responded, as he focused his gaze on the theatrics of the closing ceremonies playing out in front of them, "but all we shared was a mutual recognition of human foibles."

"Come again?"

"He told me of a saying of which his babushka was apparently quite fond."

"That being?"

"Becoming wise is a journey that takes a man an entire lifetime to complete."

"Ah."

"Then he stated that he was not as far along on that journey as he had imagined himself to be."

"So, he apologized for not trusting you," concluded Napoleon, that statement in no way a question.

"No, he apologized for not being wise." Illya precisely corrected that conclusion on the other man's part.

"Same difference, Illya," spoke Napoleon certainly. He then settled his bandaged left hand on the right shoulder of his partner as he returned his own gaze to the spectacle of the closing ceremonies of the Olympic Summer Games of 1968.

Napoleon's hand remained comfortably resting on Illya's shoulder as the two men, one American and one Russian, stood side-by-side, the silent show of camaraderie between them more to be valued than any prize of gold.

—THE END—

