

Author's Note: Written for the [Down the Chimney Affair 2014](#) on [LiveJournal's Muncle](#) community.

Story gift for *shayheyred* using prompts of:

- 1) stars/or universe/or planet(s)
- 2) Brittle (not the candy)
- 3) An "Aha" moment

This story is a sequel to my previous fanfic story [SEEKING ENTENTE CORDIALE](#), which is itself an aftertake on my story [THE CINDERFELLA AFFAIR](#). Though this story can stand on its own, reading the two previous stories is recommended.



The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our
stars,
But in ourselves...

William Shakespeare

A FAULT IN OUR STARS?

BY [LAH](#)

November 1973

It was being billed as "The Comet of the Century", the celestial wanderer Kohoutek set to make its nearest pass to Earth around Christmas Day.

It was, according to most, a once-in-a-lifetime event. Hell, a once-in-a-hundred-millennia event. Something not to be casually missed... and something not to be hastily dismissed...

December 1973

Illya Kuryakin stood in a currently unoccupied classroom within the new Manhattan campus of the prestigious United Nations International School. The U.N.C.L.E. agent was waiting on the two young girls he was charged with seeing safely home to their native country. This was to be his last assignment as an active Section II enforcement agent. At its conclusion and his subsequent return to New York he would embark upon a new career as the head of Section III in the Northwest headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. For nearly an entire year he had been stationed out of the United States, heading up the Operations and Enforcement section in the new U.N.C.L.E. auxiliary office in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. His Soviet upbringing had served the Command well in easing the startup operation in that Eastern European nation, a nation whose autonomous government – while separate from that of the Soviet Union and its Bloc countries – was still very much Communist in ideology.

Now though he was back in the States, back in New York, a situation he realized he did relate to as being home. He had missed the fast pace of the city, its constant roar of seemingly sleepless life. And he had missed his former field partner Napoleon; in fact was still missing him.

Napoleon Solo had retired from the field that past January and been immediately tagged as the Section I Chief of the Los Angeles auxiliary office of U.N.C.L.E. Just this September he had been made Section I Chief of the Rome office in Italy, but soon Solo too would be coming home. In the spring he would be brought back to New York to prepare for his assumption of the role of Northwest Continental Chief, taking over the position from the retiring Alexander Waverly.

Yet at this precise moment Illya was ruminating on the task immediately at hand, that of escorting the two royal princesses of the island nation of Nascoste back to their native country to attend the funeral of their mother, the Grand Princess Abriana. Her Gracious Highness had died unexpectedly during childbirth at but thirty-nine years of age. Her fourteen-year-old son was now Grand Prince, though his father would serve as regent until he achieved legal majority. However the tender age of the new ruler of Nascoste, a tiny independent sovereignty strategically located between Italy and Albania in the Adriatic Sea, raised red flags of concern. Thrush had played in that playground before, almost twenty years before. Though nothing had come of the supra-nation's thrust into Nascosten politics at that time (thanks in part to the intervention of a fledgling U.N.C.L.E. agent named Napoleon Solo), serious thought had to be given to the possibility that Thrush would see the current situation within the reigning family as unstable enough to make a second attempt at such intervention.

Staring unthinkingly at a papier-mâché model of the earth apparently the work of some child artist, Kuryakin considered the fragility of the world as currently organized. Hefting the globe idly in one hand, it struck him not for the first time how brittle was the composition of the many nations sprinkling the continental surface of our small planet. How easily any one of them could be crushed into non-existence under the pressure of a determined thumb.

His contemplations were interrupted by the entrance of one of the administrators of UNIS herding in her wake the two Nascosten princesses: Luce, the eldest at fourteen and twin to the new Grand Prince Alceo, and their sister Sarine, currently ten years of age.

Illya replaced the papier-mâché orb back on its original perch as the administrator offered formal introductions. “Allow me to present Luce and Sarine, Princesses of the Nascosten reigning house of Isolatalto-Barberini. Your Highnesses: This is Mr. Kuryakin of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement who will safeguard your journey home.”

Even as Kuryakin bowed slightly at the waist in acknowledgement of the two royals, Luce voiced straightforwardly, “I was hoping U.N.C.L.E. would send Napoleon as escort.”

Illya recalled that the elder princess had met Solo once before about a year ago when he had headed the security detail for the Secretary of the United Nations during a goodwill tour to the International School.

“Mr. Solo is currently assigned to the headquarters in Rome, Highness,” Illya informed Luce.

She nodded shortly. “He will come to the funeral? Rome is not far from Diamant-Grezzo,” she referenced the capital city of Nascoste.

“I cannot say, Highness,” admitted Illya simply.

Napoleon had history in Nascoste and with the ruling family itself. He had once been married, albeit at U.N.C.L.E.’s behest, to the Grand Princess Abriana. The marriage had been annulled at the conclusion of the operation of course. Illya had long ago read the mission report, but it was something Napoleon had only once spoken about directly to his friend, that assignment-demanded union that had for a time made him the August Sir, the Grand Consort of the sovereign of Nascoste. And it had been apparent that Solo suffered severe pangs of guilt with regard to that long-ago situation since, as he had related a decade later to his then relatively new partner: “Her Gracious Highness fell hard for me.”

“He should come,” Luce made known her opinion on the matter in no uncertain terms.

“Will you both be ready to leave in an hour?” Kuryakin skillfully changed the subject.

Luce nodded. “Our things are being packed even as we speak.”

Suddenly the younger girl started to cry, huge tears spilling unchecked down her cheeks as heart-wrenching snuffling noises issued from her throat despite her obvious attempts at stifling them.

“So Mama is really dead?” she questioned with quivering lip of the blond man who would take her away from here and back home. Only she wasn’t so sure she wanted to go home... not under these circumstances.

Illya nodded solemnly. “I’m afraid so, Highness.” Then he squatted down on his haunches to put himself at eye level with the child. “But your Papa is there and he will need your comfort. You can do that for him, can’t you, Sarine?” He intentionally used her name rather than her courtesy title. “Let him know the love of his children is there to buoy his spirits in this dark time?”

Sarine gulped once bravely and then nodded vigorously. Luce placed a sisterly hand on Sarine’s shoulder, offering wordless support.

The younger girl wiped away her tears with the back of one hand and then asked in her heavily accented English, "May I say goodbye to Signora Chesley and my friends?"

Kuryakin nodded as he rose back to his feet. "You go do that now," he bid the girl.

She quickly turned and bolted off, likely to keep any further tears hidden from the ready view of a stranger.

"She shouldn't have tried for any more children," stated Luce in a rather dull-edged tone once her sister had gone from the room. Unlike the other princess, her English was flawless, lacking in any determinable accent despite Italian being the Nascosten mother tongue.

Kuryakin raised one eyebrow in surprise at the girl's boldness. "Excuse me, Highness?"

"You heard me. My mother shouldn't have been having another baby. But she likely felt she had to compensate."

"Compensate for what, Highness?" asked an incredulous Illya.

"For still loving Napoleon."

The trip by private jet to Diamant-Grezzo, the capital city of Nascoste, proved blissfully uneventful. The royal daughters were both well-behaved and rather somber under the current circumstances. Though grateful he didn't need to deal with any natural rambunctiousness of children, Illya truly felt for these girls who had lost their mother so early on in life. It was a situation to which he could easily relate.

He found that the eldest princess, Luce, spoke Russian quite well and she spent much of the flight conversing with Illya in his native tongue. It was another relief that he didn't need to deal with speaking Italian as that was one of the few European languages in which Kuryakin was not fluent. He found it just too akin to Spanish, a tongue in which he was readily fluent, and thus his pronunciations and word choices too often reflected that other Romance dialect.

Several long hours after the initial departure from New York, the U.N.C.L.E. agent stood in the massive main reception hall of Castello di Marmo Scuro, the traditional palace home of the reigning family of Nascoste. The two physically wearied and emotionally drained princesses were hustled off by one of the servants, a woman who apparently served as governess to the royal brood when they were in residence. Illya meanwhile waited to attend upon the August Sir and formally discharge his duty of having seen the man's two daughters safely home from the United States.

Lucca Barberini, Grand Consort of the late Grand Princess Abriana and current Regent Gentilital of Nascoste, stood at another end of the reception chamber exchanging greetings with and receiving condolences from several foreign dignitaries. It took Illya only a moment to recognize one of those as none other than Napoleon Solo.

Kuryakin wasn't surprised... exactly. He had known it was a distinct possibility that Napoleon would make an effort to attend the state funeral of the late Nascosten sovereign. Still, he could sense even at a distance an unusual, though surely well-disguised, social discomfort in Solo at this initial moment of reception by Barberini.

“And what would you expect?” Illya brusquely mentally chastised himself. “He is after all offering comfort to the man who replaced him as the dead woman’s husband. Even Napoleon is not self-confident enough to handle that without any touch of internal awkwardness.”

“You must of course stay as a guest here in Castello di Marmo Scuro during the official rites,” Barberini spoke certainly to Solo as Kuryakin eased closer to the two men, his natural instinct being to provide emotional support for his former field partner and always friend.

“That is quite unnecessary, August Sir,” Napoleon attempted to halt this turn in events. “I and my security detail will be provided ample rooms in the American Embassy.”

“Nonsense,” Barberini dismissed this notion. “I must insist. Abriana would wish it so.”

And how could Napoleon counter that insistence when it took such a direction? Illya understood with unconditional certainty the other man could not, no matter what his innermost feelings on the matter.

“That is very kind of you,” Solo responded in a very subdued tone.

“Your security personnel do present a bit of a challenge, I will admit,” the Regent Gentilial continued, “what with so many notables in residence for the funeral. You do travel with a bit of an entourage.”

“Something U.N.C.L.E insists upon for Section I personnel,” apologized Napoleon with a little half-smile.

“Not necessarily all Section I personnel,” mentally corrected Illya with a secret smirk. *“But for a Section I destined to soon be one of the five Continental Chiefs, absolutely.”*

“Indeed, rightly so I should imagine,” Barberini acknowledged the precautionary mindset of the Command with a little nod of his head. “We would not want any mishap to befall any such personage during a stay here in Diamant-Grezzo.”

“May I suggest that Mr. Solo’s security contingent indeed be housed in the American Embassy,” interjected Illya from the position he had garnered for himself now very near the other two men, “and that I alone be assigned as his bodyguard within the palace?”

“Illya!” exclaimed Napoleon in obvious relief as he smiled wholeheartedly upon the unexpected presence of his longtime friend.

“I am so sorry to interrupt,” Illya made excuse for his interposing himself into the conversation between the now technically both former August Sirs, “but that does seem the best solution as I have quite a bit of experience protecting Mr. Solo.”

Napoleon quietly harrumphed at that suggestion.

“And you are, sir?” Barberini inquired of the Russian.

“Illya Kuryakin, currently of Section II in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement,” Illya introduced himself with a slight bow to the royal-by-marriage. “I was

assigned with the task of escorting your daughters here from New York. A task, August Sir, that I can report has been successfully completed without incident.”

“Good, good,” the Regent spoke with a reassured sigh. “It calms my nerves in this time of disquiet that they at least are home safe and sound. Please accept my thanks, Mr. Kuryakin. And as for your suggestion regarding security for Mr. Solo, if he has no objection,” Barberini furthered as he glanced questioningly toward Napoleon, “it would seem a reasonable solution. A single extra room here in the palace nearby Mr. Solo’s suite can certainly be managed.”

“I have absolutely no objection,” Napoleon confirmed his acceptance of the plan. “Mr. Kuryakin is a top-notch enforcement agent. I could have no bodyguard who would put me more at ease.”

“Then it is all settled, all as it should be,” determined the Regent bluntly. “All as Abriana would wish it,” he added more softly and with definite sadness in his voice.

Illya Kuryakin stood in the walled courtyard of the palace compound enjoying a refreshing breath of bracing cold evening air. Napoleon was currently sequestered with the family for the private final viewing of the Grand Princess before the burial tomorrow morning. Illya knew this was another turn in events with which his friend was far from comfortable, but again Lucca Barberini had expressed this expectation for the inclusion of Abriana’s one-time spouse as part of this final familial farewell in such terms as to make it impossible for him to not comply. So now Solo was attending a prayer service with the Nascosten royals within the household chapel of Castello di Marmo Scuro. Since there had never been a question of anyone other than family members being present during this particular service, Kuryakin was for the moment free of his responsibilities as bodyguard. Oh, there was security aplenty stationed just outside the chapel doors: palace guards as well as several of Solo’s Command-assigned Section III and Section V protection detail. So for the moment Illya could relax and not concern himself with the necessities of duty.

Gazing up at the dark sky where the nightly brightening head of the comet Kohoutek could just be seen as it made its nearer approach to earth, Kuryakin ruminated on what he had witnessed over the past few days. Napoleon had always exhibited an easy way with people, but here in Nascoste the people in general also exhibited an equally easy way with him. It was apparent many remembered his short-time association with the island’s reigning house in a very favorable light. The sovereigns of Nascoste were absolute monarchs by law, but by demeanor they were considerate and benevolent rulers. Thus the Grand Princess Abriana had been well-liked by her subjects, and apparently so had been her first choice of husband.

Her subsequent choice as spouse was also well-liked. There was no question that Lucca Barberini was popular with the citizens of Nascoste. But there seemed to Illya a difference in the way the two men were equally accepted. Lucca was... the business of government, someone to be duly respected, an unpretentious ruler’s helpmate that one could view with ready approval. Napoleon, however, seemed to be viewed in entirely another manner. More... personal, more... sentimentalized, the loss of his influence softly felt and gently regretted, a likely association with the people’s acknowledgement of him as their adored Abriana’s tender brush with dearly lost love.

It was undeniably something Illya had pondered on as he had watched during the public wake his former partner tactfully accept the condolences of so many of the residents of Nascoste. The indulgent and appreciative way he spoke to those who approached him, his flawless Italian standing him in good stead, had been a rather eye-opening experience for Kuryakin. He had

thought to know everything about Napoleon Solo; yet it struck him in those moments that perhaps he still sold the man short in some regards. Solo had... grace. Yes, that was absolutely the proper word for it: a classy poise that allowed him to faultlessly deal with difficult moments within an appropriate scope of emotion.

"They say it is a sign: this comet," came a voice from behind him. "A portent marking the end of the world."

Kuryakin smiled slowly as he turned his head to look directly at Princess Luce. "I don't believe in signs and portents, Highness," he stated simply.

Luce gave a negligent shrug. "I don't know. It would seem to have foreshadowed the current calamity here in Nascoste."

"If you are here," Illya noted with a purposeful change of subject, "then undoubtedly I should return to my obligations."

"The service isn't yet over," the princess advised him. "I snuck out. I said I felt faint in the enclosed space, what with the ambient heat of so many lit candles and the lingering scent of so much churchly incense. Thus my father didn't object to my leaving. I just couldn't stay there anymore: the place was too claustrophobic and the situation is too sad."

"Death is always sad," counseled Illya sagely, "and more so when it takes one so young."

"Death took my mother and left me twin brothers in her stead," Luce declared bluntly, her voice giving evidence of her distress as it came close to cracking. "Only the Grim Reaper remains unsure he will honor even that pricey exchange."

Illya didn't know how to respond to that, how to offer comfort to the girl. The two male babes the premature birth of whom had cost the Grand Princess her life were indeed not yet out of danger. Their tiny forms were both currently lying in incubators within the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit of the major hospital of Nascoste. Whether they would ultimately survive was still very much up in the air.

After several minutes of silence, Luce set a sharp gaze on Kuryakin as she questioned in an equally and surprisingly sharp tone. "Aren't you going to instruct me to pray for the lives of my newborn brothers? Pray as any true member of my faith should do while accepting whatever fate God in the end decrees?"

Illya shook his head slightly. "I am not a religious man, Highness."

"Yet you are a man of faith."

"Highness?" Illya questioned with the raising of an eyebrow.

"You have faith in the nature of mankind, faith in the end it will improve itself and provide for a better world."

"I don't know that I have any such faith, Highness," countered the Russian.

Now it was Luce who raised an eyebrow as she countered in turn, "But you are part of U.N.C.L.E. Do not all those of the Command have this faith?"

"Perhaps some," acknowledged Illya. "Indeed, perhaps most," he then conceded. "Yet I tend to be of a more pragmatic bent of mind."

"I don't understand," Luce stated with a furrowed brow.

"For my part, I believe that the striving is all." Illya clarified his position.

"Even if it ends in nothing?"

"Even so, Highness."

"Napoleon is a man of faith," the princess then noted pointedly.

"Napoleon is a man of utmost faith," agreed the man-in-question's former field partner.

Luce eyed the face of the Russian searchingly. "And you are a man of utmost faith... in him," she apprised Illya with a flash of the lightning-edged insight that had struck Napoleon on their first meeting a little more than a year ago.

"If any man could change the world for the better, it would be Napoleon Solo," Illya specified unabashedly.

"Because he has faith," determined Luce.

"Because he has heart and an inability to let good pass unchallenged into oblivion," amended Kuryakin. "But mankind is a stubborn beast, Highness, and remarkably set in its ways."

"So in the end all the striving, even with Napoleon's faith and Napoleon's heart, will come to nothing," she finalized with decidedness.

"I didn't say that, Highness."

"You didn't have to. I suppose I already knew it."

"You are too young to know any such thing."

"You think I must have faith too? Not become jaded?" The girl shook her head slowly. "I cannot promise that, Mr. Kuryakin. The world to me seems very much a coldblooded place. My mother: she had faith and heart too. Her heart she set on Napoleon and her faith she set on the presumed eternal justice of divine providence. And you see where that left her. She lost Napoleon."

"But she gained you and your siblings and your father," Illya debated easily. "I doubt very much your mother would consider those things not worth the one loss."

Luce smiled a slow and somewhat wry smile. "And I think you are indeed very much the pragmatist, Mr. Kuryakin. My mother, however, was a romantic. Thus I doubt very much she would see things as you do."

“Still, I wouldn’t doubt her being wise enough to realize life can turn out differently than we plan in our dreams. Yet in the end that doesn’t make it any less fulfilling.”

“So we are expected in the end to discount our dreams?”

Illya shook his head slowly. “Definitely not, princess. Dreams serve as the impetus to propel us forward in life. Thus they have a very real place in whatever in the end may become our reality.”

“Again then: the striving is all?”

“If we never strive, Highness, we never have a chance at whatever can be. Thus must we always strive.”

“And expect nothing,” concluded Luce glumly.

“And expect to know that we have done all we can.”

Now it was Luce who shook her head. “That seems such a pointless path to me, Mr. Kuryakin. Far better, I should think, to never dream at all, to be simply as we are and not as we could be if fate were not as it is: in the end all but set in stone.”

“Even you are saying all but set in stone; not unequivocally set in stone.”

“A slip of the tongue, nothing more.” Luce dismissed his attempt at catching out her seemingly denied belief in the untapped possibilities of life. “It is of no more consequence than the tail of that wandering comet: a thing composed of naught but celestial debris and insubstantial gases destined to burn itself into oblivion.”

The funeral was of course a state event, its ceremony filled with all the pomp of national pride and all the ritual of that nation’s predominant Roman Catholic faith. At its conclusion the traditional repast was as well a solemn occasion as last condolences were offered the Nascosten reigning family by foreign heads of government and their representatives.

Napoleon was seated at the table with the royal family, an aspect of the affair that yet again Illya was sure the other man found disconcerting. Yet Solo gave no outward sign of any such misgivings as he made particular endeavor to engage the new Grand Prince Alceo, a mere teenager beginning to show the stress of all this formality, in spirited conversation about sports cars, a subject apparently dear to the boy’s heart. Kuryakin was sure that seemingly ordinary gesture kept the lad from mentally breaking under the strain.

Often in the past Illya had teased his friend regarding the quality of his French accent; yet he could take no such issue with Solo’s inflections in Italian. The man spoke that language like a native, with an accompanying natural effortlessness. Though Kuryakin’s own mastery of spoken Italian left much to be desired in his own estimation, his understanding of the tongue was quite expert. Thus, as he stood in his place as bodyguard behind Napoleon’s chair, he listened with an inner smile to the ongoing exchange between Solo and the young sovereign.

“Grace, my friend,” he thought to himself. “You truly have got that in spades.”

Glancing over at the rest of the royal party, Illya was struck by the manner of Luce: correct in every way but somehow at this moment brittle, as if her spirit could shatter into a million shards with but the slightest increase in pressure. He frowned. He wished he could do something to help the girl, to soothe her fractured soul. She hadn't cried a single tear. She hadn't railed in anger at the unfairness of her mother's death in the struggle to bring forth the new lives that perhaps would themselves soon pass away from this world. She hadn't done anything that wasn't as required by her social role as a princess within the ruling house where the reigning monarch had just died. Instead she had simply decided that life was something more to be tolerated than enjoyed. Perhaps what was needed was a way to break through that carefully maintained reserve. Truly she was too young to become but a negative shadow of her former self.

Lucca Barberini had turned a cautious eye on his eldest daughter more than once as well. And perhaps his determination on the situation was much the same as was Illya's own. For, very near the end of the repast, when most of the guests had already taken their leave of the royals and were departing the venue, he spoke directly to Luce, ignoring all others around him.

"It will be a sad Christmas for us, I know, daughter," he said to her in the native Italian they shared. "And I initially thought to wait on this until that day so to perhaps brighten the holiday, if just a little, for you. But then I thought better on that decision, and so..."

At that he removed from his inside jacket pocket a small box, unquestionably a jewelry box.

"This morning I found this in the back of the wardrobe with a tag labeled 'For Luce'," he continued. "Undoubtedly your mother intended it as a Christmas present for you. However I think it fitting I give it to you now: a parting gift of her spiritual being as the last of her physical presence is taken from us."

He extended the box to Luce, who eyed it warily before accepting it from his hand. She held it for a long moment, unopened. Then she drew and held a single shaky breath as she cracked open the hinged lid. Her quick exhale of that held breath as the contents were revealed gave ready evidence of her surprise.

Upon a bed of black velvet lay a platinum brooch formed in the shape of a comet. Yet what was most remarkable about the piece was the gleam of the metal that formed the long tail, its beveled and Florentine-textured luster far outshining that of the smooth-finished platinum head of the ornament. Soundless tears flowed down the cheeks of the girl as she lightly fingered that gloriously brilliant portion of the pin, refractions from every light in the room radiating outward from its glistening composition as she did so.

"It reflects the inner light of her soul, yes?" questioned her father with a small smile. "Perhaps in the same way does this comet that now rides the skies so close to our small planet reflect the hidden light of mankind's soul."

Luce found no words, her voice beyond her range of control, as she merely nodded her agreement to such a pleasingly idealistic idea.

Napoleon and Illya said their goodbyes early the next morning: Solo bound for Rome and Kuryakin for New York.

"We will meet soon again, tovarisch," Napoleon reminded the other man with a ready smile.

“Never soon enough, my friend,” Illya countered with one of his own rare full smiles. “I must admit this particular meeting, however, was something of a unique experience. Perhaps I never fully appreciated your innate charisma, Napoleon.”

At that Solo chuckled. “Come now, Illya: I’m much more accustomed to you teasing me about any such possible personality trait.”

“It has its uses,” responded Illya more in the vein to which Napoleon was accustomed. “As sometimes do you.”

“I am flattered by your ringing endorsement of my being, I.K.,” gibed back Solo.

“You fit here, within this structured environment of privilege,” noted Kuryakin, as he mentally considered how differently life might have turned out for this man who had chosen U.N.C.L.E. above all else, and done so more than once.

Napoleon slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t, Illya. I’m just another outsider.”

“The late Grand Princess apparently did not believe that to be the case.”

“She was, as her courtesy title credited her, graciousness personified.”

“Luce is convinced her mother never ceased loving you.”

“Luce is a teenaged girl who must be allowed her romantic fantasies. Such things should never be carelessly stolen from the young.”

Illya nodded his agreement. “That is why I am particularly glad her father managed to crack through the brittleness of demeanor that seemed to onset in her with the death of her mother. That brooch: I don’t know how he knew, but it was the perfect means to that end.”

Now Napoleon nodded shortly. “Indeed,” was the only verbal response he made. Yet something in his manner, coupled with the purposely veiled look within the dark eyes, set Illya’s suspicions into overdrive.

“The Grand Princess didn’t hide that brooch in that wardrobe, did she?”

“She didn’t?” queried Napoleon with the raising of one eyebrow in mock surprise.

“No, she didn’t. **You** did,” declared Kuryakin without a shred of doubt.

“Did I?” questioned Solo with another quirk of an eyebrow.

“Don’t play coy with me, Napoleon. You did do it. But how did you do it? And how was it possible for you to find a way to make perfect reference to the conversation Princess Luce had with me less than twenty-four hours before?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about, Illya,” denied Solo with casual facility. “Have a safe flight back to New York,” he added as he gave the other man a quick hug before turning on his heel and stepping into the limousine his security detail had waiting for him.

As he watched the chauffeured car speed away, Ilya Kuryakin murmured softly what he had overheard Lucca Barberini repeat more than once during these last few days. "All as Abriana would wish it."

This conviction was absolute in him though he had himself never met the late Grand Princess. He may never have known her, but Napoleon Solo had, and he in turn knew Napoleon Solo.

Christmas Day, 1973

In the end the anticipated display by the comet Kohoutek as it made its closest pass to our small planet of Earth was nowhere near as brilliant as had been foretold.

Perhaps such disappointment is just the nature of all things that are avidly anticipated.

...Or perhaps some of the brilliance of the comet had already been channeled elsewhere before that day of its final approach.

—THE END—

