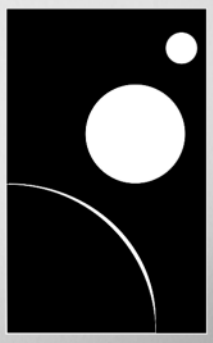
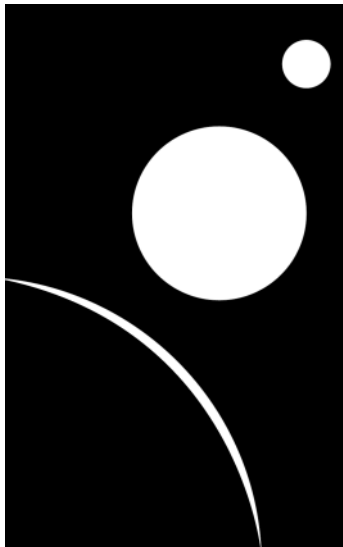


SYZYGY
FOR WOMEN





This is Syzygy.

The term itself comes from astronomy, where it refers to the momentary, transient alignment of orbiting bodies—the fleeting second when the planets and moons line up perfectly.

The magazine you're looking at comes from somewhere else. It comes from a realization me and my best friend had one afternoon, when we were talking about the male/male erotica she loved. Her tastes, her gaze, the things she loved to read and look at and

believe in. The millions of women and plenty of men who shared those desires. The lack of companies serving up hot original material to serve those desires, focusing instead on predominantly male markets. (I should perhaps mention that we were having this conversation in a porn store.)

Since then, we've done a lot of research, a lot of study, and a lot of hard work. It's cost us more in money, time, and sweat than we anticipated, and frankly if we'd known how many first-timer mistakes we were going to make, we might have had second thoughts. We did it, though. You're looking at the proof. Rough-edged and ragged it may be, but it's sexy, it's original, and it's ours. And now it's yours, too. Enjoy.

Brad Hanon

**In memory of Alia Johnson, 1948-2010
Nobody ever had a better mom**

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The Boys of Pleasure

By Heidi Cullinan

When Sid Hoyt came back to his table, there were two drinks waiting for him: a gin and tonic, and a shot of whiskey. Sid, who didn't remember ordering them, frowned at Livvy, who shook her head and pointed at the stage, where the band had started up again. An Irish flute was trilling, a fiddle was wailing, and drums were thumping. And in the middle of them was a guitarist, who, when he caught Sid looking at him, winked.

So they were from *him*.

Sid sat down and glared at Livvy.

Livvy folded her arms in front of her chest. "Hey. You asked me to take you out, and I did. It's not my fault if a guy wants to send you drinks."

"I wanted a night to clear my head." He dismissed the drinks in front of him with an angry wave of his hand. "I didn't want to get flirted with by a saucy Irish musician."

"Then you probably shouldn't have spent the whole first set staring at him," Livvy said.

Yes, that was the problem.

The band was called "The Boys of Pleasure," but they should have been named "The Collective of Sin." Their music

swept Sid up like a storm of sound. It made his toe tap and his body sway in his chair in time to its pulse. It was wild, and it was driving. And the guitarist was irresistible.

The musician stood tall and slim and handsome, and he stole the show. The others stayed put, but the guitarist wandered all over the stage, wiggling his hips and bob-





bing to the beat, winding his cord around speakers and microphone stands until the stage hand had to rush out and undo his damage. He was so over the top that Sid didn't know how anyone could *not* stare at him.

"He came to the table while you were gone, and brought those." Livvy nodded to the drinks. "He was disappointed when you didn't appear."

"Did you tell him I was living with someone?" The guilty way she bit her lip told him all he needed to know. "Livvy!" Sid sank back in his chair.

She shook her head. "You were right not to go with Mike this weekend. I've heard you two fighting when he drops you off from lunch. The whole library has."

Livvy nodded at the stage. "There's no harm in a little flirting. It's good for the soul."

"Yes, and it tends to lead to sex," Sid snapped.

"Even better."

"I just need some time to adjust to the changes that come with living together," Sid said. "I want to take this seriously."

Livvy rolled her eyes. "Bullshit. You just don't want to fail again."

"Is that so wrong?"

"Yes, if you're only staying with Mike so you can say that. Do you

even love him, Sid?"

Sid glared at her. "Of course I do!"

"*What* do you love about him, Sid?"

Sid faltered. "I—I love *him*. I love... his... personality." Livvy snorted, and Sid folded his arms over his chest. "Well? What do you expect, when you put me on the spot like that?"

"I expect more than that, *especially* when I put you on the spot. But it's your life. You want to throw it away, go ahead." Livvy pushed her chair back and rose.

Sid did, too. "Where are you going?"

"Home. I got a text while you were out; my roommate's blind date went horribly wrong." She slid her purse over her shoulder, then came behind Sid and pushed him back into his seat. "*You*, however, will stay. And you will drink. And when the show is over and the guitarist comes, you will say thank you. The rest I leave to your discretion, or lack thereof." She kissed him on the cheek. "Goodnight, Sid." She left.

The song ended, and the audience clapped, but Sid was frozen, Livvy's accusations ringing in his ears.

The guitarist as he leaned over the mic and introduced the next song with a wicked burr. "Here's

something with a bit of extra spice." He beamed at the audience, then turned and looked directly at Sid. "This one is called 'Sweet Seduction.'"

He kept staring as the song started, making Sid's blood start to hum. This was turning into another one of Sid's Bad Choices. This was the Rose Festival all over again. And New Year's Eve. And Pride 2008. This was someone hot and new and interesting who would give him a great night in bed then never call him again. This was *why* he had dated Mike, why he'd let him move in, and why Sid tried so hard not to fight with him.

But Mike never looks at me like this guitarist is looking at me right now.

Sid's hands curled on the table as the guitarist continued to look right at Sid as he played, as if the rest of the room weren't even there. The music swirled around Sid and pinned him to his chair and pounded at his chest.

Sid did love Mike. He *did*. He loved that they were living together, that there was someone to cook for. He loved the way they watched TV together. He loved lunches together. He loved... he loved...

The guitarist shut his eyes, leaned forward, and swung his hips to the beat.

Oh god, he loved that.

Sid held the whiskey to his lips, and as the music swelled and rose and took him over he shut his eyes and tossed the shot back. It burned, but it gave him courage enough to open his eyes and watch the slow smile spread across the guitarist's face. Sid didn't smile, but he picked up the gin, sipping it while he tapped his toe to the beat as the band played song after song, until they played no more and the lights came up and the guitarist climbed down from the stage and headed for his table.

The guitarist stood awhile in front of Sid, eyes twinkling as he put his hands in his pockets. Sid stared back, anchoring himself to the table with a death-grip on his empty glass. Then the guitarist righted himself, leaned forward, and stuck out his hand.

"Doug Keavy."

The guitarist's hand was smooth, all but the callouses at the tips of his fingers, which sent ripples along Sid's skin. "Sid Hoyt," he replied, and tried to retreat.

Doug held his hand fast and leaned forward to speak into Sid's ear. "I only bite, love, if asked."

Sid shivered. He hadn't known he had a thing for accents, but apparently he did.

Doug laughed and sat back. He grabbed Livvy's empty chair, spin-

ning it backwards before he straddled it. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"I did." Sid reached for his glass, putting it back as he remembered it was empty.

Doug motioned to a waitress. He murmured an order to her, then turned back to Sid. "And what do you do, Mr. Hoyt, when you aren't tapping your toe to my music?"

"I'm the head librarian at OHSU. The med school."

Doug's eyebrows shot up. "Are you now?"

Sid gave him a warning look. "Do not make a joke about late fees or point out how much time I must have to read."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Doug said, but his eyes twinkled as he added, "though I had thought to ask you if you were currently in circulation."

"No," Sid confessed, and held his breath, thinking, *well, there it is, over already.*

Doug's face fell. "So you were just teasing, then, when you ogled me like that?"

"I wasn't ogling," Sid protested. Doug raised his eyebrows. "No, I was looking at—" Sid's eyes dropped to the guitarist's long, elegant fingers laced over the back of his chair. "—your hands."

Doug laughed. "My hands!" He

inspected them, then shook his head. "Mr. Hoyt, I do believe you're a bit the worse for drink." His grin turned wicked as the waitress returned. "Which is why I'm glad I've bought you another."

"No, please," Sid protested. "I've already had too much."

"Don't worry." Doug wriggled his fingers. "My hands will take good care of you."

The waitress placed tall, mud-colored drinks before them. Sid picked his up and sipped it. It was beer, rich and bitter and heavy. He frowned at it, then at Doug. "Guinness?"

"A local stout, I think. Haven't tried it." Doug took a drink of his own and gave the dark brew a look of appreciation before turning his charm back on Sid. "So." He picked up his drink and waved it languidly at the room. "Where is

he? At home with dinner in the oven?" Sid gave him a withering look, and Doug held up his hands. "Very well, I deserved that. But you can't blame me for wanting to

know about my competition."

"Mike's a vice-president at Intel." It sounded so boring, out loud. "He's a good man."

"Steady and reliable, is he? Home on time, takes you on nice vacations and fancy

dinner?" Doug took a drink of beer again, but this time he made a face as he put it down. "I suppose you've been together for years and are preparing a commitment ceremony."

He made it sound like a prison sentence, and sitting here with a significant amount of alcohol in him, Sid thought it sounded like



one. "We moved in together last month," he said, feeling a little desperate. "It's been . . ." Sid tried to find the word that would sell this. "Nice."

Doug leaned on his elbows and ran his finger around the edge of his glass. The moment stretched on, heavy and awkward.

Sid cleared his throat and tried to lighten it. "I liked your playing," he confessed, to change the subject. "It's so . . . strong." He paused to search for a better word. "Percussive."

A sudden hunger lit Doug's face. "That's what they say about Donogh Hennessey, the finest Irish guitarist still alive." Doug lifted his beer towards Sid. "A toast, Mr. Hoyt, to your excellent taste."

Sid lifted his glass, too, and drank. They settled back into their seats, and the awkward silence came back. Doug began to fidget and glance around the bar, and Sid feared he was about to leave.

"I *do* like your hands," he blurted out. "I like the way they move."

Doug turned smoky eyes back to him. "Nice, are they?"

Sid couldn't answer, so he took another drink.

Doug watched him, not fidgeting anymore. "So," he said at last, his tone drifting back to dangerous, "if you weren't so happy with your vice-president, what would it take

to win you?" The musician's hand had inched forward over the table and now lay, a little too casually, only scant inches from Sid's own.

Sid moved his hand back to the glass. "I don't do one night stands." *Anymore.*

"I didn't ask what it took to get you into bed." Doug's fingers were now somehow right next to Sid's forearm, maddeningly close yet not touching him at all. "What sweeps you off your feet, Sid Hoyt?"

Sid couldn't stop looking at those fingers resting so close to his skin. "Why do you want to know?"

"Research," Doug said, mildly, "for the song about the pretty man who teased me and got away." His arm moved as he leaned back and reached for his own drink again. "For example, *I* like to be pursued." He smiled around the rim of the glass. "I keep hoping some handsome man will make a fool of himself over me."

Sid, mentally indexing the spectacles he'd made of himself over men, retreated into his beer and said, simply, "Hmm."

Doug's index finger drew lazy circles on the surface of the table. "And what's your fondest wish, Mr. Hoyt?"

To have a beautiful home with a man who loves me. To be with someone I'll grow old with. But



and I can hum, and I've been known to warble a bit in the shower, but my voice is tinny and thin and runs to flat. I'm afraid if I gave you a serenade, Mr. Hoyt, you'd run off before I could get to the chorus."

"Oh," Sid said.

Doug sighed and lifted his glass. He drank, then nudged Sid's beer closer to him. "Go on, love. I'll leave you alone."

To Sid's surprise, Doug was true to his word. They chatted idly for awhile, about Portland and the music scene, about where Doug had toured and where he hoped to. Sid told him how he loved the people at the university, about how he loved the way library science kept changing, making him think and work harder, and Doug listened. And Sid relaxed, so much so that when

the rest of the band came to join them and Doug shoved up beside him, he didn't move away, not even when Doug's arm snaked around the back of his chair and his hand rested on Sid's shoulder.

When Doug slid a second beer in front of him, Sid accepted it with a nod of thanks, then leaned back to let Doug's fingers tease the back of his neck. When the other band members grinned and gave Doug knowing glances, Sid pretended not to see them, telling himself

when he looked at Doug, these wishes seemed like empty dreams compared to the spark and hunger in the musician's eyes.

"I've always wanted someone to sing to me," Sid confessed, and waited for Doug to grin and pull him, helpless, into hell.

But Doug only looked crestfallen. "Well, if that isn't a shame."

Sid regarded him warily. "Are you trying to tell me *you* can't sing?"

Doug grimaced. "I can whistle,

nothing would come of this. It was just a little harmless flirting, like Livvy had said.

When the lights came up, signaling that bar was closing, Sid rose to leave, and the world swam dangerously around him.

Doug wrapped his arm around Sid's waist and helped him towards the door. "I've a cab," Doug said, tucking Sid's head against his shoulder. "Where do you live?"

I can get home by myself. But when Sid tried to step away he stumbled, and if Doug hadn't caught him, he would have tumbled to the floor.

Sid didn't resist when Doug poured him into a cab, but when he followed after and slid his hand up Sid's thigh, he pushed it gently away. "We will not have sex," he said.

Doug laughed and stroked his cheek.

Sid sat up, almost knocking Doug's chin against the top of his head. He frowned at the dark shape on the other side of Doug, thinking it was a person. Then he recognized the shape: it was Doug's guitar.

"Don't worry, love," Doug said, nuzzling his hair. "I'll just enjoy you to your door, and then I'll turn you over to your lover."

Send him out of the cab. Don't let him take you home. Tell him you're

not interested.

Doug's hand was sliding up his thigh again.

"He's away at a conference," Sid said.

Doug groaned, and Sid shut his eyes and waited to be molested, but Doug only stroked his leg and occasionally breathed against Sid's hair.

The cab stopped, and Doug helped him out of the cab and to the door.

Sid was ready for Doug to press him up against the back of the apartment door once they were inside, but to his surprise, Doug did not, and he ushered Sid not to the bedroom, but to the kitchen. He propped Sid on a stool at the breakfast nook, then busied himself in the kitchen as Sid swayed and watched. Doug poked in the fridge and the cupboards, humming softly to himself as he worked, and the next thing Sid knew, he had a glass of mineral water, a plate full of saltines, and some sliced cheese.

"Eat, and drink," Doug ordered, then picked up his guitar, sat in the easy chair at the edge of the living room, and began to play.

Sid looked from the food to the musician, thinking this was a damn strange seduction. Confused and too drunk to sort it out, Sid settled into the food and drink as he



watched Doug and his guitar.

The music filled the apartment, and it consumed Sid all over again as he ate and drank. Doug's music was more potent now in this intimate setting than it had been at the club, but he made no more direct moves to seduce Sid. Up, down, back and forth Doug's fingers went, curling, arching, caressing the strings like a lover.

Put it down and caress me. Isn't that why you came?

"What's this one called?" Sid asked.

Doug's hand slid up the fret to form another cord. "Killarney Boys of Pleasure.' It's the song from which we took our band's name."

"It's very good," Sid whispered.

Doug smiled, still watching the strings. "Thank you."

The song was picking up now, and Doug was tapping his foot, swaying with the beat and nodding his head slightly as he lost himself in the song. Sid was lost, too; when he couldn't stand it anymore, he let himself down from the stool, crossed the room, and sat on the floor by Doug's feet.

Doug gave Sid's leg a brief caress with his shoe, then continued to play.

Sid was right in front of all of it now: the music, the guitar, and Doug. He swayed, not from drink but from the spell of the song, tapping out the beat in time with Doug, and admitted that nothing in his life would ever be quite like this moment again.

The song ended and Doug's hands stilled against the strings.

"Admiring my nice hands?"

Doug asked.

Sid looked up at him, full of alcohol and music and arousal. "They aren't nice. They're sensual and beautiful and wicked."

Doug's eyes burned. "And is that good or bad, love?"

Sid stared up at him a little longer, letting the moment hang on. Then his gaze shifted to Doug's hands, and he reached out and captured the nearest one. He turned it over, and Doug opened for him, exposing his palm and extending his fingers, sucking in a breath when Sid ran his fingers over the tender plane. Sid took his time, inspecting wrist, thumb, fingers. Doug shivered, and Sid smiled, brushing his thumb across the fat of flesh where Doug's thumb joined his hand. He stroked it, once, twice, then drew it towards his mouth and kissed it.

Doug made a soft sound, but he let Sid keep hold of his hand, and so Sid continued to make love to it, tracing with his lips and tongue the same paths he'd made with his fingers. As he sucked the tip of each digit, he heard the soft *thud* of Doug's guitar as he put it aside. When Doug drew him forward by his captive hand, pulling Sid towards his mouth, Sid turned his head in time to meet the musician's kiss.

Doug's hands moved over Sid

now, stroking his skin, pulling him closer, tugging at his clothes as their mouths moved over one another, battling for dominance until at last Doug yielded, inviting Sid inside. He clutched at him as Sid grabbed his shoulders, turned them sideways, and pushed them into the carpet. Sid shoved the panels of the other man's shirt aside and nuzzled his chest, smiling wickedly as he found Doug's nipple. Doug cried out, and Sid nudged his legs aside and ground his erection against Doug's thigh. But there was too much in Sid's way; he reached down between their bodies, fumbled with Doug's fly, and took care of the problem.

Doug closed his hand firmly over Sid's wrist. "Slowly, love," he gasped.

Sid grinned, then bent to take Doug into his mouth.

Doug murmured incoherently, clutching at Sid's hair as Sid sucked him down to the root. As Doug's whispers became cries, Sid shut his eyes and lost himself to his task, letting the sweet sound of Doug's babble fill his ears until at last the musician cried out, bucked into Sid's mouth, and spent himself.

Sid lifted his head, wiping his mouth with his hand. "Were you speaking Gaelic?"

"Guitar," Doug murmured. "I was reciting chord progressions, but



they were no match for your mouth." His hand slid over Sid's neck, his eyes still closed. "I don't know Gaelic, to be honest."

"Not even a little?"

"Oh, perhaps just a little." Doug propped himself onto his elbows and lifted a lazy eyebrow at Sid. "Will you send me off now, Mr. Hoyt, now that you've had your way with me?"

"No." Sid rose to his feet, took Doug's hand, then led him down the hall towards the bedroom.

He undressed Doug first, skimming his hands over the musician's body as he exposed it. Then he undressed himself as well, lay down beside him, and pressed their bodies together, sliding skin against skin as he explored Doug with

mouth and hands and tongue, moaning as Doug responded in kind. And when they were both at fever pitch again, he reached into the bedside drawer and prepared to take his indiscretion all the way.

Doug gasped, clutching at the covers and arching his neck as Sid slipped a slick finger inside him. He moved in concert to Sid's probing thrusts. "Oh, love," he whispered, and reached up to draw Sid closer.

Sid replaced his fingers with his cock and slid home, bending forward and closing his mouth over Doug's as they began to move. He tasted the sweet softness of those lips and felt the whisper of calloused fingers across his back. It would end, of course, in the morn-

ing, and he would be left alone with the aftermath of his recklessness and his adultery. But he as he sank deep into Doug, as the sexy musician turned soft and pliant in his arms, making breathless gasps into his ear as Sid wound them round and up towards the climax of their union, it didn't feel reckless or adulterous. It felt like making love.

Sid woke alone in his bed with a mouth that tasted of ash and sheets that smelled like sin. He rolled over, groaning as his head pounded. He staggered to the bathroom, drank a glass of water, and washed his face. Then, pressing a hand towel against his cheeks, he leaned on his elbows over the sink and regarded himself in the mirror.

Well, Sid, here you are again.

It was good Doug was already gone. Affairs were sweeter when the last moment was the bliss of falling asleep in a handsome man's arms, not trying to hide disappointment when it turned out the handsome man was more interested in finding errant underwear than learning Sid's phone number. This only underlined the need to work things out with Mike: did he want such occasional and brief moments of bliss for the rest of his life?

The trouble was, they'd been such *very good* moments.

He lowered the towel and stood, trying to push his guilt aside and focus on more immediate concerns, like, did he want coffee first, or a shower? *Coffee*, he decided, because he wanted it so badly he thought he could smell it. Coffee, and eggs, and toast.



Then he paused, frowned, and opened the bathroom door a crack. He didn't *think* he smelled coffee, he *was* smelling it. And the rest, too. He could hear someone working in the kitchen and soft music playing in the living room. When he staggered down the hall, he saw a pan on the stove and the coffee pot full and steaming. Doug was in the middle of it all, whistling as he worked.

Sid made his way cautiously to the breakfast nook and slid onto a stool. When Doug glanced at him and smiled, Sid murmured, "Morning," and reached for the coffee pot.

"Good morning yourself." Doug placed a plate full of food in front of him before coming around with a plate and mug of his own. "You've a lovely larder and a cozy kitchen. And the market down the street is absolutely charming."

He'd gone shopping, too? Sid stabbed at the scrambled egg. It looked to have feta and cilantro in it, and sausage and onion. He took a bite, and he found it tasted as good as it looked. He wiped his mouth with a napkin Doug had laid out for him.

"Mike wants us to get a condo in Beaverton." Sid winced. God, why was he bringing up Mike now? And then he simply felt confused. Wait, maybe he *should*. Maybe—

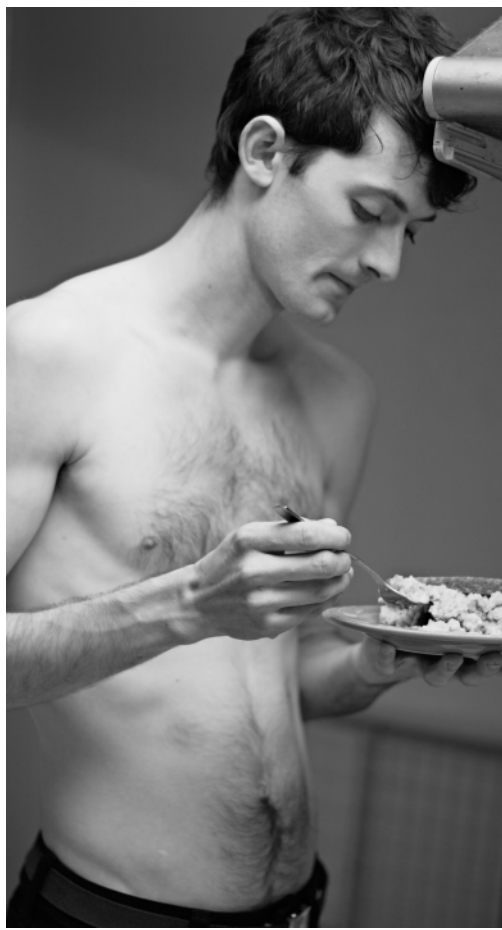
Sid stared down at the breakfast

his one-night stand had made for him, a breakfast Mike had never and would never make for him, and got lost all over again.

Doug nudged Sid's toast with his fork. "There's cinnamon and sugar on that, love."

Sid ate. He'd meant to only nibble because of his stomach, but the food was good, and as Doug chatted idly about Portland, Sid ended up eating everything and wishing there were more, both of the food and the company.

"I was thinking," Doug said as he carried Sid's plate away and began



to do up the dishes. "This afternoon we give a workshop at Portland State, and then a concert in their auditorium, and then my evening is free." He glanced at Sid.

"Are you?"

Sid paused with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth. "You want to go out? Tonight?"

"Actually, I was going to lobby for the whole day, if I could get it." Doug placed the plate he'd washed carefully in the rack. "If you're so inclined."

Oh, he should not be inclined. He needed to spend the day deciding whether or not he should tell Mike. He needed—he needed—

He needed *this*.

Sid put the coffee cup down. "Okay."

When Doug smiled, he did, too.

It seemed only natural to make love again, first on the bed, then in the shower. It was lovely to sit with a soap-smelling, wet-haired Doug, chatting while Doug's own clothes first washed and then dried. It was charming the way Doug refused to give the T-shirt he'd borrowed from Sid back once his own was clean, stowing it instead inside his guitar case before taking Sid's hand and leading him off to find another cab.

Sid enjoyed meeting the band again. They accepted him easily, even eagerly as Doug's guest, and

they invited him along to dinner where friends, wives, girlfriends, and a few children came to join them until the private room they'd reserved was full to bursting.

"Are you stationed out of Portland?" Sid asked, taking in the crowd.

"We're a band of gypsies, I'm afraid." Doug dragged a french fry through the pool he'd made of malt vinegar. He nodded at the two blond girls tugging on the flautist's beard, laughing as their father feigned terror and pleaded for mercy in falsetto. "Sean's family is in Eugene. He's having a hard time of it, being away so much. I just hope he doesn't leave us, but I'm afraid it will come to that, in the end."

"Can't you stay closer to the Pacific Northwest?" Sid asked.

Doug shrugged. "We go where the work is."

It wasn't, Sid admitted, the answer he'd been wanting to hear. "I suppose work is the focus, for you."

Doug stopped drowning his potatoes and reached for his beer with a resigned sigh. "I *do* enjoy my work, yes. But--well." He took a sip, then tapped the side of his glass, thinking. "I'll admit I wouldn't be able to put it aside and do something boring just so I could play house."



Ouch.

"That doesn't mean I'm not looking for someone to share my life with." Doug put the beer back down. "It's not that I want to have it both ways--I know a relationship means making sacrifices. And I would." He grimaced at his plate and stabbed his fish fillet with his fork. "But I'd rather have nothing but brief, passionate affairs than a life sentence of staid and boring."

Sid, not knowing what to say to this, looked away, his eyes landing on Sean and his wife, nuzzling against each other as their daugh-

ters climbed over and around them. He dared a glance at Doug and saw that he was watching, too. Then he looked at Sid, and their eyes met.

Doug gave Sid a sad smile and went back to his food.

Doug's declaration rang in Sid's ears all night. *A brief, passionate affair.* That was what this was, of course—Sid had been through enough to know. It was, he admitted, more fun than he'd ever had dating Mike. But the thought that an affair was all he had to look forward to wasn't appealing.

And yet, wasn't he as passionate about his work as Doug? Last week Mike had hinted that they might offer him a position in Santa Clara, and Sid was still upset that he was thinking about it. Wasn't he just as reluctant to compromise? And wasn't it his connections through the university and his love of the Portland arts scene that landed him in so many wild and amorous adventures?

I just want more. And I don't know that he can give that to me.

Sid tried to tell himself that this moment was enough. He told himself this all the way to the concert, and he told himself this during it as he watched Doug perform, tossing out winks and smiles to the audience like candy. But when the concert was over and he went backstage and into Doug's arms, it

just didn't take. When they fell to kissing one another in the cab, when they lost themselves in passion once again, Sid was all too aware that this moment, too soon, would end.

They fell against Sid's apartment door in a tangle of arms and legs and mouths, and once they got it unlocked, Doug pushed them straight to the bedroom, where they shed their clothes and fell into one another's arms.

"Oh, love," Doug whispered, as he slid inside Sid, tipping his head back and holding his legs wide as he began to move.

Sid tossed and turned and arched until Doug came, and then, once Doug had recovered and angled himself backwards across the bed, Sid stroked his lover's thigh as Doug took him in his mouth. Sid's orgasm was quiet, and it did not make him feel complete. In fact, as Doug turned around and drew him into his arms, he felt quite lost. Had he just been thinking of Doug as his lover? Mike was his lover, wasn't he? This was just a *thing*.

"I want more," Doug whispered, sliding his body over Sid again, pinning him down.

Sid moaned; Doug kissed his collarbone and stroked him, then pushed him back onto the

bed. Sid went willingly onto his stomach, losing himself in sighs as Doug licked and stroked him neck to toes.

"Sid, love." Doug whispered into his neck, holding him tight against his chest. His naked cock slid against Sid's back. "We'll be in Eugene next month--will you come and see me?"

Another brief flare of passion—this time, by appointment. Sid's heart was heavy; he disengaged himself and rolled away.

"Doug, I—" He looked at Doug's beautiful body splayed across his



bed, and faltered. "You have to at least give me time to think."

"If I let you do that, you'll just dismiss me and go back to him," Doug snapped.

Now Sid was angry, too. "Yes, I might realize that he's willing to give me more than the occasional night in the sack when he blows through town."

Doug glared at him indignantly for a few moments, then looked away, his shoulders rounding in defeat. "We're good together, Sid. You've got to at least admit that."

And Sid ached, because he knew then, that an affair with Doug was both what he wanted more than anything and what he could never, ever have.

"I need some time," Sid said.

But Doug was already up and shoving his legs into his jeans. "By all means, take all the time you need. I'll just go stick my thumb up my arse and wait until you're ready."

Sid tightened his hands on the sheet. "You're being irrational."

Doug paused with one boot half on, and he laughed sadly. "Aye." He shoved the boot the rest of the way and grabbed for his shirt.

Sid tried to stand, but he tangled in the sheet and fell back to the bed again. "Just give me a goddamned *minute*, Doug!"

But Doug was already tugging Sid's shirt on over his head as he headed for the door.

"Doug!" Sid wrapped himself in the sheet and ran after him, but Doug was moving too fast. "Doug-damn it, Doug, *stop!*" But Doug did not, and in the end, all Sid could do was stand shivering at the door to his building, watching as Doug slipped off into the night.

It was a long, lonely Sunday for Sid, and Monday was worse.

It was hard to explain to Livvy that yes, he'd gone to bed with the guitarist but that it was over now. Facing her, though, was nothing to what waited for him that night at home. He'd gone back and forth for two days, trying to decide if he should tell Mike or if he should pretend it never happened. And then, once Mike was in the door, once he'd accepted the kiss so slight it was chaste, he took a moment to look at him. Sid really looked at him, seeing not the man Mike represented but who he was. And just like that, Sid had his answer.

"Mike," he said, "I think we need to talk."

Mike let out a relieved breath and said, "I think so, too."

Mike confessed that he'd gone ahead and accepted the position in Santa Clara. Sid had also, it turned out, not been the only adulterer of

the weekend.

"I'm so sorry," Mike said, looking pained.

Sid took his hand and made his own confession.

And that was it. That night Mike slept on the couch, went with friends for the rest of the week, and by the end of the month, he was gone. They'd spent nine months together, building the type of relationship Sid had always wanted, but all he felt at Mike's absence was relief.

Weeks later, however, he still couldn't get over Doug.

Sid didn't have his number, or his email, or anything, and all he could find by searching online was an email for the band manager and their Facebook page. He told himself it was better this way, that he was making a fuss out of nothing. But it didn't feel like nothing. It felt like the deepest, most aching pain he'd ever known.

Then one Friday almost a month later, he came home and found the envelope propped against the corner of his door. There was nothing inside but a homemade DVD with "WATCH ME" scrawled across it in black Sharpie marker. As soon as Sid put it into the player, Doug's face appeared in the middle of his television.

"Hello, love." Doug, clutching his guitar protectively against his

body, reached up and rubbed at the side of his cheek. "I know I must begin this with an apology for being an absolute tit, so—" He cleared his throat and folded his hands together over the guitar and looked directly into the camera. "I'm sorry, Sid, for being an absolute tit."

Sid, after a few rapid blinks, wiped his fingers hurriedly over his eyes so he could watch the rest.

"I'm sorry, too, that I can't be what you need." Doug's lips quirked in a sad smile. "I thought about lying and telling you that I would change. God knows I'd like to. I wish I could settle into your little flat and be content to make you breakfast and keep some easy job and just do gigs on the weekends for a lark." He looked up at the camera, pained. "I'd be lying, though, Sid. Maybe that would change over time. But maybe not. And while it's true that I think you're different, love, that I can't seem to let you go, that when I lie back and think of making love to you a song opens up in my head every time—" He stopped and shook his head. "Well, that's not every day, that one. But it doesn't guarantee it'd be forever, either. I like you, Sid Hoyt, very much. Enough to let you go, so you can find someone as wonderful as you are."

He looked down again and fiddled with his guitar.

"I tried to write you a song, but it didn't work. Too soon, I suppose. But I needed to leave you with something, so I'm borrowing one. It's called, 'Farewell My Love, Remember Me.'" He cleared his throat, then paused and looked straight out of the screen at Sid. "And remember, I did warn you about my voice."

The song was soft and sad and slow, but for the first time, when Sid heard Doug play, he barely noticed the guitar. He was too busy training his ears to Doug's voice, thin and quiet over the instrument, his words lost to Sid in his accent and his sometimes broken bits of song. But what Sid caught was enough to break his heart. He sat clutching a throw pillow, tears streaming down his face as he listened to the sad song that Doug sang, haltingly, just for him.

My heart unbound, my gift to thee. Farewell my love, remember me.

When it was over, they both sat silent, Doug on his chair, holding his guitar, Sid on his couch, clutching



at a handful of damp tissues.

"Thank you for the pleasure of your company and the sweet memories you have given me, Mr. Hoyt," Doug said. "'May love and laughter light your days and warm your heart and home. May good and faithful friends be yours wherever you may roam. May peace and plenty bless your world with joy that long endures. May all

life's passing seasons bring the best to you and yours." He smiled.

"That's an old Irish blessing, love, and may it all come true." His smile turned sad. "*Tá grá agam ort*, Sid," he said, then rose, and the video ended, and he was gone.

Sid cradled his pillow reeling. And, actually, a little furious. What kind of sick joke was it to record a video like this, and mail it to him from God knew where, like some sort of sadistic Dear John letter? He grabbed the envelope from where he'd dropped it, looking for the postmark.

There was no postmark. There were no stamps.

Doug had delivered the package. He had been here, and he'd been here today.

Doug was in Portland.

And then he remembered that Doug had asked him to come to a concert in Eugene in a month.

It was a month now.

Doug was in Eugene, now.

Sid dove for his computer and The Boys of Pleasure's website, where he found name and address of the site where they were playing, and the time. Then he looked at the clock, swore, and dialed Livvy as fast as his fingers could punch her number.

She was there in less than half an hour, and she drove to Eugene with a fury that normally would have

made Sid claw at the ceiling.

Today, Sid only leaned forward over the dash and urged her faster.

Sid had to catch him *before*. It wasn't going to work to wait patiently in the wings to jump him once the show was over. It had to be big, a crazy spectacle of a gesture. It was what Doug wanted-- what he *needed*.

What they both did.

When Livvy pulled up in front of the bar, Sid was out of the car before she even stopped. But when he got to the door, he found he was already too late.

"We're sold out," the ticket woman told him.

"How can you be sold out?" Sid demanded.

She shrugged. "We're at capacity. Fire marshal will have a fit if we let any more in there."

"Give my apologies to him," he said, and bolted through the door.

By the time the bouncers cottoned on, Sid had a large lead and was zig-zagging through the crowd, heading for the stage. He could see Doug, fiddling with his microphone and adjusting the strap on his guitar. *I can get there*, Sid told himself. *If I hurry, I can still make it.*

"There he is!" he heard the bouncers call out from behind him, and he felt the swipe of their hand across his shirt before he darted

away.

Almost there.

The house lights went down, the stage lights went up. As the crowd began to cheer, Sid vaulted over the footlights, steadied himself on the neck of Doug's guitar, grabbed him by the back of his head, and kissed him.

The crowd murmured, and Doug stiffened in surprise, but Sid pressed on, and just before security reached out and took hold of him, Doug brushed them away, took Sid in his arms, and kissed him back.

The crowd laughed, whistled, then exploded with applause.

It was Doug who pulled away, but not very far, lingering close to nuzzle Sid's cheek. He reached up to stroke it once, then laughed and kissed the tip of his nose. Still holding onto one of Sid's arms, Doug leaned over to the microphone, looked out at the audience and grinned.

"And a good evening to *you*," he said, and the crowd applauded again.

The rest of the band was smiling as they watched Doug lean to one side and look at Sid, letting the audience see his face as he spoke to him through the microphone.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Hoyt," he said, his voice brimming with mischief and light and love, "that you didn't care for the good-bye

message I left you?"

Sid grinned and leaned towards the mic. "No."

Doug shook his head in mock defeat. "You're a hard man, love, because that was the very best I could do."

"Then I think you should stop trying," Sid said, and the crowd cheered.

Doug squeezed Sid's hand and turned back to the audience. "Would you mind terribly if I delayed your concert long enough to kiss this man once more?"

The cheers cascaded into a roar, the clapping became a driving pulse in time, and as Doug leaned in to take Sid's face in his hands, the band was starting up behind them. Their mouths met, and they were lost inside a wall of sound.

"Are you sure, love?" Doug said, when he broke the kiss, pressing his lips against Sid's ear. "Are you sure what I can give you will be enough?"


"It's enough," Sid told him, and he meant it. "It's not about what you can give me, Doug, or what you can be: it's what you are." He nuzzled his way to Doug's ear and whispered. "I love you, too."

Doug smiled and kissed him once more, then helped him down into the crowd, where he found Livvy was already waiting. His whole face nothing but a smile, Doug

joined the band. Sid watched him, beaming as well, his toe tapping along to the beat.

Livvy laughed, hugged him, then led him out into the open space to dance.

It might last, and it might not. But it would last awhile, and each time they met had the potential to be as beautiful and wild and exciting as this. Maybe it would be better because of the difficulty, and maybe it would be what spelled their end. But no matter what happened, Sid knew he would always carry Doug Keavy in his heart, just as now, even though he was lost in the crowd and couldn't see him, Sid could hear Doug's guitar riding out through the song, holding it up, and holding him, too.

As Sid spun through a reel in the middle of strangers, he was also in his lover's arms, and he let himself go and danced. 

Makeup: Stormi Burton

Models: Robert and Joseph



After They've Seen Paris

by Ann O'Nymous

Sam looked across the trench to where Vincent sat, helmet shading his eyes as he smoked a cigarette, and in that moment he knew Vincent's secret.

The two men, (for so they thought of themselves, though neither had yet seen twenty) were in the same unit, part of the vast mass of the 4th Infantry, here in a sun-baked mud trench to, as the song put it, square America's debt to France. The squaring had consisted, so far, of a lot of digging and

cleaning and boredom and a few moments of terrifying, exhilarating action. It left a good deal of time to chew the fat with the other boys in the unit, which was how Sam and Vincent's friendship had begun.

Vincent was the company oddball, the sly, slick New Yorker in the middle of big farmer's sons from Kansas and Nebraska. Most of the boys in the company had names like Johansen and Hamilton, and looked a bit queerly at a small, dark-eyed guy named Vincent DiCenzo. That very oddness was what drew Sam to him, really. Sam wasn't very big himself, family tradition holding that a bout of scarlet fever in childhood had stunted his growth, and army life hadn't been easy for him.

Sam had had a lifetime of not fitting in well. The only boy amidst four sisters, looking nothing like the rest of the family except for his mother's lips and nose, always smaller than the other boys in town, always trying to be what his father and everyone wanted him to be, never quite managing it. When the call to enlist came, it had been welcome. Finally something no one could question, a chance to become a man by anyone's definition. And it had been exciting, no doubt. The intense physical and mental exertions of training, the welter of new accents and impressions he was exposed to, the exposure to a larger



world. Even the endless tedium of army life and the gut-emptying crossing of the Atlantic had excited him on some level just because they were new, they were different.

Then, somehow, on deployment, it had turned back into Nebraska. Two fellows from his own town were in the same unit, and slapped him on the back hard enough to knock his breath out. All the men in the platoon seemed like that, big and heavy-handed and Midwestern. The routines were marching and cleaning rifles instead of plowing and feeding, and the scenery was narrow trenches and war-wrecked roads instead of the wide open plains, but somehow it was just the same thing all over again. Sam was stronger and more confident now, but all the boys that had been strong and confident at home had turned into Hercules, so he'd managed to gain no ground.

Then Vincent had turned up with a set of orders in his pocket about a transfer from the artillery, and he was smaller than Sam and didn't seem to notice or care. The two young men had fallen instantly into friendly companionship, bumming cigarettes off each other and volunteering to stand watch together.

Still, though, there was something more.

Something about Vincent drew Sam with more than companionship. Something in his loose-jointed, confident walk, or his easy, sardonic grin. Something in his laugh, in his dirty

jokes, the way he shifted his eyes away from Sam's every time they looked right at each other. Something tense and secretive, something that came between them, infecting their friendship with a strange taint.

Finally, just this morning, Sam figured it out. Obviously, Vincent was a girl.

One heard stories about cases like that. Girls who either enlisted and somehow dodged the physical exam, or who just turned up with forged orders in their pocket, claiming to be soldiers. On the front, who could wire back to ask about one more man out of thousands? It explained Vincent's slight build, his soft and mobile lips, and that tension that never seemed to leave the air whenever they were temporarily alone together. Vincent was a girl, and she was sweet on him.

Knowing that, even just in this sunshaded moment in the trench, suddenly put the strength back in Sam's spine. He glanced up and down the trench at the other guys, sitting smoking or talking or sewing buttons back on their shirts, and felt suddenly, quietly superior. He knew a secret none of them did, he'd seen what none of them could, for all their big muscles and easy soldiering.

"Hey Vincent," he asked, flopping down against the trench wall beside her, "c'n I bum a smoke?"

"What happened to yours?" Vincent asked, already digging for the pack. Listening with wise ears, Sam



could now detect the roughening of a female tone into Vincent's high tenor.

"You bummed 'em all already."

"Fair deal." Vincent extended one cigarette carefully, as though to a bad debt risk. Sam lit it and drew the rough smoke deep into his lungs. He felt a deep contentment fill him along with the sweet nicotine, and it took him a minute to identify the reason. It wasn't just the warm sun making its usual brief midday visit to the trench floor, it wasn't the respite from shelling, it wasn't even the fact that Sergeant Clark wasn't due back for an hour.

"Vincent," he asked, "you ever had anyone sweet on you?"

"Nope," Vincent replied. "Girls back in New York mostly thought I was a drip. You?"

"Well, there was a girl back home. I don't know if she was exactly sweet on me or not. Seemed to want to keep company a good deal, anyway. I remember she gave me flowers when I left for the army."

"What's her name?"

"Millie."

"She pretty?"

"I guess. Her ears stuck out, though."

Vincent laughed. "How come you don't know if she was sweet on you?"

Sam shrugged, trying to put it into words. "Everyone in my town's going to marry someone, right? So even if a girl's not sweet on someone, she might act like she is just to not end up an old maid. Hard to know where you stand, I guess."

Vincent grunted noncommittally, finishing the cigarette. Sam looked sideways at her, daring himself to go a little further. "How would you show it if you were sweet on... someone?" he asked, amazed at himself for getting the words out.

Vincent looked back at him, dark eyes unreadable. "I'm not sure," she said slowly. "I don't know if I've ever really been sweet on someone, or if I was just acting like I was."

At midnight, Sam was still trying to figure out what the hell that meant. He lay in the top bunk, staring up at the joined planks above his head, looking at the tiny crack where dirt always sifted down every time a shell struck. Around him, the other bunks were full of snoring, farting, shifting young men, and one young woman he was certain cared about him.

Sleep wouldn't come, not with Vincent on his mind (*what was her real name?* he wondered) and a full erection laying along his belly. Quietly, stealthily, he bent one leg up at the knee, forming a tent of fabric with a hollow space inside. It was an odd position to lie in, but not odd enough to draw comment--not like what he could expect if a wakeful soldier or a man coming in from late watch should see his blanket jerking up and down around his crotch.

Sliding a hand into the waistband of his shorts, he wrapped his fingers almost gingerly around himself, aware that he was taking another step on the

road to debility, mental illness, and premature baldness, but too hard to care. His penis thrilled, responding instantly to the warm pressure of his hand. His mind ran straight to Vincent's lips and eyes, imagining kissing the former while somehow simultaneously staring into the latter. He'd only ever kissed a girl once, at a party when he was thirteen, and he suspected that didn't quite count. Still, he had a vivid imagination, and could conjure the sensation.

Vincent (honestly, he really had to find out her name) was kissing him, saying *I love you, Sam*, and then a more exotic phrase he'd only heard of third- or fourth-hand, *I want you, Sam*. His breath caught at the imagined words, his peter tensing as though he were about to spend himself instantly, but then calming, retreating a bit as Sam held the caught breath, savored the moment of *I want you* in his mind alone, leaving his body out of it for a second.

The tension passed, and he stroked more quickly now, imagining sliding his hand down inside a magically-unbuttoned uniform shirt, feeling Vincent's breasts. Unfortunately, he'd never actually felt a breast, so suddenly the shirt was gone entirely and Sam was merely staring at and admiring the exposed bosom, which bore a substantial resemblance to ones he'd seen in a few furtively traded photographs.

Now, suddenly, it was Vincent's



hand around his penis, almost the same as his, even down to the callus on the outside of the pinky from jerking bootlaces tight. Vincent's hand pulling, gripping at him, stroking evenly and smoothly like milking a cow but backwards and faster, holy goddamn faster, and there, now, yes, his breath wanted to gasp but he made himself keep breathing silently because someone could wake up at any time. There it was, yes, completion, fulfilment, throbbing and pulsing and shooting arcs of spunk directly into his army-issue shorts. One part of his brain insisted on calculating that it would be sufficiently dry by morning so as not to draw comment or, more importantly, notice. The rest of him resented that part being diverted, however necessarily, from thoughts of Vincent, whatever her real name might be.

Not forgetting the need for stealth, he slid his hand silently out of his underwear, using the blanket to wipe away the semen clinging to the juncture of his thumb and forefinger before slowly, quietly, lowering his knee down and falling rapidly into a deep and bottomless sleep.

The next three days were a long walk through a terrifyingly unfamiliar landscape, and Sam loved it. The knowledge that he had a girl sweet on him, and that it was a girl as quick-witted and clever and soft-eyed and brave as Vincent, was like powerful drink. He couldn't maintain a train of thought very long, and kept tripping

over the idea that he now knew for sure whether he'd ever been sweet on anyone before. If this was being sweet on someone, he'd never felt anything like it. It occurred to him more than once that if this had come over him before military life had toughened him, he could have died of it.

Unfortunately, military life was not kind to those with their heads in the clouds, and Sam had not been Sergeant Clark's favorite soldier to begin with. When he finally managed to drop a Chauchat machine gun in the dirt, the sergeant blew his stack. With a long and fluent string of expletives, he reminded Sam that the Chauchat was a delicate and fussy gun, not tolerant of grit or mud, and that Sam's failure to bear that in mind while bearing its load meant that the gun would have to be dismantled and carefully cleaned before it could be used, and that this reflected poorly on Sam's military fitness and personal character. The latter point drew the longest comment and the most expletives.

"And we'll have to get a real soldier to clean it, too, since I wouldn't trust you to clean your teeth without your mother there to help you!" Clark shouted, winding up. "So while someone's going over every piece of that damn thing fixing your mistake, you're going to be spending all night in a foxhole on watch! Maybe getting a little dirty yourself for a change will help you understand that actually *valuable* military equipment needs to be taken care of!" Just as Sergeant Clark

was about to offer Sam a chance to grovel, Vincent sidled up with that easy New York smirk that he knew Clark hated.

"No big problem, sergeant," he said, ignoring Clark's red face, "I can clean that thing in jig time. We'll have it installed before dinnertime if you just--"

Clark turned on Vincent furiously, pleased to have his second-favorite target pop up. "I said a soldier, not a shirk-happy New York sissy, DiCenzo! And I will decide what is and is not a big problem in this outfit without your valuable help! You just volunteered to keep Jacobson company in his foxhole!"

Sam was, quite simply, too stunned to speak.

Sentry duty was a joke, strictly a punishment detail--it wasn't as though the Germans were going to send stealthy assassins strolling across no-man's land in the middle of the night to kill the Allies in their sleep. When the Germans decided to come, there would be an announcement in the form of an artillery barrage, followed by an enormous number of German soldiers running like Jesus across the baked mud to the barbed wire. Not that they were likely to do that either. Instead, they'd just have one or two snipers looking towards the Allied lines for some dumb bastard to do something like sit in a foxhole and poke his head up to see what the Germans were doing. Consequently, a man on sentry duty couldn't show any

light, couldn't smoke or stretch or sleep comfortably. Which meant that midnight was very dark indeed.

The observation trench was only intended to hold one sentry at a time, so two men made a tight fit, side by side on a little hump of hard dirt that made a poor substitute for a seat, not quite able to find anything to talk about. Sam was absolutely paralyzed by the fact that, for the very first time in his life, he was alone with a girl. If he'd just been alone with a friend, he could have chatted amiably in low tones about subjects like Sergeant Clark's character, but he hadn't any idea what to do with a girl. He delayed decision moment by moment, hoping against hope that she'd do something and he could just follow her lead. After an hour of this, Vincent silently reached over and took his hand. She didn't hold it in a firm comradely grasp, either, but gently, as though it were something fragile of immense value.

Sam didn't move, but he did tighten his fingers just slightly around Vincent's, and it felt like the right thing to do. It felt right in a way nothing ever had in his life, in fact. He felt as though he'd opened a new chapter in his life, one in which he could do things properly, even brilliantly,

and nobody would laugh at him any more.

To prove it, when Vincent turned to him and said, in a tiny voice quite unlike his usual sardonic tone, "Please don't hate me, Sam, but I really wish I could kiss you right now", he knew just what to say.

"I guess you'd better kiss me, then."

Vincent's lips were damp with nervous licking, dry from short water beneath that. They were thin, and soft, and warm, and as they pressed excitedly against Sam's, all he could



think was *So this is the big deal. This is why everyone gets so excited about kissing. No wonder, if it always feels like this.*

Suddenly they were clutching at each other, lips still pressed together, hands grabbing at shoulders, hips, anything they could grab to be closer together. Sam was dimly aware that he was hard as stone. He felt some distant part of himself fill with shame as he started fumbling with the buttons on Vincent's shirt with his left hand while all but clawing at her belt and trousers with his right.

"Oh god, yes, yes..." Vincent breathed, and that was another first for Sam. Nobody'd ever told him that, anything like that. The rush of permission and power sent his mind away for a moment, during which the buttons finally gave way and Sam's right hand plunged inside Vincent's shorts and jerked Sam's mind back to the present quite sharply.

Vincent wasn't a girl at all.

The heel of Sam's hand rested on a soft, springy nest of pubic hair, and his fingers were stroking a tautly erect penis, still tucked awkwardly into one straining pantleg. Vincent's chest, now that his shirt was finally open, was smooth and slightly muscular, and unquestionably masculine. Vincent was a man.

Sam froze, fingers still wrapped partly around Vincent's cock. His mind, for all the shocks it had received tonight, worked through sev-

eral points with great speed. Vincent was not a girl. Sam had never told her... *him* (the pronoun change seemed to bolt up his right arm from his fingers to his brain) that he thought he was a girl. Therefore all the evidence of his feelings for Sam, not least including the organ he was still holding, showed the feelings of a man for another man. Therefore, clearly, Vincent was a sissy. And he, Sam, here in this foxhole with his arms--and fingers--around a man, was... there his thoughts broke down. That was further than he could imagine at the moment. For one thing, Vincent's hand was clutching needfully at his neck, pulling him in for another kiss. This time, to his shock, he felt Vincent's tongue part his lips, reaching into his mouth, tangling briefly with his own tongue.

Unexpectedly, as Vincent's weight shifted, his erection slid out of its stuck position and sprung up to lie along his belly, resting comfortably against Sam's thumb at an angle he recognized. After years of furtive, shameful masturbation, it was almost reflexive. He was desperately aroused, he had a dick in his hand, so it seemed natural to start stroking. Then Vincent gasped and whimpered with almost pitiable gratitude, and that was the most erotic sound Sam had ever heard, so he had no choice but to keep going.

His hand knew the rhythms by heart, faster in waves, slower by decreasing degrees, but sooner than he would



have believed, at a crest that should have subsided, Vincent strangled a cry in his throat until it came out as a little squeak, while his hands clutched desperately at Sam's shoulders. He shook from head to toe as he spasmed in Sam's grip, spurting copious amounts of come up his belly and all over Sam's hand.

Vincent panted, leaning against Sam, holding him. Sam felt the hot semen slipping slowly down his hand, and tried to understand what had just happened. What was still happening, in fact, as Vincent shifted from his side and, bending and maneuvering carefully in the cramped foxhole, knelt in front of him.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked, part of him rebelling but no part of him making any move to stop Vincent

as he fumbled open Sam's pants and pulled his almost intolerably hard prick free.

"Just... just trust me," Vincent breathed, not looking up as he ran his hands along Sam's length. "God, it's so beautiful." It had never occurred to Sam that any penis, most especially his own, could be considered beautiful. Especially not by the standards of Vincent, Vincent with the soft, dark eyes and the easy smile and those lips, those lips...

Those lips were now around the head of his penis, he realized. And moving downward. He was, unbelievably, in the middle of a sexual act of which he had heard only rumors, persistent and furtive whispers of "French style" or "prick sucking" that he'd never been sure whether to be-

lieve. It was good, though. Incredibly good. Vincent's mouth was hot and wet and powerful and Sam had no idea what to do with his hands. Finally, and knowing beyond any doubt that it was the wrong thing to do, he simply folded them politely on his lower chest.

Vincent had his own fingers wrapped tightly around the root of Sam's cock, and was stroking them strongly, almost painfully up and down in the same rhythm as his lips slid up and down along the top half. It came close to hurting but didn't, instead it was amazing, as one by one all Sam's other senses faded out and all sensation reduced down to this unprecedented and unimaginable thing that was happening to his cock, and

when all that existed was his cock, floating in a universe devoid of all but the feeling that was building in it, suddenly everything exploded and his entire body flooded back to him as waves, shuddering gasping dam-breaching earthquake rhythms of feeling blasted across every nerve in his body like artillery fire and then reversed back into his prick as every ounce of pleasure and strength in his body jerked, spurted, poured out through the head and down Vincent's throat.

Gasping, Vincent fell back against the foxhole wall next to Sam. A clod of dirt, dislodged by the impact, fell into Sam's hair and he realized that at some point his helmet had gone. No, there it was by his feet. That was all



right, then.

"Jesus Christ," blasphemed Vincent, "that was wonderful."

"That was... that was..." Sam stammered, looking for a lie or a cover, then gave up. "Yes."

And with that, lying against each other in the dirty little foxhole, they committed the cardinal sin of men on even a pointless and irrelevant sentry duty. They fell asleep in innocent and well-spent exhaustion.

When they awoke, the night was old enough to be growing gray. With dawn's approach, Sergeant Clark just might risk himself enough to crawl out and check on them, so they rearranged their uniforms to look as much like those of men who'd been vigilant all night as possible. Clark didn't appear, however, and eventually they had to talk.

"Vincent... about, uh, what happened..." Sam began, wishing he knew the end of the sentence.

Vincent looked straight at him with every street in New York sneering from behind his eyes. "I'm not sorry," he said.

"Oh, neither am I!" insisted Sam, politely, and was amazed to discover it was true. He'd committed an unforgiveable sin and fallen asleep on watch to boot, and he wasn't even a little bit sorry. He couldn't sort out exactly what or how he was feeling, but there was no flicker of an impulse to apologize to Vincent or to anyone.

They sat, thighs pressed together but touching nowhere else, conscious always that someone might now appear at any moment, and made conversation.

"They say the war will be over soon," Vincent ventured.

"That would be nice," Sam replied, meaning every word.

"What are you going to do after?"

Sam shrugged. He'd never really considered it, not because he didn't believe the war would end but because he already knew the answer. "Home to Nebraska, I guess. There's the farm to take care of. What about you?"

Vincent shook his head. "Nothing in New York that needs me to take care of it." He paused a little while before speaking again. "So head home, take over the farm, and marry... Millie, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so. She's a nice girl. You have to marry someone."

Vincent laughed. "Don't say 'you'. I don't have to do a damn thing."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Stay here." Sam looked at Vincent in surprise, and Vincent chuckled. "Not here in this damned trench, but here in France. I got a week's leave in Paris a few months back, and I'll tell you, that's the kind of town I could see myself in. I'd heard there were places there where... anyway, you know, I met some people. Some men. It's a city where a man can be who-

ever he wants, and I like the idea of that. Anyway, why not? Not like New York's waiting breathlessly for my return."

Sam reeled. The idea of being able to do that, to simply decide where to live and how, was inconceivable, almost impossible. And Vincent was so casual about it, as though it was the kind of choice one could just make, like picking a hat. "Don't you have to get mustered out back in the States?" he finally asked.

That sardonic half-grin reappeared. "This war ends, there's going to be a lot of guys going back to America and England and Belgium and lord knows where. Lot of slips of paper getting passed back and forth. Easy for a guy to slip through the cracks... if he wants to."

Sam was still trying to comprehend the idea that Vincent could talk about desertion so casually when Sergeant Clark suddenly appeared over the edge of the foxhole.

"Morning, you two sissies," he snapped, and Sam had to repress a guilty flinch. "All men have been ordered in for a briefing, and that includes you. It seems that the army has a broader definition of 'men' than I do. Now get your sorry selves back to where you're supposed to be, double-time!"

The briefing was short and to the point. They were going over the top.



By the end of the day, the German positions would belong to the Allies. This proposition was greeted with great enthusiasm by most of the troops, leaving Sam feeling once again alone amid a crowd of men who did not think or feel as he did. Why now, now that he'd finally found something he wanted to stay alive to learn more about, was he being asked to risk his life? What kind of sick joke was that?

Nevertheless, noontime found him in a tense line of men by a trench ladder, a rifle tightly gripped in his hands, bayonet fixed, listening to the thunder of the guns behind them

shelling the German trenches, the idea being to keep their machine guns and artillery defenses down long enough for the infantry to cross no-man's land.

The infantry, of course, being him and Vincent and the two boys from his hometown and everyone else in the unit. And the suppression of German fire, of course, being a terrific idea in theory.

All too soon, though, Sergeant Clark's whistle blared shrilly and he charged up the ladder at top speed. The men right behind him in line charged up too, and a surge of movement overwhelmed the entire trench in both directions as far as Sam could see.

Vincent was right ahead of Sam in line, and just before they came to the ladder, he turned to Sam for a moment and smiled. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Being afraid is what kills you."

And then they were up the ladder and running like hell over the uneven, cratered ground, and there was a few seconds of near-silence except for all the noise of the charge, but then that ended. Sam's vision was uncannily clear as he ran, and he saw the men up ahead cutting through the barbed wire, and then he heard the distant chatter of the German machine-guns start, and two of the men cutting the wire fell down. The third one kept working for several seconds more, and he saw the wire part and spring in two directions right before the third man fell down too.

Just ahead of him, Vincent angled his run toward the gap in the wire, and Sam followed him. He'd be damned if he'd go where Vincent didn't. All the other men ran towards the gap too, and then Sam heard the distant, sharper sound of German artillery, and he wanted to throw himself flat on the ground and pray, but he didn't. He kept running because it was his job and because the others were doing it and Vincent was doing it and he would be *damned*.

Then there was a sound like the end of the world and a time without memory.

When the world came back, he was on his belly in the dirt next to a shell crater, and there were no more sounds of gunfire. He pushed himself up away from the ground and everything hurt. He looked at himself and there was blood on his uniform. Something told him that much of it was his own, and was still coming. He coughed and that hurt too, and he spit up a wad of something black and gritty that he supposed was dirt. He looked around for Vincent and saw him lying on the ground a few feet away, rifle stuck into the dirt by its bayonet next to him. *Better not fire that again until it's cleaned*, he thought reflexively, even as he crawled over to Vincent and shook him.

Vincent's head was mostly gone. His coat and uniform were intact, but above the collar there was a neck and a jaw and a few inches of dark brown



hair, but then just a red and dripping end of Vincent and whatever he had been.

Vincent was never going to go to Paris. Vincent was never going to go anywhere or do anything again. He was dead. Sam went cold all over. He had imagined, vaguely, that there would be other conversations with Vincent, in which certain things would be resolved, understandings reached, perhaps even a goodbye. He tried to make himself comprehend that that would not happen now, and to his dismay found it surprisingly easy. Vincent was undeniably there, undeniably dead, and whatever they had shared was at an end. Sam was alone now.

He looked around the battlefield. He

really was alone. He saw Sergeant Clark's body slumped over barbed wire, cut to pieces by bullets, recognized the bodies of most of the rest of his unit. His hands were still on Vincent's body, which was too still and cold to even think about, when he looked back towards the trench he'd come from and saw busy, active men with stretchers and red crosses on their arms.

In that instant, he felt a perfect clarity come over him, and saw the future. He walked back to the men with the crosses and they took him back behind the lines to treat him for his wounds. He was in hospital for a few weeks, and soon enough shipped home, where he took a train

back to Nebraska and inherited the farm and Millie was there and he married her and worked diligently and honestly and died sometime in the 1970s.

Easy for a man to slip through the cracks... if he wants to.


Instead of that, he reached down to Vincent's neck and found the leather thong that held his dogtag. Pulling it free of the gory wreck of Vincent's head, he slipped his own leather thong over his head and placed it carefully, lovingly, around Vincent's neck. Then he slipped Vincent's identification over his head and committed himself to an entire lifetime.

Don't be afraid. Being afraid is what



kills you.

Sam Jacobson would be buried here and a telegram sent to his family, who would grieve and weep and be, for the first time, proud of their son who gave his life in the Great War. And Vincent DiCenzo would slip through the cracks and live in Paris, and have the life he'd wanted. No German shell could stop that happening, not if he had anything to say about it.

Leaving his body behind to be found and identified and buried and mourned, he pulled himself to his feet and walked staggering towards the men with the red crosses. His legs gave out just as he reached them, but they were fast and capable and caught him before he fell. He told them he was Private Vincent DiCenzo and they told him he would be all right. 

Makeup: Aviva Raskin

Models: Theodosius and Linck

Lunchtime

By Glenda Glass

Ed McIntyre shrugged off his dripping trench coat. The warm air inside the bar was aromatic with pungent notes of caraway, mustard, and kraut from their famous Reubens, and just a hint of spilled beer. Ed slumped onto a well-worn bar stool and let his coat slide into a puddle at his feet.

"Brew and a burger, Ed?" Lev Greenberg asked from behind the bar.

"Nah, just the beer. Not hungry yet," Ed told Lev, who nodded sympathetically and pulled him a pint of Schlitz. Ed took a long swallow, and grimaced.

"Rotten stuff," Lev grinned, and passed a basket of fries to a man at the other end of the bar.

One day, Ed told himself, I'll drink imported dark ale. Wine, even. One day I'll walk in

here, order my last Schlitz, and pour it out on the floor. Then I'll throw Lev a few twenties on my way out... God, fat chance...

"What?" Lev quirked an eyebrow, hirsute, handsome face tilted to one side. Ed realized he'd said the last few words aloud.

"Nothing, Lev. I just spent the morning churning out five gross of godawful fliers advertising a film called *The Devil and the Debutante*."

"Pardon?"

"You know, one of those two-bit dramas, where the leading man is

so old and fat he fails to look good no matter how much makeup and soft focus they give him. It'll show for three minutes and even the teens necking in the back will walk out in disgust. And my posters will be down by





morning."

Lev quietly polished a schooner glass with a white rag, wearing the patient, amiably blank expression of bartenders everywhere. Ed figured it was passed from one to another like a cherished old corkscrew.

"Sorry, rambling." He knocked back the rest of his beer and Lev re-filled his glass.

"About your show last weekend, I..." Lev looked uncomfortable.

"You had other things to do. Yeah, I know." Most everyone had,

Ed knew. The beer still tasted like piss, but at least a faint glow was beginning to fill Ed's short frame, gently pushing off some of the bitterness that twisted his gut.

It had been a decent enough show, Ed supposed, except for the fact that all of his work was total crap. In *Still Life On Sunday Morning* he had used way too much Hooker's green for the intended mood, *Not a Poet* had horribly muddled lines and everything was off center, and *Man on a Divan...* Christ. Even in the poor light of Ed's tiny loft, the blending of the stylized flesh had looked wooden. Under the blank electric bulbs of the attic room that passed for a low-rent gallery, it was a real train wreck. Ed had made sure there was a great deal

of cheap chardonnay, but except for a few brown-nosing art students, no one had seemed amused, let alone enthusiastic.

Ed had left early, for "another party"—a party alone among brushes, wooden stretchers, and squeezed-out paint tubes. He sat on the floor for hours, drinking cheap gin whose aroma was almost entirely overpowered by the reek of turpentine and linseed oil. About halfway through the bottle Ed wondered why he didn't just give up on gin and drink the turpentine. He still wasn't sure why

he hadn't.

Ed caught Lev's eye and nudged his empty glass across the bar. Lev raised one of those so-expressive eyebrows, an odd crimp at the edge of his beard that might have been worry, disapproval, pity, or even bald scorn. The clock on the wall with the Schlitz logo read a quarter past noon.

"C'mon, it's happy hour somewhere," Ed said, and Lev filled the glass without a word. His dark eyes met Ed's, unreadable, but to Ed they were the calm bottomless eyes of a man bidding farewell to a friend on the long, agonizing road to Hell. Maybe the same eyes Moses had turned on Pharaoh once. Ed wondered, not for the first time, why he didn't just leave non-representational art to his betters, and paint old-style illusions of men like Lev. Those eyes alone would fetch top dollar from jaded collectors, if only he could render them. Ed drank deeply. *Aye, there's the rub*, he thought, unable to meet Lev's gaze any longer. Lev looked away too, but Ed found his eyes still darting around the bar, looking

somewhere, *anywhere* else.

A young man walked into the bar as Ed's eye wandered, catching it immediately. He was tan and fair-haired; under his plaid rain cape, he wore a crisp pinstriped suit, a few years out of date, but expertly fitted to his tall, slim frame. The boy's filmy eyelashes slipped down over his bright eyes, but he



cast them just so. Ed knew the boy was returning his glance, with interest. It wasn't the look of a child, but with that hopeful stance and trim figure, Ed knew the boy couldn't be more than 21, 22 at the most. Ed averted his face, hoping his blush wouldn't show too clearly against his washed-out winter pallor. March was no time for sunbathing, not in the city. The boy must have been traveling. Before Ed could compose himself, the boy had taken the stool beside him and asked Lev for a Schlitz.

"Awful stuff," Ed murmured cautiously, wryly hefting the remains of his own pint.

"Lousy," the kid agreed with an easy grin, "but that's half the fun." Ed found himself fighting a half-smile.

"How about the lousy weather, is that fun, too?" It came out cattier than Ed meant it to.

"Nah, but it's a good excuse for the cape."

"Ah." Ed was out of quips, so he examined his last inch of beer, instead. Maybe there was something clever at the bottom of the glass?

"So," the boy said, oh-so-casually, "how come an able-bodied young man like you isn't off fighting the Führer?" Ed, uncomfortably close to thirty, felt flattered by the word "young". He gestured awkwardly at his delicate, almost

finicky little body in its hemmed-up suit.

"Faulty, I'm afraid. Heart murmur, ulcers, and a little deaf in one ear." He kept his voice carefully light, but a sidelong glance earned him a glimpse of the boy's eyes, soft and wide, assessing his claims. Their blue clarity raked him gently, stem to stern, with a thoroughness that politely disagreed with Ed's self-deprecation. His defective heart stripped its gears and started thumping in double time.

"How about you?" Ed asked, suddenly hoarse.

"They wouldn't take me," the boy said quietly. He took a sip of beer, gaze cast sidelong at Ed under those long lashes, and very slowly wiped the foam from his lips, using only two fingers. Ed felt a queasy stab of excitement shoot down through his abdomen. With equal care, Ed examined the fingernails of his right hand, and wiped an imaginary smudge off his middle finger with his left thumb. Then he put both hands in his lap, glancing to his right just long enough to catch the boy nod ever-so-slightly.

Ed picked up his coat, threw a few coins on the bar for Lev, and walked into the men's lavatory in the back. He carefully hung the coat over the stall door so it would close without the latch, and took a leak. He dried his cock carefully

and waited, fly open, leaning against the wall by the toilet.

He didn't have long to wait. Just as Ed started to wonder whether he'd misread the signals, a low tap preceded the boy's entrance. He slipped in with a big grin, replacing Ed's coat behind him. He latched the door, and leaned in to clasp Ed's shoulders.

"You're beautiful," the boy whispered. "May I start now?"

"Sure," Ed breathed, and let the boy maneuver around him to kneel on the floor. Ed slipped his cock out of the smooth, striped cotton of his boxers. Eager, the boy kissed the head; it was already hardening. Ed braced his back on the door of the stall, legs planted at shoulder-width. He affected nonchalance; this was an anonymous encounter, not a romantic liaison. The boy was just young, and polite.

The boy kissed Ed's cock again, and began gently running the tip of his tongue up and down Ed's foreskin, teasing. He was going to take his own sweet time, Ed realized. He relaxed into the boy's pleasant caresses, erection growing. Then Ed almost gasped as the boy slipped his lips suddenly around his cock, ramming it deep into his mouth until the friction on the drier shaft slipped the foreskin off the head and pressed its bare tip into the roof of the boy's mouth. The



boy held it there a moment, tongued the underside, and then slipped his lips back off and began licking further down the shaft, stroking with more of his long, agile tongue.

Ed was fully hard now, mouth half open, leaning hard against the stall door for support. He struggled to keep from moaning aloud. The idiosyncratic jog of his heart pounded in his good ear. The boy barely breathed, it seemed; his tongue spasmed steadily in sweetly sensuous arcs up and down Ed's cock. It was as if he wanted to

taste every square inch of Ed's sensitive skin. Ed could feel how slick his swollen cock was, silky with a combination of saliva and precum that allowed just enough evaporation to keep the heat of his erection from becoming painful.

The boy slowly took the smooth trip down Ed's cock, soft lips guiding it expertly into the back of his throat. Ed was on the point of allowing himself a soft moan, anything to release a little of the near-unbearable pressure of his arousal, when he heard the bathroom door open. Ed froze, waiting;

a bright tinkle of piss sounded on the ceramic of a urinal barely a yard away. A muffled giggle, barely audible, arose from the region of Ed's crotch. He glanced down, startled, to see the boy's clear blue eyes fixed on his. The urinal flushed.

Unable to look away, Ed watched the mirth fade from the boy's eyes, leaving a gentle, almost pleading look. Without taking his mouth off Ed's cock or breaking eye contact, the boy undulated his tongue along the underside of Ed's shaft, and slipped one long, soft-skinned

hand up to Ed's waistband. As the bathroom door swung shut, leaving them alone again, the boy slipped his fingers gradually lower, until they brushed the swell of Ed's buttock under his boxers. It hit Ed all at once: the boy wanted to please—he was waiting for Ed's approval before he went any further. The thought of being wanted like that thrilled him. Ed's cock throbbed with what he was sure must be more blood than it had ever held in his life.

A soft, guttural cry rose unbidden to the back of Ed's throat. He nodded emphatically, eyes fluttering shut as the boy put the other hand into his waistband and



slid both hands down to cup Ed's buttocks. Properly braced, he thrust Ed against him in swift, smooth plunges. The pneumatic rhythm had a primal syncopation, fresh and lovely as a jazz solo.

Ed tried to move with his young seducer, but his knees had turned to water. Pants slipping down his thighs, all he could do was gasp appreciatively. He reached down with his right hand to cover the boy's left as it cupped his buttock.

Just as Ed felt himself on the point of climax, the boy slowed dramatically. Slowly, he fanned his fingers, then twined them around Ed's, raising imploring eyes for one more confirmation. Ed met the hopeful eyes with a slap-happy grin. That smile said "yes" in a language that needed no words. Ed's breath stopped entirely as that sinuous tongue spiraled around his whole length in an impossible pirouette. The warm lips drew on his hard cock as on a fine cigar. The boy pumped faster and faster, accompanying his smoothly insistent lips with the virtuoso cadenza of his amazingly talented tongue.

Every muscle in Ed's body was as taut as his engorged cock, and the boy's hand on his ass flamed red-orange, hot as the youthful hand clutched in his. Ed's heartbeat was as wild in his chest as an unbroken colt. In the fiery rush that spread from his cock up through his spine

to every nerve in his body, Ed felt the spasm that presaged orgasm.

Just as Ed thought he would scream from the blissful pain, he came. The vibrations of his explosive release probably caused minor earthquakes as far away as Jersey. Even the residue of stale beer that lingered in his mouth turned to ambrosia. Ed's vision blurred; all he could register in the lambent afterglow was the velvet pull of the beautiful boy swallowing, licking every trace of semen from Ed's cock, and dabbing it with a silk pocket square as soft as a slow jazz beat.

Ed opened his eyes to see the boy tucking the semen-stained hanky into an inner pocket, and gently slipping Ed's cock into his boxers before finally—reluctantly—releasing Ed's hand to pull up his pants, fasten his belt, and straighten his suit coat. Heart still pounding out strange rhythms, Ed let the boy perform these ministrations, trying to hide how out of breath he was. Standing now, the boy leaned down to whisper in his ear. "You taste like Havana's finest. *Thank you.*"

Ed almost choked on a lungful of air, and looked into those honest blue eyes. He had no breath to speak, so he just stared. The boy's eyes gleamed with... was it admiration? Ed broke first. Looking away, he unlatched the stall,

and took his coat. The boy stepped closer to Ed than necessary on the way out of the stall. Breath mingled with Ed's, he paused to brush his fingers gently over the thin wool covering Ed's ass. Ed left the stall, coat over his arm, as the boy walked to the lavatory door.

Suddenly, gripped by an impulse he couldn't have explained for the life of him, Ed asked, in a hoarse whisper: "What's your name?" It was against every tenet of men's-room sex, and yet...

"John Murray," the boy breathed, with a dazzling white smile that took back all the breath Ed had regained. John started for the door again, then stopped, wheeled, clasped his trembling hands together.

"Mr. McIntyre," he said quickly, "I... I saw your exhibit last Sunday and I loved it. Your *Man on Divan* ... it changed my world." Snapping his mouth shut, the boy flushed Ed's favorite shade of

red: alizarin crimson. John Murray turned away again, walking slowly towards the door.


"John," Ed said, leaning against the stall to support his wobbly legs, liquid with shock and joy. "Do you come here often?"

"Yes," the boy said, face alight with a rush of lovely Christmas-morning glee. "Yes, I do."

"Call me Ed," Ed croaked, with a broad, genuine smile. The boy



nodded like a happy terrier, and strode out of the stall with beautifully fake nonchalance.

Ed rested against the wall for a while to catch his breath, then washed his hands for form's sake, smiling beatifically at his reflection. He left the lavatory totally composed, but as he reached the street he caught himself whistling. The rain cooled Ed's flushed face and crooned a soft ballad on the street. Spring unfurled ahead of him, full of mild Schlitz and incomparable Reubens under Lev's benevolent gaze. For the first time in months, Ed McIntyre felt swell. 

Makeup: Aviva Raskin


Models: Jeremy and James,
featuring Miles

"My one complaint is that it's just too damn intense..."

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The Prince of Ashaltan, Ch. 1

By Gwen Northage

Birds sang in the boughs of the chestnut and apple trees surrounding a fine country estate whose walls and walkways would once have been everything of which I'd dreamed... and yet I filled my mind with scorching sun and drying blood. I told myself that the roses lining the path were nothing to me, that I had grown up in a courtyard surrounded by flowers just as bright, their lush scent carried on hot winds into my own private rooms, lined with rich rugs and spicy-scented exotic woods. My clothes and skin had been bathed in expensive perfumes, and humble servants had tended my every wish... and now my stomach was growling. Of course, I couldn't afford food now that I'd wasted most of my gold in this strange land.

That, at least, was near the truth. Near enough that I could pull the hunger in, wrap it around my performance, and use it to my advantage, making it another layer to the part I would soon have to play to the very best of my ability, if I wanted to win over the gentlemen who owned this sumptuous place.

I had worked some impressive stages in the past, at home in London, but the stage onto which I was walking now was the whole of the English countryside, a manor lar-

ger than a city block back in the world I had known before, surrounded by gardens rich with flowers and trees, humming with bees, and populated by the sort of people who would have looked down on me from the private balconies in the theater. Today, I would play to them face-to-face—an audience of only a few, but if I played it well, I stood to make more money than I'd ever dared hope for on the boards.

As I wandered the garden while I waited for my soon-to-be audience, I enjoyed the thrum of my nerves, like the strings of a violin under the bow. This thrill was why I loved the theater. Colors were never so bright, air never so sweet, my skin never so alive with feeling as when I waited to step onto the stage, and now the world was my stage. I couldn't rely on written lines to get me through, but only on my wits.

A tall, thin butler in a dour, dark suit greeted me at the door of the house, and eyed me suspiciously. I knew how I must appear, my dark skin and eyes beneath a carefully-wound turban, brocade robes not quite trailing to the ground, as out of place in this garden as a red damask rose in the middle of a dark and dusty London pub.

"I wish to see Lord Wessex," I informed him. "This is his... abode, yes?"



"It is, sir. And you are...?"

"Prince Rais Shamalman of Ashaltan." I was quite pleased with the name—it sounded rather impressive and suitably exotic. Certainly it was a far cry from my common Christian name.

"Of course, sir. And... if I may ask how you are acquainted with his lordship?"

"I am not yet," I told him, all blithe innocence. "But I have heard many tales of their charity and goodness." In reality, I'd spent weeks and the last of my money perfecting my role, rehearsing on dozens of country bumpkins and

coachmen halfway across England, and learning what I could about the local lords, until I'd heard of this one. Lord Wessex and his brother. The perfect audience, the perfect chance.

To his credit, the butler hardly reacted to this—only nodded, and gestured me to follow him into the garden. "Lord Michael and his brother are outside, sir."

As he escorted me toward his lord and the lord's brother into the garden some minutes later, I was so enthralled by the game that I could feel my pulse pounding even in my fingertips. The

butler introduced me, while I got my first look at my marks.

The lord himself was greying and stout in the way of those who never have to miss a meal, but his younger brother was as arresting as the elder was dull. Small and slender of frame with a delicately handsome face and eyes like a poet's, he threatened to steal all my concentration, and I had to force my mind back to my imposture. Neither of them looked like they had the slightest idea what to make of me. Perfect. I took the chance their silence offered, and took con-

trol of the conversation by speaking first.

“Forgive, my lords... my English is not so good, but my heart is for your goodwill.” I rested my hand upon that organ and cast my most beseeching look at those I hoped would soon be my benefactors. “I travel many miles, across desert and sea, to meet with such men as yourselves, and beg your help.”

“What kind of help?” the older fellow asked sharply. He was acting rude, off-balance. A good sign for me. Better yet, his brother looked embarrassed by his behavior.

“Michael...” The younger man hushed him with a dire look, and turned his attention back to me. “Forgive my brother, please... Come, friend. Tell us your name, and your story.”

“Take care that you do not overstep your bounds, James,” Michael chastised the younger man. “But I agree.” He turned to me. “Come. Sit and tell us. I shall be interested to hear what brings you here, and what you want of us. But first, we should take some refreshment. After a long

journey, you must be quite tired,”

James cast a guilty look at his brother—so there was respect there, I guessed, along with the rivalry—and held out his hand, and gestured for me to sit on a bench beneath a fine plum tree covered in blossoms. I took the opportunity to demonstrate my foreign bona fides, waiting until he had sat and then perching myself, legs folded, on the grass at their feet. James blinked, looked once at his brother, and then, apparently deciding the older man’s ire was



worth possible offense to a stranger, lowered himself as gracefully as he could to sit in front of me. Lord Wessex frowned slightly and remained on the bench, but he waved over the butler. "We'll take tea here in the garden, it seems, Rogers. Bring a setting for our companion, as well. And a low table, if you please... unless my dear brother wishes to balance his cup and saucer on his knee?"

James blushed. "A table would do nicely, thank you."

After the butler had left, we sat in silence for a moment before James made the traditional assay at conversation of polite nothings. "The weather is fine today, for autumn. I hope you find it to your liking?"

"It is... less warm than I am used to, but beautiful."

"Is it very hot in your land?"

I smiled. "I do not find it so, but perhaps you would. The sun bakes parts of my land quite dry, but others are lush and thick with life, even more than in these lovely gardens. Perhaps this climate is better for walking, though. Heat can be quite tiresome when one has far to travel before a rest."

"Did you have far to walk today?" James asked.

"Not so very far, no. I walked from the charming village over that hill. A lady there was kind enough to suggest I might introduce myself

here."

"That was good of her," Michael put in, although his tone suggested his heart was not wholly in this statement. I would have to work hard to earn his approval, I could see—I abandoned a half-formed notion of addressing him as Michael rather than Lord Wessex to prove my foreignness.

Fortunately the butler, Rogers, spared us any further awkwardness at that moment by reappearing with a low table, followed by a trio of servants carrying the makings of a lush tea-time repast. I took no small amusement in pretending confusion over the details of the meal, ignoring the silverware and instead dipping my little muffin directly into the marmalade, all the while watching out of the corner of my eyes while my hosts looked on. Michael looked aghast, but James hid a lovely smile.

"Have you been in England long, Mr. Shamalman?" Michael asked.

"No, my good lord. Only long enough to see that you are good people, and live very well. I only wish that my own people... but I speak too soon of ill things."

"No, do tell us, if you will," James set aside his teacup and leaned forward eagerly. "I do not wish to pry, of course, but we are naturally curious what brings you here. I take it there was some tragedy involved, however, and I



would not cause you pain.”

“It is a sad tale,” I agreed, “but one that must be told if you are to understand me.” I took a deep breath—here lay my making or my undoing. “My kingdom, Ashaltan, lies beyond the great ocean, where the sun is bright and high all year. My father, the king, had thrice-three wives, and I was the only son of the youngest and best-beloved of these, the wife of his old age, a woman called ‘Radiance Approaches the Horizon.’ For twenty years I lived happily in the palace of the sun, blessed by the love of my father, my mother, and all my older siblings. My brother, a noble and brave man, ruled our kingdom after my father died, and all should have served him gladly. An older brother should be revered as a father, when the father is dead. Such is the way of my people, at least,” I added. I thought I saw Michael

smile a little at that. A noble's pride was an easy target to hit.

“Unfortunately such was not to be,” I continued, letting my voice and eyes both fall. “My fifth-eldest brother is... not a good man. His mother was the first wife, but bore many children who died before she brought him forth, so by our accounting he was still low in rank. Bitterness filled him, and when my father died he thought he had been robbed of his rightful place as successor.”

“Such things happen, of course,” James murmured. “Our own kings have seen similar, on occasion.”

I nodded to him. “It is a sad truth that evil men may be born in any land. Such a one is this brother of mine. He plotted against my eldest brother, and gained friends through his treachery, and then he attacked. He set upon my eldest brother in

the night at a festival, while he was out in the gardens with his favorite wife, and threw him bound up in thick ropes into the sea, with stones tied all around his waist and legs.”

“Good God!” James gaped. “What about the wife—did he kill her, as well?”

The look of unfeigned sympathy in his eyes told me everything: James was sentimental, the sort to think much of a tale of love thwarted by tragedy. I moved my story slightly to suit his tastes. “Fifth Brother would have taken her for his own slave, but the maiden was both loyal and brave. She convinced a serving girl to secretly bring her a little knife, and cut her own throat rather than be unfaithful.”

“The poor girl...” James murmured. His eyes practically shone with empathy for the creatures of my little phantasmagoria. He was an actor’s dream, the audience who feels every soliloquy as though it was spoken from his own heart, who watches every impassioned courtship as if he would speak those words. He was everything I had hoped to find here... except that the estate’s purse-strings were not in his hands.

“A noble woman. Death before slavery, like the matrons of ancient Rome,” Michael commented. I thought even he looked somewhat

moved, and felt the giddy pleasure of a great performance. No bow and applause here, however. I could only continue, and do my best not to lose their attention.

“It is a terrible thing when brothers fight, my lord. We—all eight of us—are divided, now. Two others side with Fifth Brother, and the rest of my elder brothers are now in chains, imprisoned by them. More than us, our whole land suffers... Fifth Brother cares little for the peasants, and treats them ill in pursuit of his own pleasure. In my father’s day the old peasants were cared for, food was set aside for drought, but now... I do not know what will happen to them.” I let a careful tremble into my voice—a nobleman like myself would not weep for peasants, but I could imply that their pain was my own.

James nodded sympathetically, and reached out, touching my shoulder with a steady hand, long-fingered and scholarly, but strong. His eyes shone with a pale, cool light, and I knew that he had been touched by my tale. The perfect audience indeed.

I continued in a low tone, as of deep sorrow. “Perhaps I should have stayed, but I took my chance when it appeared. As youngest, I was able to slip out of the palace some time ago, to travel and see what help I might raise for our cause... but my little boat was

dashed in the rocks north of here, and I have wandered ever since.”

“What do you seek?” Michael asked.

“Rest, and a place of safety,” I said promptly. “I need time, to plan what I might do to help my remaining brothers and our people.” Greater requests could come later, once I gained their trust.

And come they would, I told myself, if only the two brothers would buy my act...

The idea for my little adventure had come to me in London, while I was out enjoying an ale with a fellow-actor and sometime-bedmate named Freddy. From our table, we saw a fellow in extravagant robes and a turban parading through the streets accompanied by a moustachioed businessman in a top hat and tails. Both of them were obviously quite rich... and attracting a good deal of attention from everyone along their way. In time gone by

I’d dreamed of being that rich—as every young actor does, I suppose, when he first tastes money and the crowd’s acclaim. By this time, however, I had passed thirty years—although I didn’t look it—and increasingly scraped for even small roles.

“Who’s that, then?” I asked Freddy.

“Some foreign fellow. A prince or something like that. From the look of those clothes, I’d bet he owns half of Arabia.”

“Then what’s he doing here?” I asked, watching the supposed prince carefully.

“I don’t know what he’s here for,” Freddy replied. “Foreign fellows



always seem to show up on our shores, don't they? For whatever reasons." He was like that—literal-minded. Rhetoric and wonder were quite beyond him.

"That's true..." I watched the foreign man, fascinated. He wasn't as dark as I would have expected of a man from that corner of the world—although certainly swarthy, I had seen darker men from my own father's Italy. And he was certainly handsome; I laughed as one of the brassy flower-girls gathered around the theater blushed, so flustered by the appearance of this exotic stranger that she forgot her pitch in the middle of giving it. The gentleman said something to his companion, and the English man smiled back, and gave the girl a shilling in return for a slightly wilted red rose from her basket. "I suppose they're taken in by rich nobs who think to gain from the notoriety," I mused out loud. I stood suddenly, and left the table.

"Hey, you ain't finished!"

"Finish it yourself, if you like," I told Freddy. "I've got a part to study."

My young friend must have been flabbergasted to see me leave a glass still half-full. He knew I'd no jobs coming up... although he also knew I didn't have the coin for the ale, any more than he did, and the poor bastard didn't think of *that* as he sat there gawking after me. I *did*

have a plan, now, though, and this part—if I succeeded at it—could buy me a few weeks' comfort and good food while I came up with something better.

I spent the rest of the day following the Eastern visitor and his host, watching their every move, absorbing his movements and manners, and planning. I noted the peculiar way he bowed, with his hands folded in front of him like an English child praying, the way he touched his friend's shoulder and hand frequently as he talked, an intimacy that would have been offensive in an Englishman, but seemed unthinking courtesy from this gentleman—and, I noticed with some amusement, his English friend did not seem to take it the least amiss. When they paused for luncheon, the man wrinkled his nose to alcohol, and likewise to the pork that was offered, but took beef and bread with gratitude, and eschewed flatware to eat by pinching the food elegantly between the forefingers of his right hand. The left never touched anything. I had no idea what that might mean, but given how scrupulous he was about it, I noted it as a thing of some significance. I also noted the little silver ring he wore on his right hand, set with a red stone carved with some curling sort of designs. As the day wore on, I edged in and out of earshot to catch the cadences of his speech,

the manner in which his words did not quite match those of an English native, and I grew more and more eager for this new role.

And I could pull it off; I knew I could. I am not a pale fellow—where golden curls and blue eyes are the fashion for the hero of the day, my hair is black, my nose prominent, and my skin a bit dark, like my father's. It's true that I've

been more often cast as Don John or even Shylock than I have as Benedick or Prince Hal. My eyes are not so dark as a Mediterranean's—the one legacy I have of my Welsh mother—but still dark and strange enough to the eyes of Merry England that they would not preclude my pretending to exotic foreign birth. I had once—long ago, when times were good and parts more easily had—even

played Oberon in the appearance of a Turkish king. I still had the turban I had used, and the heavy brocade robe. They would serve me well, now. Most of all, I knew, I was a good actor, better than Freddy or a thousand other sweet-voiced mumblers, and I deserved to sit on satin and eat like a king. If my acting wouldn't earn me that life one way, it would do in another.

The longer I thought about it, the more certain I was. It wouldn't work here in London—even in a bit



of makeup, someone might recognize me, and of course people of the city are more canny and suspicious than out in the countryside. I would go out, find some ripe and peaceful estate where I might install myself as a curiosity and amusement, earn my keep... no. That sort of thinking would keep me small-time forever, always scraping by from drink to drink. With a scheme like this, I could make my fortune if I played my cards aright. Why *would* a foreign prince come to England? Why throw himself on the mercy of a country gentleman and his household? Why, except if he was in desperate need of the assistance that only a very rich gentleman can provide? And surely that need would speak to the hospitality and generosity of a man seeking to show himself well in society... Yes, I was sure that I could use this to my advantage.

That night, as I was packing my things in the cramped lodging-room I rented, Freddy appeared. Of course.

"You're leaving me," he accused.

"I'm not leaving *you*, fool. I'm leaving *London*."

His blue eyes widened. Freddy had grown up in London, never left it in his life, and the thought of leaving probably stretched the very limits of his silly mind. Still, he proved by his next words that he

was a game lad, if nothing else.

"Can I come, then? You said you had a part to study... I could join up, right? Come on, old man! It's a hard time out there, you know..."

"I know. But this is a one-man job." I stuffed the last of the clothing I was taking into a bag, and turned to him. "You can take the room—I'll leave you a letter with Widow Bartlett. She's a good landlady, doesn't mind actors. She thinks you're my younger brother, so she won't think it odd if you take my old clothes and all. I can't take them with me, anyway."

"I don't want your stupid old clothes," Freddy sulked.

"Then sell them, for all I care," I growled. I hated when he got like this. Freddy had been a stage phenomenon back when he was a small boy, and he'd been spoiled terribly in those days. His talent, unfortunately, had not grown with him, and by the age of nineteen he was a pretty but thoroughly third-rate actor. We'd met in a play, and it had been an easy thing to fall into bed together from time to time. Unfortunately, Freddy had taken it all very seriously. "Look," I told him, taking his cheek in the palm of one hand and setting the other over his heart, "we can't go on like this. Half our friends already suspect us, and there's consequences for both of us if it gets out. It's best if we break things off before it ru-

ins both our reputations. You're young. You could still find a nice girl to do the cooking, bring home a daughter-in-law to make your old mother happy..."

"I don't want to!"

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't want, Freddy," I murmured, nuzzling his cheek. "I'm sorry. You know I'd stay if I could, but... darling, I can't stand to see you risk your potential this way. You break my heart. I cannot be cautious around you, and passion will be our undoing. I must leave, before our love brings you to ruin."

It was a load of tripe, of course, but it worked on Freddy—he was the sort of romantic idiot who cried over even the worst love poetry. I knew, because he'd cried over mine. And the same thing happened this time, of course—he fell into tears and I held him while he cried like a child, convinced that I was leaving to spare him the suffering of humiliation and a ruined reputation. It wasn't a half-bad performance, if I may say so, but it never took much to turn Freddy around. I would have to do much better with my as-yet-unchosen country gentleman, if I was to convince him I was worthy of his trust, and his pocketbook.

When Freddy's tears were half-

dried on my cheek, I unbuttoned his shirt and bent, taking the little button of his nipple in my mouth and swirling it gently with my tongue, while my hands undid his trousers. He moaned above me, and shoved my shirt open so he could clasp his hands on my bare shoulders. His fingernails needed



trimming, and they dug into my skin. As I'd hoped, I'd played our scene well enough to earn a proper goodbye. The good Lord only knew when I next might find a willing and appealing fellow, after all.

When released from his trousers, his cock stood up straight and ready, slender, satiny, and surrounded at the base by a thatch of curls. I licked at his thighs for a moment, to tease, and then worked my tongue slowly up the length of his cock before engulfing the tip in my mouth and working it slowly in until I could have swallowed him whole.

Freddy keened like a kitten while I milked him with my lips and tongue. I knew his signs well enough that I could tuck him aside a bit with my tongue just before he came, diverting the majority of his seed into my cheek. While he moaned and leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed, momentarily boneless, I spat it out into my handkerchief, then turned him around and pushed him to his stomach on the bed.

"You'll come back, won't you?" he asked over his shoulder as I slicked myself with a bit of oil.

"Maybe someday, love. But we must be careful... we are too much seen together... If one of us were married, perhaps, there would not be so much speculation, but... I dare not risk our lives even for this

great ecstasy," I murmured. His buttocks looked like two half-baked loaves of bread. I smoothed my hands along them, kneading, pressing kisses on the backs of his thighs until he parted for me willingly. Inside of two weeks he'd be no better for another man, I was sure.

"But... but you'll try, won't you?" Already his voice sounded distant again, hitching with desire.

"Of course I will, my Ganymede." It was a silly nickname, but it always made him sigh like it was Shakespearean verse. He arched his bum for me, waiting like a dog in heat. When I slid into him, he muffled a cry into the pillow. Despite all the 'admirers' the young fellow'd had in his short life, he was still quite tight—one of the things I enjoyed about him. It wasn't that he wasn't handsome, of course—his face was lovely, if girlish; pink and gold and white like a cherub. Freddy's beauty was his one great feature—the one thing God had given him to let him get by in this world, because his brain certainly wasn't going to get him his bread and meat.

"Oh. Oh. Oh, good God..." he moaned.

"Keep it down, Freddy," I growled, closing my eyes as I thrust into his willing body. One thing I'd told him was true enough—the fellow would get us



both nicked soon enough, if I didn't leave him, and although, thank God, his family was far from noble, there would still be trouble in it. "Keep it down... There's a good boy... Ah!"

I came in him with a sigh, and waited only long enough after to go soft and soothe his wounded pride with a few kisses, before turning to the washbasin to clean myself. It was too late to kick him out without it looking suspicious, I thought, so I just slipped into bed and turned my face away from him, when I'd finished. Tomorrow I would be gone, and Freddy would soon forget his indignation and take full advantage of the room and clothes I was leaving him.

He was still sleeping when I crept

out of the lodging-house before dawn. Inspiration thrilled in my blood, and Melpomene whispered in my ear. I felt ready for the performance of a lifetime.

In the garden of Wessex Manor, every nerve in my body sang with anticipation, awaiting my audience's response to my trumped-up little tale of woe. "Will you help me, my good lords?" I asked, putting on the most piteous expression of wounded pride.

"Of course!" James held out his hand in friendship, and I squeezed it in return, as one deeply affected by his support. In truth, I didn't have to pretend a profound reaction to his bright eyes and innocent, wholehearted acceptance of



this tale—James was a strikingly handsome fellow, and had a clarity of spirit that I found refreshing. In other circumstances... I checked my feelings there. This was a young aristocrat, and my position here depended on his trust and goodwill. I could not let myself be distracted by attraction that might ruin my situation here, least of all under his brother’s watchful eyes. There could be no hint of impropriety while I was in their house, I reminded myself firmly.

Still, as we stood to go into the house, I felt my blood speed up just looking at him—the casual grace in his gait, and the almost painful brilliance of his smile... I wanted to touch his hand again, to touch his face, his chest... wanted to see what other expressions that

guileless face might reveal, given cause.

“Try not to fear, Rais,” he told me gently as we walked, his brother many steps ahead of us. “I’m sure there is a way. A good, brave fellow like you... well...” He trailed off. “Your cause is too noble not to succeed,” he finished awkwardly. “Surely the world cannot be so unkind to one of such pure intentions.”

He meant to caution me, but looking at him, all I could think was that if there was a man of pure intentions there, it was certainly not I.

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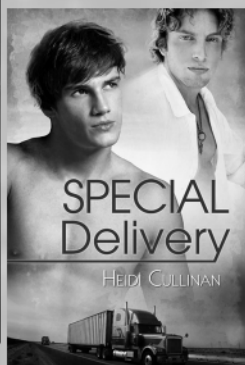
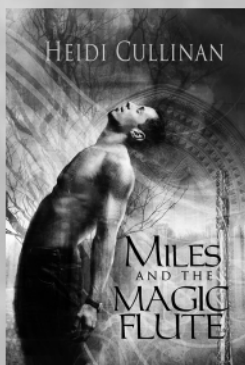
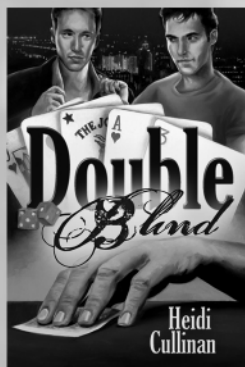


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Agents of GHOST

By Aris Merquoni

At the height of the Cold War, there was a theory circulated in whispers at the highest levels of Soviet intelligence. Surely, they said, a nation as powerful as the United States would not have an espionage apparatus as comically incompetent as the CIA. The CIA, this theory held, must be a distraction, a blind for the real U.S. intelligence service, an organization so secure and effective that there was no evidence it even existed.

This theory was, as it happened, entirely correct.

The rain trickled down the ornate facades of the buildings lining the Vinohradská that night in Prague, dripping onto the sidewalks and turning them silver in the glow of the streetlights. Nathan tugged his coat a little tighter and checked his watch, eyeing the lamppost at the opposite corner. His contact was supposed to show up in three minutes; the street was empty, the night on this side of the Iron Curtain full of threatening shadows.

Nathan idly pulled his cigarettes out of his pocket and tucked one into his mouth, reached for his matches. They weren't his brand, but real American cigarettes were too expensive for his cover. The CIA always wanted deniability when one of their people was this far East. As the clock-tower started to chime the hour, Nathan took another look up the street, peering through the dimness. He could see a distant figure approaching. Hopefully Gregor, come with the package.

He took another drag



on his cigarette and leaned back against the building, practicing nonchalant. Their informant had been carefully handled, but tonight was a much larger handoff than they'd ever gotten before, and the last thing Nathan wanted was to spook the man. As Gregor approached the target streetlight, Nathan tensed, waiting, prepared for anything. KGB officers in the shadows. The soft chuff of a silenced rifle. Anything.

The only thing he wasn't prepared for was what happened, as Gregor took a final step toward the streetlight—and vanished, suddenly dropping straight down out of sight.

Nathan's cigarette fell from his open mouth. He dimly noticed it bouncing off his coat onto the pavement. "That's impossible."

At first he thought, as he stepped closer, that he must have been hallucinating—but no, he hadn't been that far away, he'd seen Gregor come into the light. The sidewalk looked like any other Prague sidewalk, no sign it had been tampered with.

How it had been done was of no consequence. Nathan was only sure of one thing: someone had stolen his contact, with his

package. And it was Nathan's job to deliver that package, intact, to the government of the United States.

He quickly sized up the building next to where Gregor had vanished, trying to determine if the kidnappers had dropped him into the basement. He didn't see any outward sign, no doors to a cellar, nothing but a grate with steam rising from it. A steam tunnel. Nathan dropped to his knees and grabbed the grating, tugged hard, and it came up in his hands.

The tunnel was humid and hot,



and ahead in the darkness there were figures writhing, the sound of a scuffle echoing off the walls. Nathan charged forward, until he could make out Gregor in the midst of the struggle. Two men were on either side of him, and Nathan took no time in pulling the nearest one away and punching him square in the jaw.

The other man dropped Gregor's arm and launched himself forward, and both he and Nathan went down, slamming into the side of the tunnel wall on the way. A fist caught him in his side, and he groaned, then sucked in enough breath to yell, "Run, Gregor!"

The next blow didn't fall. "You're American?" the man on top of him asked, in a flat Midwestern accent.

Gregor was running away down the tunnel. Nathan's head was spin-

ning. "Yes," he admitted.

The other man sighed. "Sorry about that," he said, and stood, offering a hand. "These things happen, don't they? I'm Sebastian Drake. I think the other fellow's KGB, despite his uniform."

Nathan hesitantly took the

offered help up. "Nathan MacCahill."

The dim light wasn't doing his former assailant any favors, but his face didn't need them—Drake was square-jawed and darkly handsome, smiling grimly in a way that invited Nathan to share the joke. A dangerous face, in other words,

one that struck a chord with certain tendencies that Nathan tried to keep buried.

He turned away as quickly as he could and looked at the man he'd



punched out. The uniform was Czechoslovakian police, but the face was familiar from a black-and-white photo in a dossier. "Definitely KGB," he confirmed. "Sergei Lebedev. I remember his file."

"We should go get Gregor before this guy wakes up," Drake said. "He's supposed to be handing some files over to a CIA agent, and there'll be hell to pay if he misses his pickup."

Nathan froze. Drake started off down the tunnel, and after an agonizing moment where he couldn't get his legs to move, Nathan started after him. "How did you know that?" he asked when he caught up.

"Know what?"

"About the files. The CIA, I mean."

"It was part of our briefing on Chimera's movements in this area," Drake said. While Nathan was still trying to figure out what that meant, Drake shot him a look. "Oh, no. You're the CIA man?"

"You're not?" Nathan mentally kicked himself. There hadn't really been any reason for him to assume that Drake was with the US gov-

ernment.

Drake smiled. "I'm not with the CIA, no," he said. "I'm with a different part of the US intelligence community. Ghost."

...charming. He'd fallen in with a lunatic. He smiled tightly in Drake's direction and hurried his pace.

There was a tunnel junction up ahead. As Nathan approached, he



could see on the wall the flicker of a flashlight beam, hear someone cursing idly in Czech. Nathan pressed his back against the wall, heard Drake behind him do the same. He could make out Gregor crouched at the junction, and inched forward until they could talk.

Gregor looked back, and visibly relaxed when he saw Nathan. "Maintenance man," he hissed.

Nathan frowned. "We need to get to the train station," he said. "It's in that direction. I'd hate to double back."

"Train station?" Gregor asked.

"We have to extract you," Nathan said, ignoring for the moment that he was counting Drake as on his team. "The KGB knows who you are; it's not safe in communist territory."

"Just what I was thinking," Drake added. "One second while I take care of our friend up there."

Before Nathan could protest, he'd slipped ahead, silent and panther-like. He ducked around the flashlight beam and out of sight.

After a moment, a quick sound of fist meeting skull, and the flashlight went out.

Nathan darted around the corner to see Drake carefully leaning an overall-clad maintenance worker against the wall. He checked the man's pulse, then pointed behind

Nathan. "There's the ladder back to the street," he said. "Quickly, now. We don't want our KGB friends to catch up."

"South," Drake said when they got to the station. "I know someone who can get us across the border to Austria. If I'm lucky, that is, and she's still in Vyssi Brod."

Nathan had contacts of his own in Austria; he nodded and bought his own ticket. Sebastian picked up a briefcase from one of the station lockers, and didn't seem at all perturbed when Nathan insisted on searching it before they boarded; it contained nothing more dangerous than a pair of cufflinks and a change of shirt. Nathan gave it back, suddenly irritated that he hadn't had time to clear out his own hotel room.

His mind was full of timetables and details, but after they boarded and were rolling southward, all of his thoughts were narrowed to their small private compartment and the enigma of Sebastian Drake.

"You're not going to shoot me?" Gregor was interrogating their strange benefactor.

Drake shook his head with a smile. "I work for the same government that Mr. MacCahill does," he said. "Just a different branch of the service."

"Yes, that isn't reassuring,"



"Not fake; at least, not a quality I've ever seen." With that, he shrugged, leaned his head back against his seat, and started snoring a moment later.

Drake watched him for a moment, still smiling, then looked back at Nathan. "Do you have a drop point for that microfilm he's giving you, or are you supposed to take it in yourself?"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Nathan hissed, startled.

"I told you," Drake said. "I'm with GHOST. We're the other foreign intelligence service."

"The Company is the American foreign intelligence service," Nathan said.

Gregor said. "What proof can you offer?"

Drake reached smoothly for his pocket, and Nathan moved his hand into position for a quick disarm and hoped he wouldn't have to pull his own gun. But Drake just produced a slim wallet, and flipped it open to reveal an American diplomatic passport, the same kind that Nathan had traveled into the country on.

Gregor's mouth pinched and he took the passport from Drake's hand. After examining it, he said,

"I don't know where you get your information, but you're not with us."

"Well, I'd like it if you believed me," Drake said, leaning forward and resting his head against his hand, so that he was looking up through his lashes like a movie star. Nathan kept his features composed and fought down, in rising panic, an exhausted temptation to lean forward and—no. No.

"GHOST," Drake was saying, "is an agency that deals with a number of larger questions than the CIA

finds in its line of work. Not just the other players in the global balance of power, but those who would exploit the tension between East and West to their own ends."

"People who want to gain from the Cold War?" Nathan asked, trying to regain the conversational footing. "Like Italy meddling in Crimea—some state trying to get international prestige? China?"

"No, no one country," Drake said, sitting back again. "This extends beyond borders. Alliances rise and fall. We keep on top of them."

"That's a fantastic proposition," Nathan said. "If I believed a word of it I'd be worried."

Drake nodded in Gregor's direction. "That microfilm that you're supposed to receive has reproductions of several communiqués between upper-level lieutenants of Chimera. When we get to Austria, I'll show you."

Nathan snorted. "Convenient. You'll show me proof that you're not a Soviet agent when we get to Austria. Of course, if you are a Soviet agent, we'll never make it to Austria."

"I've been knocked down to KGB again?" Drake said, sounding more amused than wounded.

"Unless you've got more proof than a well-done passport," Nathan said, "you may find yourself knocked down further than that."

Drake smiled to himself, nodded, and pulled his suitcase over his knees. He worked the catch and pulled it open—revealing a slim hidden compartment. Nathan guiltily started, having felt no evidence of the space in his earlier search.

The first thing that Drake pulled out was a pistol, which he handed to Nathan without comment. Following the pistol was a small box with a strand of ticker-tape sticking out one end. Behind the box, Nathan could make out a stack of print magazines.

He tilted his head as Drake shifted the case, and his blood went cold as he suddenly recognized the type and content of the books. 4x5 pamphlets with names like "Adonis" and "Body Beautiful"—physique magazines, one of the few legitimate ways to look at other men, attractive men, without getting caught out. Nathan had a small collection in a locker under his bed, at home—and seeing them here, in a spy's suitcase on the other side of the Iron Curtain, was literally the last thing he'd expected. He'd have been less surprised if Leonid Brezhnev himself had strolled in to announce that communism had failed and he was packing it in to go start an ice-dancing school in Omsk.

He looked up. Drake had noticed him looking. Nathan took a breath,

then pointed and said, "Are those for espionage, as well?"

"Personal, actually," Drake said, and then smiled. "It's impossible to find these things in Eastern Europe."

Nathan felt his mouth go dry, fought against nervous swallowing. He was saved by the little box suddenly buzzing and spitting out a line of ticker-tape into Drake's hand.

He pointed as Drake unwound

the tape. "All right, what is *that*?"

"It's a radio transmitter and receiver," Drake said slowly. "It's set up to receive messages from GHOST." He looked up. "You'll want to look at this."

Very hesitantly, Nathan held out his hand for the device. It fit comfortably in his palm, and the tape read out in English—or mostly. "Ivanov tail d4b—what on earth does that mean?"

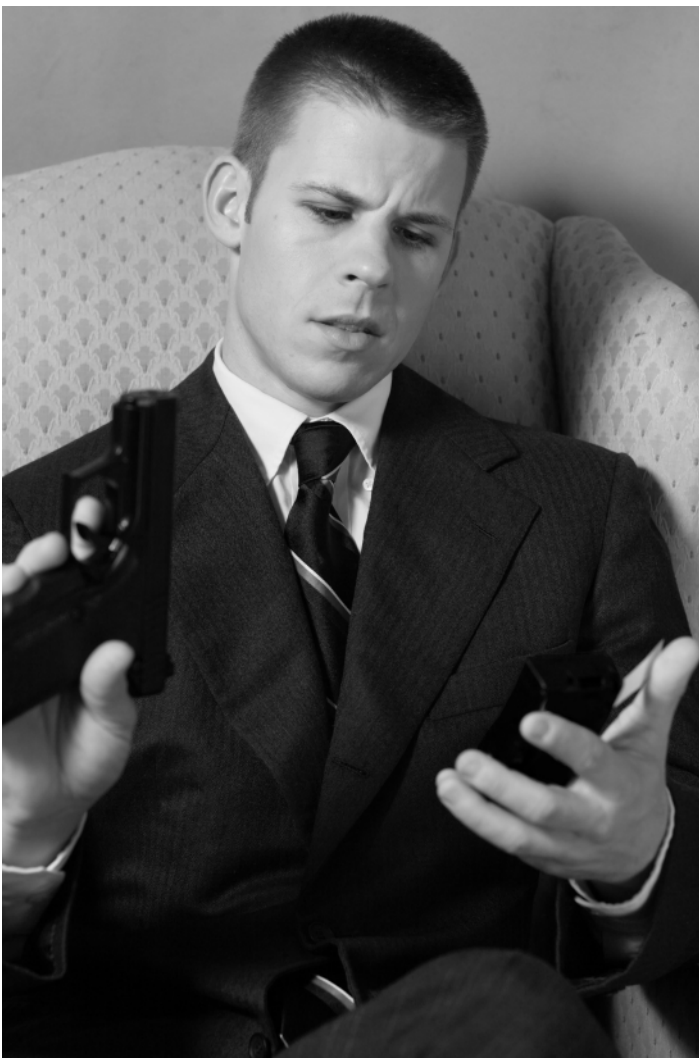
"D4b is a code for directions—it means he's following us south," Drake said. "And Ivanov is likely Egon Pavelovich Ivanov, Chimera agent."

Nathan blinked a few times. "You mean KGB agent."

"I mean Chimera agent," Drake said, flashing that smile again. "He's one of the best—I thought I'd given him the slip on my way out of Leningrad, but if he's following still, we might have some trouble later on."

Nathan looked down at the device in his hand, at the compact pistol he was still holding in his lap.

The radio receiver was patently ludicrous.



The pistol was no model he'd ever seen, strange-looking but probably just as deadly as any other. The photographic magazines in Drake's briefcase—

Those, those were real. American. Nobody from the KGB would even think of using those magazines as part of a cover. Which meant that Drake was certainly an American.

But a representative of a secret government agency sent to retrieve memos about a bizarre international conspiracy? No. He was American, and he knew where to find Nathan—which meant he was from the Company.

Nathan smiled and handed the device and the pistol back to Drake. He knew how to deal with internal review, no matter how it was packaged. If someone was testing his heterosexual bona fides, they'd find him utterly opaque to this line of inquiry, no matter how—

Drake touched the back of his hand gently as he retrieved his gun. "So I have your trust?"

Nathan fought hard to keep his smile from slipping. "To an extent, Mr. Drake. At least until we get to Austria."

"Please," Drake said, smiling again. "Call me Bas."

Nathan swallowed, hard.

"Mr. Drake," he said, less coolly than he intended. "If you'll excuse me for a minute?"

Nathan locked the door of the washroom behind himself and slumped against it, gasping as though he'd been through a marathon. He jerked his pants open and palmed his cock, sweat on his fingers slipping against his flesh, and pulled a handful of toilet paper from the roll.



Oh, God. Oh *God*.

Just thinking about Drake—about *Bas'* fantastic mouth, was sending his mind into a spiral of desire. And with a sudden flash, he could picture the man, spread nude on Nathan's bed, licking those lips, sitting up to slip his hands under Nathan's shirt. Nathan groaned and twisted his hand slightly, stroked faster, imagining *Bas'* mouth closing on the tip of his cock, his tricky, seductive tongue licking out and pressing just *there*, under the head, slowly back up to the tip, just how he liked it.

God, *Bas* would be beautiful naked. Desperately Nathan bit his lip to keep from crying out. Imagined *Bas'* hands on his body, pushing his clothes off, caressing his

chest. *Bas'* hand reaching down for Nathan's cock while his mouth pressed, gently, against Nathan's lips, tongue darting out to touch. He would be—stroking just like this—perfect, yes, perfect, yes!

He dropped the evidence in the toilet and caught his breath. After a while, he used the washroom properly, cleaned his hands, and



checked his reflection over in the mirror.

Drake appeared to be catnapping himself when Nathan got back to their compartment, but his eyes flicked open when Nathan put his hand on the door. "Good idea," he said as a greeting, then pushed himself to his feet and left Nathan to watch over Gregor.

Nathan sighed, pulled his coat tighter, and sat down.

They changed trains twice and watched the sun rise before they reached the border town of Vyssi Brod. Beyond was mountains, and the final checkpoint to freedom. Drake looked around the town happily in the morning light and headed to the bar.

Nathan snagged a table in the corner with Gregor as Drake drift-

ed through the crowd. He hadn't dared to sleep on any of the trains, and he was buzzing from adrenaline. When the barman brought a round of beers, he let Gregor enjoy the thick brew and sat silently wishing for coffee.

Drake came over to their table in fifteen minutes, grinning so wide you could see every one of his perfect teeth and leading a woman with a scarf and wide sunglasses obscuring most of her features.

"Gregor Cerny, Nathan MacCahill, let me introduce Mercedes Maria Montgomery."

"The smuggler?" Gregor asked as the woman sat down. Nathan blinked, and reflected that hers was the most transparently fake name that he'd heard since... well, since Sebastian Drake, for that



matter.

"Yes, that's right," she said, and her accent was refreshingly English, beautiful syllables rich with BBC radio vowels. She pulled her sunglasses off and smiled at the both of them.

Her face was... normal, Nathan thought, natural, not the artistically arranged features of the femme fatale. And then she pushed the scarf back on her head to free her hair and tilted her face just so, and he could see the dangerous lilt in her cheekbones when she posed, and he smiled to himself. Ah, yes. She knew how to use her features to her best advantage. And Drake was definitely appreciative, smiling and pressing a kiss to the back of her hand as he slid into his seat.

"So," she said, "Bas tells me you have a location problem."

"Yes," Nathan said cautiously, "In that we are here and we need to be somewhere else."

Mercedes laughed. "Bas, where *do* you find these people?"

"In unexpected places," he said, "trying desperately to get elsewhere. Do say you'll help us, Mercy; you'll break my heart otherwise."

"Your heart is a stone, Bas," she said. "You're going to leave me in Austria, bored again."

"In Austria, yes. Bored, never," Drake said. "And what fun getting

to Austria will be. You, me, under the stars, hiding from KGB agents in the wild..."

Nathan raised an eyebrow, wondering how he and Gregor fitted into this plan.

"And it's certainly more exciting than hanging around picturesque Czechoslovakian taverns," Drake pointed out.

Mercedes pouted. "I enjoy picturesque Czechoslovakian taverns," she said. "This one is full of picturesque Czechoslovakian men." She frowned. "And speaking of hiding from KGB agents, there was a man in town a couple days ago, looking for American strangers. Russian."

"Damn," Drake said, but he didn't seem surprised. Nathan's stomach did a quick flip.

"I haven't seen him since, but it sounds like you and your friends are in a terrible amount of trouble." She looked hard for a moment, then lazily smiled. "And you're trying to get me involved?"

Drake only grinned the wider. "How long will it take me to convince you?"

"Forty-five minutes," she said primly, then smirked. "And that's just the warm-up."

Did they just... Nathan realized, startled.

"Gentlemen," Drake said, standing and taking Mercedes' hand,



"You know," Nathan said when they were a quarter mile out of town in the slanting afternoon light, "It will take us more than our feet to get us past the border."

"feel free to enjoy the refreshments on my tab. I owe the lady a few rousing games of backgammon."

Nathan waited for Drake to follow the woman upstairs. Then he turned to Gregor. "Backgammon."

"Smugglers enjoy backgammon," Gregor said, straight-faced. "I think I will get another drink."

Forty-five minutes. Nathan scowled at his glass and wondered if there was anything in Vyssi Brod worth the sightseeing.

Three hours of convincing later, Nathan had lost six games of chess to Gregor and gone back to staring morosely into his beer. When he next looked up, Drake and Miss Montgomery appeared at the front door with a pack mule and matching smug expressions.

der."

"I am good at this," Montgomery assured him. "And I've been thinking about vacationing in Austria for some time now. Think of it: Vienna! Strauss waltzes, art, culture. The Burgtheater. The Volksoper."

"I understand things were bombed around a bit during the war," Nathan said noncommittally.

There was a twinkle in her eye as she continued, "The Hofburg..."

"Mercedes," Drake cut her off, "I'll buy you a diamond in Linz."

"Promise?"

"The brightest diamond next to your eyes... assuming we make it there in one piece."

It was only a few miles to the border, but it was rough going.



Nathan didn't feel completely acclimated to the mountain air, and they traveled as much distance upwards or downwards as they did forward. Finally they emerged on a ledge looking down through the evergreens at a manned guard tower a few hundred feet away, and a barbed wire fence stretching into the distance in both directions.

"The fence is electrified," Montgomery said, pulling something out of one of the packs on the mule. "So we can't cut through it without breaking the line first."

It was a plastic device the size of a book, with an antenna that she extended quickly and a keypad on the front. Like a... "What is that?" Nathan asked, just to be sure.

"Radio transmitter," Montgomery

said, smiling. Then she tapped a short sequence into the device and pressed a large red button on its top.

He should have expected the explosion.

It was a few hundred yards down the fence and the ridgeline, thank God. And their own footing didn't seem to be affected. Boulders like dice of an angry God shook themselves loose from the mountain, close enough to make out cracks and crevices, and tumbled down the slope and straight through the fence. In moments, angry shouts came from the watchtower. Nathan waited, aftershocks still buzzing in his bones, watching the dust settle.

"So now we bolt through the hole in the fence, is that it?" he asked,

ears still ringing.

"Oh, no," Montgomery assured him. "We'll wait until the guards are gone to look at the hole, then cut through over there." She pointed in the opposite direction. "The power has been cut, so it's perfectly safe."

"I do enjoy a simple plan," Drake said.

Montgomery smiled, then turned to re-stow her radio. Nathan stared at her for a moment, then turned to Drake. "Who on Earth," he said, "sets radio-controlled charges on a mountainside, and leaves them for... months, possibly, just in case they need to make an illegal border crossing?"

"Mercedes Maria Montgomery." Drake's grin was utterly self-assured. "Now aren't you glad I knew where to find her?"

They slipped down the ridgeline, keeping part of their attention on the shouting commotion on the other side of the guard tower. Montgomery had packed a large pair of shears, and efficiently clipped through the barbed wire while Nathan and Drake stood guard, nervous out in the open. It was only a few seconds before she was holding the fencing open, waving them through.

Gregor ducked through first, then Drake pushed their mule through and waved Nathan after. Nathan

only hesitated a moment. If Drake and Montgomery meant to double-cross them, now was the time.

Drake held the wire open for Montgomery and slithered through after them, waving them toward the trees. Nathan slid his finger away from his pistol's trigger and noticed, idly, that he'd put himself in position to cover Drake as well.

Drake made no mention of it as they crossed the final bit of clear ground toward the trees. Nathan's



heart hammered in his chest as Gregor stumbled right before the brush—but then they were through, they were in thick forest, they were picking their way under cover downhill, four people and their pack mule finally in neutral territory.

Nathan took a deep breath and slowed to a walk. Drake clapped him on the shoulder, then holstered his pistol. "Good work."

"I'm glad you didn't tell me what you had planned," Nathan admitted. "I never would have believed that would work."

"I always try to have a few escape routes planned out in advance," Montgomery said. "None have failed me so far."

"Except that time in Paris," Drake said smugly.

"Except that time—*do* keep from smirking, Bas, it's not nearly as endearing as you think it is."

This only caused Drake to smile wider, and open his mouth to retort, but Nathan caught a gray blur of movement behind him

and before he thought he had his pistol pointed at the head of a tall bald man in a Soviet overcoat, who had a deadly-looking dagger pressed to Drake's neck.

"Very little Sebastian Drake does is endearing," the man said with only a faint Russian accent. He had piercing blue eyes and an ugly scar that started just above the left one and continued to the top of his head. "I suggest you drop your weapon."

Nathan took a quick survey—Gregor had his hands busy with the mule's lead rope, and Montgomery had her hands out,



weaponless. He kept his aim fixed on the man's head.

"Egon Pavelovich," Drake said, not even sounding surprised.

"Looking to even out your face? The first one's free, but it'll cost you to make it symmetrical."

"I thought you'd recognize this knife," the Russian—Egon—said, then pressed the blade into the side of Drake's neck. "I thought I'd repay the cosmetic favor, before I kill you."

"You can't kill me, Egon," Drake said, "or Nathan will have no reason not to shoot you."

"He can't shoot me," Egon retorted, "or he'll have half a dozen very annoyed Czechoslovakian security men here in a minute. Wasn't the plan to get away without anyone noticing? Sloppy, sloppy." He grinned, looking straight at Nathan, now. "And you'll hardly take a shot at me while I have your friend as a shield, da?"

Nathan considered briefly, then shot him through the left eye.

"Nyet," he commented as the dead Russian slumped to the ground and Drake stood staring at him.

"My God," Montgomery said wonderingly. Gregor just nodded.

Drake swallowed briefly, then stooped and picked up the knife which had recently been tracing his jugular. "I'll never have cause to

doubt your aim again," he said.

"I had a merit badge for marksmanship when I was thirteen," Nathan said, a small warm flame of pride kindling in his chest, "and I've kept in practice. Come on, he wasn't joking about those border guards."

The rest of the trip to Linz was a blur (Drake did, indeed, buy Montgomery a diamond—and dinner, and a hotel room), as was the progression to Vienna (On a train where Drake and Montgomery shared a cabin, and Nathan re-acquainted himself with Gregor's snores), but they finally made it unharmed to the American Embassy, where Gregor handed Nathan the microfilm and was taken for new papers. Montgomery, predictably enough, had vanished as soon as they hit the city limits.

Drake steered him into an empty viewing room and shut the door. "All right," he said quietly. "I'm going to give you a last chance. Turn over the microfilm to me and you can turn around and walk away. I'll give you the material you thought you were going to collect before you leave Austria, and you'll never hear about GHOST again."

He was quiet, serious. Nathan felt as though he'd suddenly been shocked awake. Of course this insane... this experience, if he believed in it, was being orchestrated



at a higher level of confidentiality than his current one. And there were only two ways to go when exposed to that kind of information: all the way in... or out, feet first.

Drake was giving him the option to walk away, which was likely a violation of his standing instructions—and a sign of immense trust.

"And if I don't walk away," he asked, "would I be working under you?"

"We'd be partners," Drake replied, smiling. "At least, as soon as I'd trained you properly—and if you don't mind working with a fairy."

A flash of sheer terror shot through Nathan's body. Was that a come-on? Had Drake thought he

was—That was ridiculous. Magazines or no, Drake's actions with Montgomery were clearly, *clearly* not the actions of a man suffering from Nathan's own... problem. If nothing else, no one in a sensitive intelligence operation—which he now had to concede this GHOST bureau was—would ever admit such a thing under interrogation, much less volunteer the information.

All Nathan's instincts screamed that he was being offered a position in a trap. A beautifully gilded trap baited with the perfect line of Sebastian Drake's shoulders and that wonderful, wonderful lie.

The alternative, though, was to say goodbye to this. To bid farewell to the ridiculous adven-

ture and the danger, and go back to reading Soviet crop reports in Langley between occasionally standing on streetcorners in the middle of the night. Managing assets and shuffling disinformation and doing all the slow, cautious work of *normal* intelligence operations.

And if he went back to Langley, he would spend every day for the rest of his life knowing he'd given this chance up out of cowardice.

He pulled the microfilm out of his pocket and weighed it, then handed it to Drake. "I'm in."

Drake's grin was dazzling. Nathan held himself firm. Take the offer, avoid the trap. It wasn't going to be impossible—keeping secrets

was more than his training, it was his life.

"Welcome to GHOST," Drake said. "Come on, let's take a look."

TO BE CONTINUED 

Makeup: Aviva Raskin

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