

ENTER OBLIVION

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Also from C.M. Harris

The Children of Mother Glory

For the runaways.

They call you heartless; but your heart is true,
and I love the bashfulness of your goodwill.

—Nietzsche

London was my city. It was our city. In fact, she was anyone's treasure for the taking. Back in the 1980s, London was filthy and cheap, but if you scuffed at her long enough you could find yourself a bit of glam.

It was on a humid August evening, when London first glittered for our boy Vince. That cocky American chancer knew less about himself than anyone. So we took him in, for entertainment mostly. Vince was a gangster on the lam with an angry stare and a sweet tenor. He had no idea he was running from more than bullets. He thought he was better than us, and yet, at the same time, could scarcely see his own potential.

But take it from Jezebel—hottest cabaret act on the West End—when I say: drag is the sincerest form of mockery. If you don't wipe off the mask with your own hands, someone else is bound to do it for you.

MIND THE GAP

A warm mist had fallen over London, her sky low and entrapping. The roads slicing across the West End shimmered with neon and hissed with traffic. Along Old Compton Street, a crowd had queued up to see their favorite band. Underground music, the freshest sounds of eighty-four, beckoned like a heartbeat from within the club. As Soho's denizens brandished straps and chains and vinyl and mascara in hopes of winning entry, the bouncer promptly unhooked the velvet rope for two V.I.P.'s and one not yet important person.

Vince Saviglio gazed at the neon "Le Cirque" glowing purple above the brick entrance and a twinge of humiliation shot through him. From the Brits' pronunciation, he'd assumed La Suck was the name of the gay bar. Maybe that was the joke, who knew?

A few steps ahead his friend Nigel, and Nigel's boyfriend John, strolled in to chat with the doorman.

“O’Blivion here yet?”

“Half hour late.”

“Naturally.”

Vince held back, not ready for introductions of any kind. The acrid scent of the fog machine cut to the back of his throat and promised all the manufactured thrills of the Coney Island Spook-o-Rama. As they delved farther in, the disco clubmusic grew louder and expanded into swirling melody. Its beat thumped faster than seemed danceable, as if rushing everyone toward the inevitable heart attack.

The multi-leveled nightclub was set in the round, its circular dance floor the hub. Two smaller circles, one a vast bar and the other an even vaster seating area, linked to either side of the dance floor. To support this monstrosity of hedonism, phallic pillars jutted upward and purple neon climbed them like veins. Vince’s breath caught in his throat.

Nigel and John walked hand-in-hand through the archway and Vince followed a few steps behind on his invisible leash. He gathered up some Brooklyn street bravado, rolled his neck and shook out his arms as if stepping into yet another boxing ring. All this had the opposite effect of camouflage. Even with his eyes trained to the distance, he felt the stares of the male crowd wandering over his physique.

Above the din of music and murmurs, there came a sputtering laugh. “Nice hair, Geronimo!” said a man who looked as if he’d styled his own at highway speeds.

Vince quickly tossed his long, black braid behind his back and picked up the pace. Occasionally he saw some women. Well, maybe they were. “Please let them be lesbians.”

“What?” John was in his face; so close Vince could smell the hempseed oil in his dreadlocks.

“I need a drink. A whiskey. Double.” Vince stuffed a few quid into Nigel’s hands. “And a beer chaser. Any beer.”

“Straight away!” Nigel bounded off.

“C’mon, much less crowded over there.” John thumbed toward an area looking just as clogged.

Vince nodded with rare agreeability. He was on their turf tonight.

They made the trek over to a darkened lounge and a group of boys, barely men, quickly opened a space, then stood staring at the two. They all wore t-shirts emblazoned with the Underground transit logo, a red ring with a blue line crossing it. Instead of a station name across the blue swash, it read: OBLIVION.

“So how do you think it went tonight?” John said. He cocked his head. “The restaurant. My gig, Vin!”

“Oh! Great. Your drummer sucks though. I could do better.”

“You might have a chance if we chuck him. You play drums too?”

Vince shrugged. “A little. I mess around.”

“Must be the Apache blood.”

“Never thought I’d hear that coming from you.”

“Get used to it. I have to hear it all the time. Seems everyone wants to be black nowadays.” John’s gaze returned from smirking at the whispering boys. “Say, you look a bit off. Could ring up a taxi if you like.”

“Nope, I can take it,” Vince said with a snort.

“Well then, have you noticed that you’ve earned a few admirers?”

Vince bowed his head. “Shut up.”

“Ah, here’s Nige with our fuel.”

Nigel thrust out a jumble of shots, tumblers and pints held tight between his long fingers. With a jerk of his neck, he flicked his blond bangs out of his eyes and chattered loudly, “Gosh, Vince, you’re getting the up and down.”

“Erm, don’t think he wants to hear that right now.”

Vince knocked back the whiskey, slurped down half the beer and licked off the foamy mustache.

Nigel gaped at this, but John only laughed. “Give it an hour, Vin, and they’ll be through with you.” He winked. “I guarantee it.”

“I could care less.” Vince welcomed the hot advance of liquor down his throat and prayed for its swift progress.

“You mean couldn’t.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

Nigel set down his untouched G & T. “Vince, mind if we dance?”

Vince’s upper lip curled. “No way.”

Nigel slid his hand into John’s. “Not you, you clot.”

“Oh. Sure. I’ll just then, um, scope it out.” Vince straightened his back and tightened his biceps.

“Try not to get into any trouble.”

Vince sneer-smiled. How could they leave him alone? Hell, they were no protection anyway. A short, gray-haired man was on the approach. Vince quickly took himself up on a walk and glanced back over his shoulder.

He’d only been blocking grandpa’s path to the toilets.

Vince climbed stairs to a darkened balcony. Two burly men embraced a few yards away, chuckling into one another’s ears. When they caught Vince watching, he turned instead to

gaze out over the dance floor. A sea of clubbers swelled below, shouting, laughing, dancing. He spotted Nigel and John; didn't need to see that. Nearby, Jezebel swayed with her boyfriend, Ian. Another clown, wearing a bright pink sweater vest, tried to cram a small bottle under the drag queen's prodigious nose. Jezebel batted his hand away a few times and finally gave in. She then began to spin around the dance floor.

Vince bought another whiskey/beer chaser and stared at the massive network of lighting suspended above the dance floor. Programmed globes, resembling the torture droid in *Star Wars*, scanned the multitude with thin blue beams as if relaying information to the mother ship. On and on they twisted, back and forth, in an emotionless cyber dance.

Vince nursed the alcohol this time. He was safe up here. Not that he should care; a Dei Gratia boy was afraid of nothing. In a bar filled with hundreds of odd men, he was still the odd man out and he liked it that way.

How many of these fruitcakes could go ten rounds with a WBA middleweight hopeful? How many had worked

for a mafia enforcement crew? Or sported a five-inch knife discretely strapped to their shin? Or had been shot?

Vince's abdominal muscles twitched. The new scar below his ribs itched like fire ants marching in a circle. Every night, before he fell asleep, Vince relived the young gangster raising the pistol. First came the abyss of its barrel and the flinch of the kid's eyes as the gun bucked his scrawny arm. Then came the ballpeen hammer to the gut. Nighty, night.

Air puffed bull-like from Vince's nostrils.

Nope, walking into Le Cirque was probably the least dangerous thing he'd done all year and merely the price of admission to Nigel Weymouth's fame and fortune rollercoaster. Throughout his twenty-two years, Vince had seen the best things come to those who grabbed the neck of things and clamped down tight. A few over-dressed fags weren't about to shake him off.



Strobing flashbulbs glittered at the entrance of the club. The crowd had divided, one half swarming toward the commotion. Nigel and John were gone from the dance floor

and Ian was trying to drag Jezebel from her Hi-NRG reverie. She stood stiff for a moment but soon gave in, chin raised proudly.

A hand landed on Vince's shoulder and he flinched.

John stood grinning, looking gamier than usual. "Bout time you came with me. This is one bloke you've got to meet."

"That's okay. I'm good right here." Vince glanced up at the light rigging again. But now it seemed too bright; he couldn't focus. By the time his mind caught up with his eyeballs, he realized he was seriously toasted.

John wiggled eyebrows. "Honestly, you'll think he's a right swanker."

"Great, whatever that is." Vince sighed. "Where's Nigel?"

"Putting on his best face."

Vince glowered and followed John down the stairs. Still determined not to touch anyone, he raised arms as John

squeezed into the crowd. At least John had been right earlier; men were no longer ogling him.

The throng instead faced the subject of all those flashbulbs. And, though the area overflowed with bodies and the club still throbbed with dance music, the mood itself grew hushed, reverent, as if a member of the clergy had arrived.

“Excuse me. So sorry!” John yanked Vince by the wrist through the glut of clublife and into the darkened lounge where they had stood before. This time it was hot and as crowded as a cattle car. “Pardon me. *Oi!*”

Everyone had gathered around an antique divan, which management had thought a lark to reupholster purple and spray-paint the woodwork silver. Nigel sat there, within the only bubble of breathable space, “having a chat,” as if there weren’t a hundred people jockeying for the spot. He sang out over the murmurs and music in his rapid-fire voice, “You’ll never guess the trifle we picked up in New York.”

Vince halted and John lost his grip. From behind, someone stepped on Vince’s sneaker. His heel came out and he

stumbled forward, elbowing the pint out of the hands of the boy next to him. A behemoth of a bodyguard stepped between the fans and the sofa. “Shift those flippin’ cameras! This is a private room now!”

Vince righted himself only to find the boy he was apologizing to not at all concerned. Instead, the kid stared—nose leading him forward—at the man sitting next to Nigel. Vince hopped on one foot, trying to reach his other shoe but none of the zombies budged to give him room. “Fuck.”

“Jonathan, how have you been, dear?” asked a smoky voice in an accent as meticulous as Nigel’s but without the rush.

“Brilliant, Jik, you look smashing.”

As John bent to kiss the man’s cheek, Vince stood exposed to bright, feline eyes. The first pair Vince had actually looked into that night were looking right back.

“Got someone I want you to meet.” John nodded toward Vince. When Vince didn’t move, he gave him a nudge.

Vince pushed forward, still trying to ram his foot back into the sneaker. With no one in front of him anymore, he crouched to shoehorn his heel with a forefinger.

“Vin, this is Jik O’Blivion.” John turned back to the man. “Vince here is a musician as well. Got a wicked fifty-seven strat.”

“Is that right?” O’Blivion stared down at Vince, an eyebrow raised, a smirk drawn.

Vince’s gaze rose from the floor and up the man’s shiny boots. Still crouched on one knee, Vince felt as conspicuous as a knight returned from battle.

O’Blivion’s grin peeled back to a smile, revealing wolf-sharp cuspids under full lips, which were dark pink against lunar white skin.

Vince gulped.

The man was fitted boot-to-neck in a suit of black rubber so tight it looked like melted wax. He owned a lion’s thatch of wavy red-gold hair and curly sideburns, which ended in a slice at the hollow of his cheekbones.

Vince stood abruptly and extended his hand, palm down, with street dominance. O'Blivion met it with his own upturned palm, but neither of them shook hands. Instead, they just sort of held on.

O'Blivion's up-slanted eyes widened for a moment then narrowed onto Vince with accusation. "Vincent, it is a genuine pleasure."

Vince's dry throat managed to spurt, "Nicetameetcha."

As they stood there gripped like that, Nigel began to prattle at O'Blivion again, his voice oddly quivering, "Do you know darling, they've not heard of you in Canarsie?"

"Oh, my. We can't very well take America without Canarsie." Jik's stare remained locked on Vince, his voice lowering as he bent forward, "Perhaps you could talk me up when you get back, Vincent."

Unlike others in the club, O'Blivion wore no make-up that Vince could tell. No foundation lines, no glitter, no mascara clogging his lashes. And yet, he was so—

It's the lighting, the whiskey. Oh yeah, and get another one while you're at it.

Vince withdrew his hand but fingers of warmth continued to climb his arm. He forced himself to look away, to Nigel, who eyed John sternly.

John chuckled lowly, the same guttural laugh that had buzzed through John's mouthguard the day he'd landed his first punch on Vince's cocky mug.

"Okay, yeah. I'll do that." Vince backed up. He continued backing until the crowd closed around him.

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