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## Valeska: Enchantment and the Vampire

by

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A full moon hung above midnight Gdańsk. The dark medieval streets were wet and filthy. Puddles ringed with oily rainbows covered the cracked cobblestones. The moon shown in each of the puddles, reflected as a milky glow that was grimed with the floating sheen. The scent of saltwater and rotting fish rose with the night time tide, an unavoidable stench this close to the waterfront. At street level, the night was utterly dark. The very few modern lights along the crumbling cobblestone avenue shared little illumination with the ancient alleyways that pierced the darkened buildings on either side of the street.

George Mardling stepped gingerly to the alley beside an old shop and glanced down it. His eyes were already well adjusted to the dark. Still he flipped the night vision goggle over his left eye and scanned the alley. It was clear.

The late fall night was cold--George wore a suit and over it a black overcoat. He had a dark felt fedora on his head. That helped conceal the night vision goggle. The night vision equipment

was very modern and compact. The organization had issued it to the field last month. The point was to get a lot of night visibility out of a very small package—it worked well, but the battery life was limited.

George was a tall and thin man. He liked to think his physique was like a body builders', but he knew he was too thin. He also knew his face looked too young and too serious. More like a student or a professor than an agent. That was probably good for the organization.

George carried a Beretta nine millimeter in his jacket and a Beretta nine millimeter kurz in his waistband, he hadn't unholstered either weapon—yet. According to headquarters, his target wasn't supposed to be armed. According to his orders, this wasn't an attack or an arrest—he was making a reconnaissance, a surveillance with a contact. If he could identify the mark, all the better.

Usually, George worked in a team--he was alone this time. His partner was busy, and this was supposed to be a simple intelligence gathering mission—hardly a mission. George moved across the storefront. It was an old toy store, but the building wasn't on his target list either. He stepped carefully and quietly toward the next alley. If the mark wasn't in the first alley, he should be in the second—that was what their intell said. George glanced down this alley and caught a slight movement—he noted a flare in his night vision goggle, obviously a human being. George eased into the alley. He saw something else move as well. The moment George stepped around the corner, something in his field of view moved very quickly. It seemed like an animal, but it didn't flare much in the infrared—not enough for a person or an animal. Perhaps it was just a blowing piece of scrap. He stood a little straighter, puzzled, there was almost no air movement on the street or in the alley.

George stepped a little further into the alley. He put his hand over his pistol—no need to draw it unless necessary. He wanted a contact and not a confrontation. He stepped quietly and carefully down the alleyway. These old alleys in Gdańsk made all kinds of twists and turns. He eased his way toward the back of the store. The alleyway opened up slightly near the backdoor. He saw a small dumpster on the left side, and on the other side, a stack of garbage the city wouldn't collect. The alleyway closed in again and continued further into darkness. It was a darkness so black, his goggle couldn't pierce it.

The person flared next to the dumpster. George kept his hand near his Beretta. He was about to speak. The point was to make contact—that was all. A sudden noise behind him at the front of the alleyway caused him to start. That's when he realized they had made a terrible mistake. That's when the admonitions of all his instructors came immediately back to him at once. He had no backup—no partner. This was supposed to be a simple contact and not a risky mission. It wasn't really a mission, just information gathering. He wondered in that moment if they had all broken protocol and training. His boss rushed him out to the field when the information stream passed the data to them. He had approached this work like a simple lark in the evening.

George identified the sound behind him at the street as the scuff of a boot on the cobblestones. Then he heard a click. George spun around to the street and backed toward the collection of garbage and not the dumpster with its hidden person. A green laser dot appeared on the left side of his chest. In front of him, he caught a very bright flare in his night vision scope. Directly after the flare came a thump. It took only a moment to process that a bullet had been fired at him. By then, it was too late. George felt something tear into his left chest. It pushed him half around and he fell to the damp ground. The bullet pierced him and he felt it tear into his skin. It broke a rib, and burned as it drilled a hole through his lung. He felt it break another rib

and exit at his back. The pain was excruciating, but he was too shocked to make a sound. If he made any noise, it was a great exhalation of breath when his lung collapsed.

George fell into the pile of garbage. The pain and burning was so intense, he didn't notice if it hurt when he hit the ground. The man behind the dumpster moved—he didn't say a word. The man who fired the shot didn't say anything either. They just bolted and left him there...to die. He heard their rapid steps as they ran down the street. The sound slowly died out, and was gone. For a while, there were no sounds after that.

George knew his was dying. It wouldn't do any good to cry out—too late now. He pulled his phone out of the pocket of his jacket and fumbled with it for a moment. He pressed the panic button. He sighed, they would be here in an hour maybe two. He tried to dial the local police, but the phone slipped from his suddenly slick hand and dropped to the cobblestones. He couldn't gather the energy to pick it up again. The blood poured out of the bullet wound in his chest and he felt it bubbling out of the hole in his back. He pressed his hand against the wound in his chest and groaned—that hurt. It didn't staunch the blood much, and he could do nothing to stop the blood on the other side. He was amazed. In all the movies when people were shot, they moved around and chased the bad guys. He couldn't do anything but lay there on the cold and wet ground.

He was dying.

A movement caught him by surprise. It came from the dark alleyway away from the street. A small person moved very quickly from the opening to stand right in front of him. It stopped suddenly and whimpered, then sat on its haunches. It squatted outside of his reach and watched him. Its face was thin and pale. The face barely showed in his night vision goggle. That, in itself was surprising. It wore clothing that seemed exceedingly fine, but they were filthy and

damp. It had on the filthy remains of a girl's party dress. The dress had once been white with red or pink ribbons, but now it was torn and bedraggled. The ribbons blended with the stains on the dress. The stains seemed like long dried blood and not just the dirt of the streets.

The girl, it was a girl, stared at him with bright eyes that seemed tinged with silver. They appeared slightly dull in the night vision goggle. Her hair was black and matted. It reached almost to the cobbles of the alleyway where she squatted. Her face was finely etched and hard looking. She let her tongue slip out of her mouth. She licked her lips. Her tongue was slightly pointed, and George could swear, her teeth were pointed like fangs.

She raised her eyes to his and spoke. It wasn't Polish. She spoke high German with a strange lilt. Her voice was low and melodious, "You, mortal man, you are dying."

George groaned, "I'm dying. Can you call the police with my phone?"

She eyed him strangely, "I don't have a phone here—what good would it do?"

"My phone. It fell at my side."

She shrugged, "I don't know what that is. I wouldn't be able to use it. You are dying."

"I am dying. Can you help me?"

The girl stared at him, "You are dying. It is a full moon—I am starving."

George laughed and immediately wished he hadn't. He felt the blood bubble from the wound in his front and his back. His laugh cut off suddenly, "What did you plan to do—eat me?"

"I would like to dine on your blood."

He wanted to laugh again, but stifled it, "Are you a vampire?"

The girl drew her finger across the cobbles, "I am a vampire, and I am very hungry. It's a full moon, and you interrupted my hunt."

"Why are you asking my permission? If you are a vampire, just drink my blood."

“Can’t.”

“What do you mean can’t?”

She spoke mournfully, “You are one of those. I can’t just take. I’m not sure I can ask, but I’m starving.”

“I’m what?”

“You are a cross-bearer. I can’t attack a cross-bearer.”

George argued, “I’m not wearing any cross.”

She hissed, “You don’t have to have it on your body. The cross marks your body, heart, and soul.”

“Do you mean because I am a Christian, you can’t attack me.”

“What you said—I cannot speak the name or the word.”

George thought he must be hallucinating, “Is that true of all vampires or only for you.”

“No vampire can attack those who hold to the cross. You frightened my rightful prey, and I am starving for human blood.”

George had to stifle another laugh, “You look like crap. Are all vampires like you?”

She frowned and her lips twitched, “My master died, and I have had to live on the streets.”

George smiled. He was certain he was delirious, “A homeless vampire...”

She hissed, “My master died, and the house was sold. I had nowhere else to go...”

“Now you wish to drink my blood.”

“While it is fresh. Please let me dine on it. I will take only a little.”

George smiled, “You may have all you wish. I won’t need any of it soon.”

“Are you certain? It may be a sin...for you.”

“A sin to give my blood to a starving vampire? I don’t believe in vampires. I’m sure you are a figment of my dying brain’s imagination. My blood will have no other purpose soon.”

The girl moved closer to him. She warily stepped toward him. George could see muddy stains across her face. She was dirty, and she smelled of old cemetery ground.

She pulled his hand away from the wound on his chest, and she opened his jacket and shirt. He felt her lips touch him. They were soft and strangely warm—perhaps because he was so cold. He didn’t feel anything but it seemed her lips touched his chest for a long time.

Finally, she lifted her head and drew her hand across her mouth. Her lips and cheek were slick with his blood. She moved her face close to his. She pushed the hair back from his eyes and touched his cheek. Her hands were cold, “I can give your life back to you mortal man—it is very likely a sin, but for your courtesy, I wish to do so.”

George smiled, “There is no need. I had no more need of my blood. I know I am dying.”

“I’m sure it is a sin, but do you wish to live?”

“I don’t want to be a vampire.”

The girl’s voice was very sad, “That is certainly no gift. I can give you back your life. It is all I can do for you, mortal man.”

George raised his hand, “Not as a vampire.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in vampires.”

“I don’t.”

The girl bit her long tongue and pressed her lips against his. He tasted her blood in his mouth. He had been tasting blood since he was shot, but this was different. The taste was different, and he felt something burning in his body. He felt her lips form a smile and pull back. She licked her lips with that oddly pointed tongue of hers, “That is all I can do for you.”

George was more groggy than before—perhaps he was finally dying. He stared at the girl, “My name is George Mardling.”

The girl stood over him, “I was called, Valeska by my master, but my given name is Heidi.”

“Heidi is the name of a vampire?”

She frowned again, “You don’t believe in vampires.”

“No, I don’t.” George’s head fell to the side and he was suddenly unaware of anything.

George woke with a start to the smell of antiseptics in a bright hospital room. He glanced around. It was bright enough that he thought he might be in heaven. The room was dazzling and light, but small and bleak. He knew it was a lockdown room—private and locked. The locking was for his protection—they would likely say. He was surprised to be alive. He took an inventory of himself. He was dressed in one of those typical lightly colored embarrassing hospital gowns. The neck was loose enough, he could pull it down to see his chest. There was a tight bandage around it, but no pads. He didn’t feel any pain in his lungs. The biggest pain was from the IV stuck in his arm. He took a deep breath—that hurt. He let breath out in a rush, “Ouch.”

He remembered everything and unconsciously, his hand reached to his neck. She hadn’t bitten him. She drank his blood from the wound in his chest, and she had kissed him. George didn’t believe it, but he looked around. This wasn’t an intensive care unit—this was a normal room. He felt his face. He had some stubble, but not enough to answer for a very long time—unless they shaved him.

George moved his legs. It didn’t feel like he had been in a bed for a very long time. He felt pretty good for taking a bullet through a lung. In fact, unusually good. He didn’t have anything

else to do, and he thought it was about time to find out the worst—he pressed the call button attached to the bed.

Almost immediately, George heard a scratching sound at the lock on the door. The door opened and a nurse entered. An officer stuck his head around the door and nodded at George. George recognized him. He nodded back.

The nurse gave him an honest smile. She spoke Polish, “Good afternoon, Mr. Mardling.”

George responded in English, “Good afternoon.”

The woman was surprised that he could speak. She curtsied and put up her finger, “One moment—the doctor needs to see this.”

She rushed out of the door, and left George with his mouth moving without making much of a sound. He finally got out, “Wait...,” but he was too late. George lay back and put his hands behind his head. That stretched his wounds and hurt too. He put his arms back down. He figured he didn’t have that long to wait.

After only a few minutes, the door was unlocked again and the nurse entered back in. She was breathing hard. Right behind her stepped a young man in a doctor’s white coat. His face was pleasant and fresh. He was just beginning to go bald, but his hair was only thinning right now. He gave a slight bow and stepped forward with his hand out. He spoke English with a thick Polish accent, “Mr. Mardling, I’m Dr. Walczak, ... ah, your doctor while you are here.”

George grasped the outstretched hand and shook it.

Dr. Walczak continued, “Ah..., I really need to speak with you Mr. Mardling.”

“Certainly. I have some questions for you too.”

“Ah...yes, I’m certain you do. First of all, Mr. Mardling, you should be dead.”

“Yes, Doctor, the last thing I remember...”

“Yes...?”

“Well perhaps you should tell me.”

“Ah...yes, Mr. Mardling. You seem to have been shot through your left chest by a nine millimeter pistol at close range.”

George nodded.

Dr. Walczak continued, “The bullet entered your chest, broke a rib, punctured your left lung, broke another rib, and exited through your back.”

“I really didn’t realize all that at the time, but in the main, that’s what I thought too.”

The doctor turned him an amazed expression.

“Well?”

Dr. Walczak shook himself, “Ah..., Mr. Mardling, you should have died.”

“But I didn’t. Can you explain what you found?”

The doctor pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead, “I was the responding physician. I have a lot of experience from the Balkans—you see. We don’t get that many bullet wounds here.”

George pulled his covers up a little closer, “I guess...”

“When I examined you, I expected to find two open bullet wounds—the...your blood was everywhere. You had a broken rib in the front and a broken rib in the back, but your lungs were whole...or nearly whole and you had two scars. One in the front and one in the back.”

George gave him a quizzical look, “So, what happened?”

Dr. Walczak looked down, “I have no idea. Dr. Pawlak wanted to make an immediate exploratory surgery, but I convinced him not to. We took an x-ray first...”

“And found the broken bones...”

“Yes. I’d already noted those—they were obvious. So, we made a CT scan.”

George prompted him, “...and you found?”

The doctor looked up, “We found evidence that a nine millimeter bullet had pierced your lungs. Your records do not show any such injury...”

George smiled, “But my body does. Dr. Walczak, have you noticed anything else about me?”

The doctor thought a moment and shook his head. “In the past, could you have...were you injured in that specific location?”

“No. Perhaps it would be best if you explained to me what else you found.”

Dr. Walczak glanced down again, “Listen very closely to me. When they brought you in here, your clothing was drenched in blood. We prepared multiple transfusions for you—even started one. You showed few signs of trauma. You were pale and in shock, but not due to blood loss, but I get ahead of myself. When I cut away your clothing, I thought I would find a horrible wound in the front and in the back...” His voice trailed off.

George leaned forward, “What did you find?”

“I found a partially healed wound in your chest and a partially healed wound in your back. Your lung had been pierced, but it appeared like it had been healing for a while.”

“You cut me open?”

The very serious doctor laughed, “I told you I wouldn’t let Dr. Pawlak at you—he wanted to put you in surgery right away. As I said, we did a CT scan. Your lungs were healed and your ribs were healing. To tell you the truth, your body appeared to have been healing from this wound for at least two weeks...”

“And how do you explain this?”

“I can’t explain it. I tried to explain it to your boss and my boss. This is the most unusual case I have ever seen.”

George lay back, “Could this happen naturally?”

“It appears to be natural—the lungs were the most healed, the wounds the second, and the ribs last. That’s what we would expect for a person who had been treated normally for a gunshot wound. I didn’t get to it, but your blood level was fine...”

“Fine?”

“From the amount of blood on your clothing, I thought you had bled out, but you weren’t even close. It was as if your body had healed including your blood.”

“And nothing natural could have caused this?”

“Nothing I have ever experienced in my career.”

George shrugged, “I’ve never heard of anything like this before either.”

Dr. Walczak’s face tensed, “Your boss wouldn’t tell me anything, but I realize to some degree the business you are in. You are here at the invitation of our government—they wouldn’t say which country. I can guess. Could this be from something you have available...?”

George smiled, “I wish.” He put his arms behind his head, grimaced, then quickly put them back down again, “If we did, I couldn’t tell you. Still, I don’t know of anything...”

The doctor’s face fell.

George frowned, “I’m feeling pretty good. How much longer do I have to stay in here?”

Dr. Walczak grinned, “I wish all my patients responded as well as you, but I can’t take any credit. I’d like to keep you for a couple of days more...for observation.”

“Can I have my phone? I’d like to contact my office.”

The doctor was backing up already, “Your equipment was confiscated by the police, and I believe, retrieved by your office. After I make my report, I think you will be seeing someone from there very soon.”

George waved his hand.

The nurse left with the doctor, but returned in moments pushing a cart that held a large lunch. George was starving. He ate everything on the cart. Afterwards, the nurse brought him an English language paper. That’s when George learned he had been out for almost two days.

Not much later, George heard the door unlocked and a tall man entered. He wore a nice suit with a turtleneck underneath so his overall look was very modern and very chic. His face was thin and pale, and his hair was a fine thin red. He walked with a very slight slouch, but it appeared to be affected and not real. George knew he slouched slightly to reduce his real height and intentionally reduced the intimidation others might feel when meeting him.

George folded his paper. He spoke English, “Afternoon, Stew.”

Stewart Oghma Calloway glanced at his watch, “It is afternoon. I wonder if we could get a spot of tea.” He went to the door and called the guard.

George couldn’t tell what he said, but he knew Stew was ordering tea and biscuits.

Stewart carefully closed the door behind him. He pulled over the only chair in the room and sat in it, “I say, George, you made a mess of it this time. For a while there, I thought I’d lost you.”

George put an arm behind his head, “You didn’t get that lucky this time.”

Stewart touched George’s arm, “I was not lucky at all, but you were. That’s why I want to recall you to England. The mission was my mistake...I’d be surprised if you didn’t ask for a recall.”

“No way, Stew.”

“What do you mean no way?”

George tapped the paper against the side of the bed, “No one could have known it was a set up.”

“I should have sent your partner with you.”

“We know that now...”

“It was stupid.” Stewart sat straighter, “I’m not certain why I did it. I’m usually not that sloppy.”

“Look, Stew, we took a popup request by our allies—if anything, it was their fault. And we can’t complain much—they took care of it.”

“How did you know that...?”

George shrugged, “A guess--I’m in here with their best trauma doctor.”

A knock came at the door and the nurse entered with a tray of tea and small sandwiches. She poured George and Stewart a cup of tea, and served George a plate of the food. Stewart saw her out of the door with a, “Thank you.” He made sure the door closed and locked behind her.

Stewart slouched again. He held up his tea cup, “I really want to recall you, George. If something happens to you, my sister, my mother, and Claire will have my head.”

“I only took that school girl out once because you asked—I’m not promised or anything.”

“Well, it’s a bargaining point.”

George pursed his lips, “A bargaining point. Claire isn’t twenty, and I’m almost thirty. If you want to set me up, you need to find me an older relative. No, no, Stew, I’m staying here until we finish the current mission.”

Stewart stuck his hands in his coat pockets, “I only asked you to take her out because I could trust you with her—I didn’t expect her to build this infatuation.”

“That’s more reason to keep me here—she’ll eventually find a young man of her own age to fall in love with. I’m safer here.”

Stewart sighed, “Well then back to the serious—there is another reason I’d like to recall you. It’s this entire situation.” He raised his eyes to George’s, “Can you explain how you took a bullet to the chest and are still alive?”

George dropped his eyes and shook his head.

“George, have you heard of Stela?”

George sat a little straighter, “Who hasn’t heard the rumors. I don’t know anything about it.”

“My mother and step sisters all work for Stela.”

“Should you really be telling me this?”

“I don’t know anything about it either. Your recovery stinks of the kinds of things Stela is involved in. It fits certain reporting criteria.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

George cocked his head, “You want to get this super secret part of the organization involved, because...because, I had an unusual recovery?”

“I have a list of things to report up the chain, and this is one of them. I know the info goes directly to Stela.”

“Don’t report it.”

Stewart sat straighter.

George ticked off on his fingers, “I don’t want to be recalled. I don’t want to date Claire. I don’t want to get involved with that part of the organization.”

Stewart frowned and stood, “I may not have many options.”

“Stew, you have many options.”

Stewart glanced up, “I’ll think about it. What do you need while you are in here?”

“Laptop, protection, decent clothes. The tea is good.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Stew.”

The door shut and locked behind him.

In a couple of hours, the nurse delivered his laptop and some clothing to George’s room. He didn’t get any protection—weapons. He opened the computer and turned it on—that’s when he started a very intense study on vampires—he didn’t really learn anything he didn’t know already.

The doctor released George the next day with an admonition to keep his activities light and not too strenuous for the next week or two. He was supposed to get a checkup and had an appointment for the next week. He thought about missing it, but knew that would cause problems with Stewart.

When the hospital released George, the guard at his hospital room door led him to the hospital parking lot and drove him to his flat. George’s apartment was near the city center to keep it close to the foreign embassies located in Gdańsk. The embassies were the major focus of George’s work. That’s what his part of the organization did.

The organization was part of the British Military Intelligence structure, the MIs. During the second World War, the organization had been called MI-19. It was the foreign language and

interrogation branch of the MI system. After the war, there was a political blowup about interrogation techniques and MI-19 shut down one day and reopened the next as the organization. The functions of MI-19 were just too important in covert operations to not be under proper control. The organization was handed most of the foreign covert operations, and it shared agents with the remaining MI-5 and MI-6. The most important part of the organization was covert while most of the operations in MI-5 and MI-6 were overt.

George walked to his apartment building. It was rather lavish for Gdańsk. The doorman opened the door for him and he rode the elevator to the fifth floor. He entered and showered, then changed his clothing. After he checked his evening schedule on the organization's servers, George put on a nice suit with a matching shirt and tie. The suit was nondescript as was the shirt and tie combination. He selected his protection from the stash in his closet, and noted they were his personal weapons. Stew must have recovered them for him.

He carefully ensured his weapons would be evident under the suit and headed back out. It was nearly time for dinner and he knew he would be fed well this evening.

George flagged down a taxi in front of his apartment building and headed for the Chinese Embassy. Tonight, his overt job was British muscle. George stood at the main door to await the arrival of the British secretary to the ambassador. When the secretary saw him, he frowned and moved close. He spoke English, "George, where have you been? I've felt especially uncomfortable the last two days with the guards they've sent me."

"I'm sorry, Sir Rolland—I was indisposed with a cold."

Sir Rolland's frown increased, "A cold hasn't held you back before. I was getting concerned. The office said you were in hospital."

"They were exaggerating."

“Really, George. Exaggerating, about that?”

“Yes, sir. They were exaggerating.”

Sir Rolland was dressed to a tee. His face was sharp and his eyes canted downward. He had a very pleasant look when he smiled, but amplified unhappiness when he didn't. It seemed to provide considerable help in his diplomatic duties. He was otherwise a thin man and not very tall. George, towered over him although they were of a similar build. However, where George was well built and muscled, Sir Rolland was light and soft.

Behind Sir Rolland came Sir Rolland's interpreter, and beside him walked George's partner, David Shear.”

Sir Rolland pointed to the interpreter, “George, this is Lu Ming, the new interpreter they assigned me for the night.”

Lu Ming had a typical Asian look. He was thin and cool. His suit was expensive but looked too large on him.

George nodded. Lu Ming was one of those they were supposed to watch carefully tonight. The Foreign Office was questioning some of the translations Lu Ming had done—they wanted to know if it was an accident, incompetence, or intentional. That was David's job. David was an expert in Mandarin and perhaps some other Chinese language—George didn't know. George wasn't supposed to know—that is except about Mandarin. The covert part of their work was their language skills. No one knew George and David were anything other than British protective muscle from MI-6—everything else was highly classified. That's why they both worked for the organization. George's expertise was Polish, German, Russian, and a few other related languages. His job was to listen to conversations around Sir Rolland, to mark them and remember them. He would compile a report that evening that would go to the highest levels of

British security and perhaps make its way back to Sir Rolland in the morning. No one, including Sir Rolland would know where the information came from. That was the point.

David Shear was not as tall as George. He was older and looked more like muscle. He exuded the proper feel for a British agent. He was slightly blocky and tough. His face was square and bristled with a five o'clock shadow.

When David moved close he whispered in English, "I didn't expect to see you out tonight."

"It was on my schedule."

David squinted, "Does the office know?"

"It was on my schedule."

David smiled, "I won't be able to help you tonight."

"There won't be any problems."

David nodded.

George stepped in close to the group.

At the security checkpoint, they made a point of protesting the confiscation of their personal weapons, but gave them up. The Chinese took George's Berettas, but missed his hidden graphite automatic. It was a nondescript and small nine millimeter kurz weapon with composite bullets. It wasn't as accurate as the Berettas, but it was a great close in weapon. They didn't catch his graphite knife either. This was part of the act. He and David were supposed to be MI-6 agents working for the Crown. They were actually both members of the organization working for the Crown and shares to MI-6. They did provide protection for the ambassador and his secretary when necessary—two birds with one stone. That was their cover.

When they moved into the party area, David took the point with Lu Ming, and George hung back near Sir Rolland.

George ate all he wanted. No alcohol—not on duty. The food was Chinese and European and very high quality. He listened carefully to the conversations around him. The other countries' diplomats knew Sir Rolland didn't speak Polish or any language other than English—not even French. They assumed George and David didn't speak anything other than English or perhaps a little survival Polish. The diplomats always said the most amazing things around them. George had trained himself a long time ago to hide his emotions. Otherwise, he would have laughed through most of the evening.

At the end of the evening, they exited and picked up their weapons. Once Sir Rolland was with his driver and assistant, David, George, and Lu Ming headed back to their apartments.

When George arrived back at his flat, he had an encrypted message on his laptop. His ribs hurt. He poured a glass of single malt and sat down before he read the message.

From: Office Manager  
To: George  
CC:  
Subject: Assignments

Mr. Mardling,

Dave informed me that you were on assignment tonight. I look forward to your report on the activities.

I have decided not to recall you for now. Don't overdo it. I have too much invested in your safety.

Do not reply to this message and destroy completely via standard means.

George sighed and electronically shredded the message. He began his report.