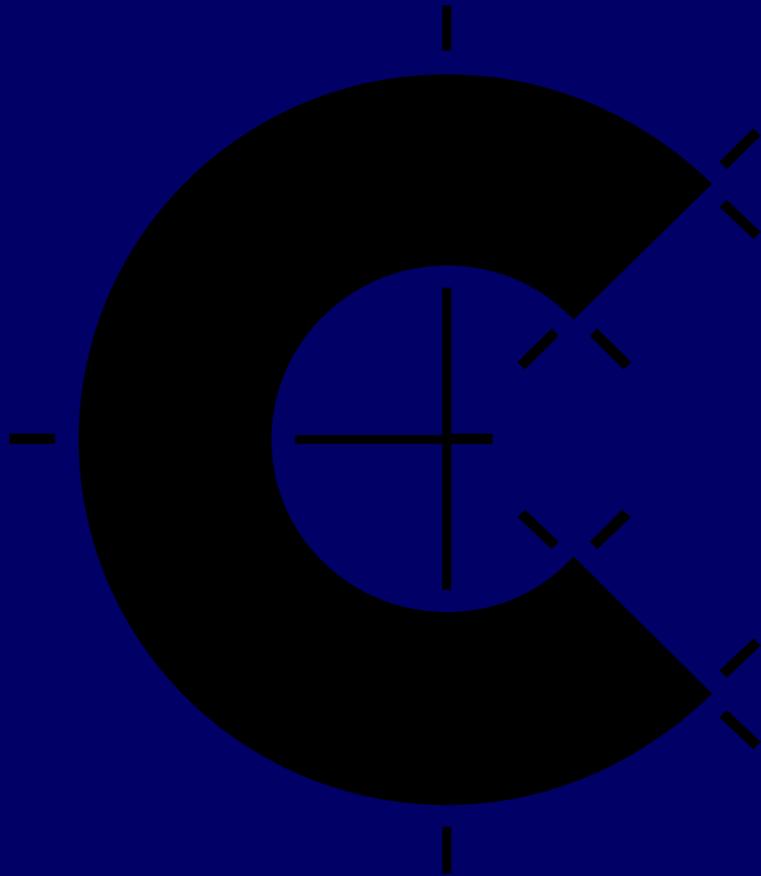
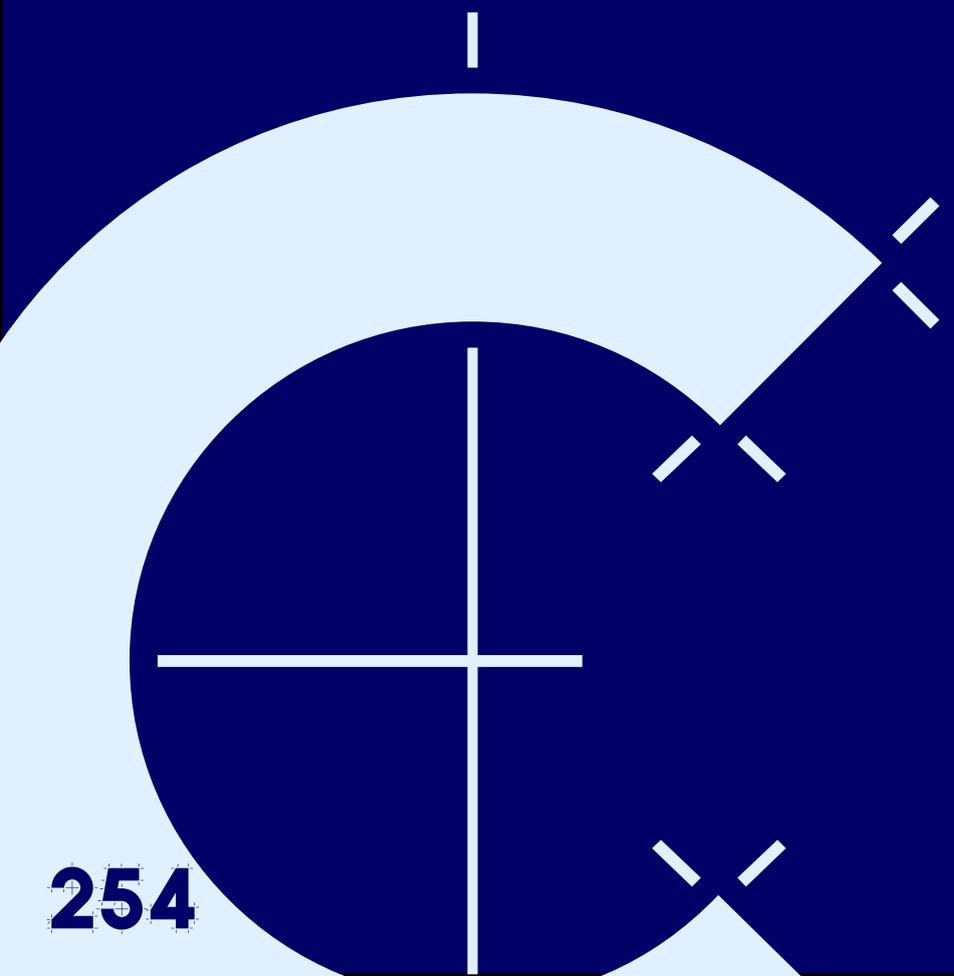


Pæan to Priapus VII a multi-media slash anthology



**ircumference**  
by M. Fae Glasgow



# SEEMS LIKE OLD TIMES

Set during “Call of the Wild”; based on that multi-layer, multi-interpretation conversation between Fraser and RayV, and on that lovely hallway conversation between Fraser and RayK. I found myself listening to the dialogue in the hospital room and wondering just what was being said by the choice of music in the background at that precise moment...



# AND RAY WAS

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right: it was just like old times, one of them lying in a hospital bed with a bullet in him because of the other.

If he moved just right, he could still feel his own bullet, Ray's bullet, lodged beside his spine, a silent threat that could still scare the living daylights out of him, if he stopped to think about exactly what could go wrong.

Just like old times. All the old shadows and shades between them, enough ghosts and enough skeletons in enough closets—not counting his own father, of course—to populate a graveyard.

Any other people, and now would be the time to reminisce, to catch up on a year's worth of living, of nearly dying, of all the things they had said and done, and the things left unsaid, and undone.

But it really was just like old times: Ray, looking at him, not meeting his eyes, and finally answering the last question lingering from their last old time together.

Which one is it, he'd wanted to ask Ray, a year ago: the phone message with its talk of friendship, or that postcard, with a secret photograph of them in a pose that belonged to a sepia-tinted

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wedding photograph. Cold out here, heat me up. Not friendship, no, not that. The last words spoken were of friendship, the last words written were of...heating him up.

And he'd spent a year in limbo, not knowing which message was the real one: one message sent him on his way, and one bound him with unspoken promises.

But now he knew.

Go get your man.

He stopped his hand before it could rub his eyebrow: Ray knew him too well to miss that, and the last thing he wanted was Ray asking him questions.

The first thing he wanted was more answers. Go get your man. Had Ray thought about that, in his year undercover as another man? Had Ray thought about the other Ray, the new Ray, and his old partner, a man who had confessed that the official motto was 'Maintain the right,' but for him, 'a Mountie always gets his man' sounded much closer to the truth. Or at least his hopes.

He had loved this Ray; loved him still, but not like old times. Not like old times at all. They'd each had a year, very different years, and in that year, each of them had become someone else.

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Each of them. He resisted the impulse to stretch, to crack his neck, to check to see if this body had changed as much as the man inside it had, to see if the old mask and the old shell would still hold, or if they'd crack and fall away, brittle chrysalis revealing overgrown butterfly. Although he doubted if anyone but himself and this Ray, his old Ray, would even see the differences in him: he wasn't like old times, not any more.

And this Ray, his former Ray, was very much like old times, all mixed messages and barriers, longings hidden and denied, hopes both fanned and faded.

Or perhaps this Ray had changed, too, depending on what was meant by that 'go get your man.'

Yes, he heard himself say, and heard his own doubts color his voice. Yes. As if it were that easy. As if he knew for sure if he actually wanted to catch his man.

As if he knew if his man wanted to be caught.

And as if he knew how to find his way out of this limbo.

He closed the door to his first Ray's hospital room, and his...other Ray was there, right there, as always.

And asking, clear, no smoke screens, no confusion, one perfectly,

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diamond-sharp question cutting right to the heart of the matter—and right through his own heart, severing withered old ties.

Are we still partners?

Clear, but not simple, not a single question after all. So much hope in those eyes looking at him, and so much fear.

Partners. One of those words, like plastic, that had changed over the years, that had added meanings. A transitioned word. Like gay.

Don we now our gay apparel.

The glint of Ray's bracelet, the glimmer of tears in his eyes the day Ray had punched him, the glitter of smile, the glister of the wicked winks tossed at him when he least expected it.

A single question, of many layers: and for that, he had the perfect answer.

"If you'll have me," he said, and watched this Ray, his other Ray, take that in, and watched as this Ray started prying the layers apart, looking for answers.

"I've been thinking," he said, in the car on the way to the airstrip.

"Uh-oh, that's always dangerous," his Ray said, soothing it with

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a smile, although he could see, too clearly, all the other emotions lurking behind the bonhomie.

“I was thinking about what I’d ask if I were the one returning from a year undercover—indeed, I was wondering what you would ask, if you were in Ray Vecchio’s shoes.” Wished those words back the instant they hit this Ray.

“Yeah, well, I am in his shoes, but—”

Into the silence, he spoke, carefully. “I’m not trying to make comparisons. I’m just...curious.”

“And I’m yellow,” this Ray muttered, and for reasons that escaped him, slanted an embarrassed look towards him.

More than the usual reference to cowardice, then: another pop culture reference, no doubt, and equally doubtlessly, some reference to sex.

“Okay, so if I was the one coming back after a year undercover? I’d ask you if you were all right, how many times you’d nearly died this time, and if you got laid even once.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, and knew, too, that he’d answer this Ray—who would finally know which of them was getting less sex.

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“Listen—”

A rather more sudden right turn than was strictly wise, but Ray’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and so he waited, holding everything else still and quiet inside, until Ray continued:

“I’ve been undercover, I know what it’s like, I know how it is. This is the first time I ever been undercover as a good guy, and it’s—it’s just *different* when you’re under as a bad guy. Takes a while to shed that snake’s skin, you know? What am I saying, of course you don’t know, Mr. I Just Learned To Bluff. But when you come up from under, it’s...it’s not easy, you know, to stop being that bastard, to stand up and say, hey, this is me, and you’re you, and we’re back, we’re us again. So I don’t know what he said, and I don’t know what I’d say if I was coming back from being a bad guy for a year. I know what I’d say now, today, as me, Ray Vecchio, but what I’d say after a year of being someone else? So whatever he said, you can’t hold it against him.”

Even though he could see Ray wanted him to. And there was something Ray had said, something he didn’t even know where to begin to address, tongue-tied and useless as he watched this Ray,

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belted into the driver's seat and a life that was screeching to a halt, itching to get out of his skin.

But then Ray stopped, rather roughly, at a red light, and he could see the words slowly filling Ray's mouth. He watched, impotent, unsure of what was best and what was worst to do, as Ray dropped his head to the steering wheel, and stayed like that, until the car behind beeped at them, loud and long.

He waved a polite apology to the following car, as Ray drove off again, and waited for Ray to let the words spill.

"Ray Kowalski," this Ray said, and swallowed, hard, as if against tears. "Kowalski."

"But still Ray," he said. "Still my friend."

"And partner?"

Oh, how he'd failed, if this Ray needed reassurance already—or at all. "If you'll have me," he repeated, carefully, hoping that all of his answers were there for this Ray to find.

Despite the urge to blush or look away or exhort greater care in the operation of a motor vehicle, he met this Ray's eyes and held them, as steady and true as he hoped he would be with this Ray. Partners. Friends. Best friends and warming up, no difference, with this Ray.

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Not like old times. Not like old times at all.

Better, really, but how to say that? For that matter, how to accept that? Off with the old, on with the new? Which rather begged the question: which Ray was old Ray now, and which Ray was new Ray?

A year of being someone else. A whole year.

So who was his old Ray now? And this Ray, this old new Ray of his, who was he, before, and after, his year as someone else? Who are you, he wanted to ask, but didn't dare, because he feared he knew the answer.

I don't know.

He could see that answer in Ray's eyes, had heard it in the repetition of a name that should be like old times, but...wasn't.

Who are you.

Were he himself asked that question now, he would know the answer, without hesitation: I am me. Absurdly simple, but beyond him for so very long. Until he met one Ray pretending to be another Ray, and fitting him so well, he hadn't even noticed them bonding like epoxy. Until the other Ray had come back, and the first Ray no longer fitted the old space inside him.

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The smile, and the hug, had been so much like old times, but he was used to different smiles now, and different hugs. Heaven help him, he had even grown accustomed to offering semi-hugs himself. His own hand, on the back of this Ray's neck, or in the middle of this Ray's back, or on this Ray's shoulder, or this Ray's arm—even, more than once, in this Ray's hand, so natural to hold this Ray's hand that neither of them had really noticed, the times they'd done it. So natural, to ask for assistance, or to offer it, to take a hand offered or offer his own, and to forget to let go, standing side by side in an alley or on a roof, simply holding hands.

And this Ray's reaction to the belated realization: nothing more complex than a grin, and a wink, and a squeeze of his hand before letting go.

If you'll have me.

Another question, unanswered.

"Ray?"

"S'okay. I got it."

Got what? Replay of what they'd done, where they'd driven, what they'd said... Partners. Unforgivable, to wallow in self-indulgent navel-gazing instead of answering that.

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“It’s up to you, Ray,” he said quietly, remembering other times, other places, and (for once useful) advice about pride, and letting go. “Partners. If you’ll have me.”

Such a sharp look for that, so many questions greeting his answer. He had rubbed his eyebrow before he could stop himself, and for some reason, that made this Ray smile.

“Yeah,” this Ray said. “I’ll have you.”

And there it was again, the wicked wink, sassy and fresh and barely covering up the doubt in those honest eyes. “We can work out the details later.”

Ah. Yes. Details.

Later.

They still had a ‘later’ and they would have...details. Go get your man. He could do that; he was a Mountie, and that’s what he did.

And he was a man, and he could admit to need without breaking, without pain, and he could even admit, to this Ray, with this Ray, that he kissed and was kissed, that sex was still part of him, that he wasn’t a eunuch or a plaster saint. Just a man. Who wanted to get his man. Who could, and would, with

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this Ray, who didn't feel like old times: because this Ray was tomorrow, and beyond.



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