

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

LINE OF SIGHT

Jenn Burke

LINE OF SIGHT

Betrayed by his alien partner, it takes intergalactic cop Cailad kar Natoth a full year to accept that he's stranded on Earth. Rescue just isn't going to happen. He's now Cal Smith, a bartender of all things—but the situation could be worse.

Out from under the pressure of regulations, he has a chance to explore the emotions he's always kept tightly controlled. Ryan Cameron, the man who offered him shelter and a job when he needed it most, once held up the chance to be more than friends—and now that Cal's sure he's staying, it's time to take him up on it. Maybe they can see if the lust and desire ricocheting between them is the start of something more.

But Ryan's lingering grief over the death of his husband five years before—and an unexpected visitor—might steal their future before they have a chance to build it together.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LINE OF SIGHT

By Jenn Burke

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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LINE OF SIGHT

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Photo Description

A shirtless man stands in hip-deep water, staring up at a sky colored orange and yellow by the setting sun.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Is anyone coming? I've been waiting for so long...

Take it from there. I like plenty of atmosphere. And please no BDSM, though angst and personal trauma are always appreciated. Other than that, you're on your own.

Sincerely,

Plainbrownwrapper

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: action/adventure, aliens, law enforcement, psychic ability, grief, stranded on Earth

Word Count: 17,079

LINE OF SIGHT

By Jenn Burke

Friday, June 26, 6:45 p.m.

The twinkling stars mocked him. They popped into existence, carefree, unstoppable. If he were in a better mood, he might even admit they looked nice, the Milky Way all laid out across the indigo darkness of space. They looked gentle, welcoming, like they wanted him to be back amongst them.

The fuckers lied.

Cal whipped the rock in his hand. It skipped across the placid, gentle waves of the North Atlantic twice before being intercepted by a swell and dropping below the surface with a soft *plop*. He came out here every night—sometimes he swam, sometimes he just stood here, hip-deep in the water, trying to *will* an answer from the stars for the silent questions revolving in his thoughts.

Was anyone coming? Did anyone even know he was here?

After three hundred and sixty-six days, he had to face the answer he hadn't wanted to acknowledge.

No—no one was coming. No one had heard the life pod's transponder. No one had missed him. And why would they? Dezoldii would have been able to sell any story she wanted about Cal's disappearance. The truth wouldn't have been part of it, how Lieutenant Dezoldii ni Hyratha—decorated, trusted cop and his partner in the InterSystems Security Forces—had ambushed him in their ship in the middle of the sleep cycle, beat him, and tossed his unconscious body into a life pod. Cal knew why she'd done it—Cal had asked too many questions, trying to prove, trying to *believe*, that his partner wasn't accepting bribes from galactic mercenary groups as encouragement to look in another direction when something illegal was going down. Even though all the evidence he'd been trying to ignore said Dez was.

He still didn't understand why she hadn't just killed him outright. Friendship? Had their friendship ever been real?

He swiped a hand over his forehead and looked up at the stars again. The sky was darker now, the stars more numerous. The pricks of light had nothing to compete against out here—just the vast stretch of the ocean in front of him and the rolling hills with farmland and trees behind him. No lights, no nothing.

A few hundred meters offshore, the transponder in his life pod still beeped its signal to the stars. Weaker now, almost out of power. It would be a matter of weeks, maybe days, before it stopped completely, never to awaken again. His

last connection to his old life would die, leaving him truly abandoned. Unless he made the call to turn it off.

His fingers hesitated over the inside of his left wrist, calling forth the holographic interface of his subdermal onboard computer. Turning it off meant giving up on rescue. Maybe he'd retrieve the power cell from the pod one day. Maybe he wouldn't. At this point, did it really matter? He was now a resident of the third planet from the star the natives called Sol.

Time to accept it.

His fingers stabbed at the holo. A few decisive movements was all it took to disable the transponder and put the power cell to sleep. The holo faded, his computer going into standby mode once more. Done. With those commands, he'd given up hope. His life as Cailad kar Natoth, Sergeant of the ISSF's Tenth Platoon, was officially over. Now he was just Cal Smith—bartender of the Vanishing Point and newest resident of the East Point community on this little Maritime province known as Prince Edward Island.

Letting go... felt better than he'd thought it would.

Instead of investigating the new lightness in his chest, Cal turned back to the path that wound up the hill from the beach and quickly pulled his shirt and pants back on. At the top of the bluff, the rugged wooden structure of the Vanishing Point faced the road, its windows glowing. Once a barn, it had been converted into a bar two decades ago. At first glance, it didn't look like much—grey, weathered shingles covered the exterior, masking the warm, honeyed richness of the inside. The two guest cottages set behind the bar, closer to the red-sand beach, wore the same weathered look with Islander pride. The owner's house, larger than both the cottages put together, also looked a bit more modern—but it was tucked back in the trees and barely visible unless you knew to look for it.

When he'd stumbled up the path a year before, Cal had thought the old barn was abandoned. He'd huddled on the porch for momentary shelter, never expecting anything more. Never expecting the inside to feel like *home*.

His steps quickened. His break time was almost done, but that wasn't the only reason to hurry.

Ryan was up there.

Maybe that was the reason why giving up hope on returning to the stars didn't feel so bad. Staying here, seeing if the offer Ryan had made ten months ago was still valid—that could be good. Better than good. Depending.

No, not depending. It would be good just to finally touch the other man. So what if he hadn't taken Ryan up on his offer because he hadn't wanted it to be just sex? That's all it could've been. Until now. Now, he could maybe think about more.

Gods, I've been watching too many... what's the term? Chick flicks. But the emotion in them... it was nice to just let himself *feel* without worrying about the rest of the platoon catching a whiff of his emotional history during sparring exercises. He'd had to be steady, even, consistent—unless he wanted to find himself before the captain answering a psych eval. Not fun.

Here, no one cared what he did in his time off. Hell, he and Ryan had shared a few tears over *Titanic*. Then another night Ryan had pulled out *Jerry Maguire*, which led to more tears (to this day, remembering how Tom Cruise had delivered the “you complete me” line made his nose run). Movie afternoon had since become a standing thing for Sundays, the one day the bar was closed.

Cal bounded up the path, eager to talk to Ryan. Maybe instead of a chick flick or disaster movie, they could watch something a little spicier this week. A smile curved his lips at the thought. He chuckled as he entered by the service door—then froze as the lack of normal bar chatter settled over him.

The bar was never this quiet.

Music played on the sound system, a generic rhythm Ryan had called “rock” that tended to fade into the background on a busy night. Now, the music was the only thing Cal could hear. All of his instincts flipped to alert. Without thinking about it, he chose his steps carefully, softly, not making a sound as he approached the front room.

“Wave that gun all you want, I'm not giving you any money.”

Cal's jaw clenched at the mulishness in Ryan's voice. With those few words, he understood the scenario—and, gods, when this was all done, he was going to smack Ryan over the head. First rule of armed robbery: give the assholes what they want. That's what insurance was for. Didn't matter what planet you were on.

“I'm takin' it. Y'hear me? Fuckin' tourist trap, takin' all the cash from the rest of us hard-workin' folks.”

Cal sneaked a glance around the corner. He forced his gaze to skim over Ryan, with his familiar, fluffy auburn hair and stubborn, resistant stance—though he did note the slight tremble in Ryan's form—and focused on the

would-be thief. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans that had seen better days, stained and ragged. As Ryan had said, he was literally waving his gun around, his motions sloppy enough to indicate he'd had a few drinks but not so uncontrolled that Cal could be sure he'd be easy to take down. He couldn't identify the gun, beyond the fact that it was a handheld—he didn't know enough about Earth weapons to know its capabilities. He drew in a breath, flattening his emotional reaction to seeing a gun pointed at Ryan. There'd be time later to curse his lack of knowledge. After he dealt with this bullshit. He understood why the folks at the tables hadn't moved—shock, fear. This wasn't the sort of thing their small community saw on a regular basis.

Cal scanned what he could see of the customers, cursing when he didn't find the guy he was looking for. Of all the nights for the local cop, Drew, to be absent. It would've been nice to have some backup.

"Bill, you're not making any sense," Ryan said, his voice calm.

Cal looked back to the fellow with the gun, recognizing him now that Ryan had mentioned his name. He was a regular. Hadn't his boat been repossessed last week? *And robbing the local bar is the solution?* Cal shook his head and crept forward, keeping low.

"Shut up!" The gun stopped wavering. "I'm making sense. I'm the only thing that makes sense!"

Fear flashed over Ryan's face. Having a gun that close and that steady would do it, yeah. Cal kept his emotions tamped down. Anger, fear, worry—none of that would help Ryan or anyone else. He edged around the bar, using it to keep himself hidden. This position meant he couldn't track Bill's actions, except by sound, but he had to get closer. Even with his enhancements, he couldn't sprint across a room faster than a bullet. A few meters... maybe. He reached the corner of the bar and paused, hoping that the people sitting at the tables didn't acknowledge him, didn't make a sound.

Too much to hope for.

Someone gasped. Bill spun toward them. "What?"

Cal moved.

Darting forward around the bar, he aimed for Bill's significant gut. They slammed to the floor—and Bill managed to crook his knee just enough to catch Cal in the stomach. All the air rushed out of him. Bill took advantage, scrambling to flip Cal over onto his back as he straddled his hips. Up came the

gun—grabbed by the muzzle now, and Cal didn't know how that had happened. He didn't have time to figure it out, either, before the butt of the gun crashed into his temple.

Pain shredded his thoughts. The nanites in his blood surged into action, starting to repair the worst of the damage before he even drew another breath. Consciousness wavered and solidified. He fastened a hand around Bill's wrist, immobilizing it and the gun. His other fist clenched and struck Bill's jaw, knocking him sideways and down. He thudded to the floor beside Cal, motionless.

"Cal! Cal—shit, you're bleeding." Ryan pressed the bar towel into the side of Cal's head. Cal wondered if anyone else saw how his fingers trembled.

"M'okay." Long blinks, but he was here, present. He tried to smile and moved to get up, only to watch the bar fade into a weird grey fog.

"Cal!"

He was lying down again. No, he wanted to get up.

Almost like Ryan could read his mind, he leaned on Cal's shoulder. "Stay down. You got your bell rung good."

"I don't have a bell."

"Your head." Ryan absently brushed a strand of hair away from Cal's forehead.

"That's a bell?"

Ryan snorted with quiet laughter, used to Cal's questioning of metaphors and idioms. Cal did it less now that he'd had more opportunities to read people and get insights into culture and language, but there were some things he still didn't understand. *Bell rung. Huh.*

Ryan's fingers made contact with Cal's skin, the gentlest of touches. Emotions bloomed over the brief connection. *Worry, fear, pride, gratitude.* Cal sighed, blanketed by the knowledge that Ryan cared. He wasn't blank, he wasn't unreadable. He was just really fucking human.

"I swear a lot in my thoughts."

"Huh?"

Oh, whoops. He'd said that out loud. He smiled, the expression feeling looser than usual. "I think it means I've assimilated."

“Damn, buddy, he hit you *hard*.” Ryan looked over his shoulder. “Janey, you called the cops, yeah?”

The waitress stepped forward, nodding. “Mounties and ambulance are on their way.”

“Don’t need an ambulance.” Cal started to push up again, gratified when the fog stayed on the edges of his vision instead of obliterating it. Progress.

“Like hell,” Ryan growled. “You need X-rays. A doctor to check you—goddammit, Cal, stay down.”

“I’m good.” *Good* might be pushing it, but he was better. The room stayed where it was supposed to be, anyway, even if it felt like someone was pounding a hammer into his temple. “It’s not as bad as you thought.”

“Not as bad—Cal, you’re going to need a shitload of stitches and—” Ryan took a peek at under the towel and frowned, removing the cloth entirely. “Oh. I could’ve sworn...”

Could’ve sworn the cut was larger, more grotesque. It probably had been a few minutes ago. *Go, nanites*.

“Head wounds bleed a lot,” Cal assured him.

“Yeah. I guess.”

Sirens blared outside. Ryan helped him scoot over to lean his back against the bar, support that Cal welcomed. He might not need a hospital visit, thanks to his nanites, but that didn’t mean he was a hundred percent—and he still had to get through the cops’ questioning and the paramedics’ exam.

Oh, fun.

Saturday, June 27, 12:05 a.m.

“You don’t need to stay.”

Cal stood there, awkward and conflicted while Ryan snorted and kicked off his shoes by the front door. His light jacket got hung up on the row of pegs next. Now that Cal had decided his future wasn’t in the stars, he wanted Ryan to stay over—but not because he was hurt, of all things.

“I’m staying. Be thankful they didn’t insist on keeping you overnight in the hospital,” Ryan said. “Got a beer?”

Cal scowled. “I’m not supposed to drink for the next few days.”

“Wasn’t asking for you. For me.”

Cal waved a hand in the direction of the cottage’s tiny kitchen and considered retreating to his bedroom rather than watch his friend indulge in one of the things this planet did very right. But that would mean separating himself from Ryan and he wasn’t ready for that yet.

The man had stayed solidly at his side from the moment the paramedics decided he needed to be checked out at the nearest hospital, which was about twenty minutes away. Cal had never been to a hospital—not even when Ryan had found him, cold and shivering, huddled on the back porch of the Vanishing Point. He thanked all the gods that the designers of his subdermal computer and the nanites in his blood had taken into account possible covert operations—neither was detectable by the technology in use on Earth. Other than the poking and the prodding and the waiting, the worst thing about hospitals was the smell of antiseptic. It had seeped into his clothes, his hair, even his skin.

Instead of flopping beside him, as he’d done a hundred times over the last year, Ryan settled carefully onto the cushions. Cal was grateful for the show of courtesy. Jarring movements still hurt.

“You should go have a shower and crash.”

“Janey close the bar okay?”

“Yeah, she texted me earlier to let me know everything was taken care of. Some of the regulars helped with the cleanup.”

Ryan lifted the long-necked bottle to his lips and swallowed. Cal tried not to watch the motion of his Adam’s apple, but he couldn’t help it. The sight

distracted him. As did the way his lips caressed the bottle. Suddenly it was very, very easy to think of Ryan's lips on something else.

"Cal?" Ryan's concerned blue gaze met Cal's. "Don't worry about the hospital bill, okay? I got it covered."

Cal blinked, bringing himself back from fantasyland. Because he hadn't had a provincial health card or other resident documentation, the hospital visit hadn't been free—a rarity in Canada. "You sure you're not going to get in trouble for letting me work for you without the right paperwork?"

Ryan shrugged and took another swallow. "No point in borrowing trouble. If something comes of that, I'll deal with it when it happens."

Very philosophical. But that was Ryan. Who else would take in a stranger dressed in odd clothes, soaked to the bone, and telling a shitty story in broken English? Of all the places Cal could have ended up, he thanked the gods repeatedly that he'd found Ryan's bar.

"We should probably look into getting you a social insurance number and a health card. I mean, if you're staying." Before Cal could respond to that statement, Ryan leaned in, his light-blue gaze intense. "Your eyes are looking more focused. Still feeling dizzy?"

With Ryan so close? A little. All of the desire and want he'd subdued over the past year broke through the gate he'd shoved it behind, flooding him. Blood rushed south, and he sucked in a breath at the suddenness. His senses were filled with Ryan—sight, sound, and smell, anyway. Taste and touch... he needed those next.

"I'm staying."

Ryan straightened. "What?"

"I'm staying. I decided tonight."

"Before or after the head injury?"

Cal chuckled at the doubtful look on Ryan's face. "Before. On my dinner break."

"Ah. The stars finally spoke back." A grin crooked up one side of Ryan's mouth. He'd stopped commenting on Cal's habit of communing with the night sky, but clearly he hadn't stopped noticing it.

"Something like that."

"And you figure my offer should still be on the table?"

“No strings. I’m attracted to you, you’re attracted to me, and it doesn’t have to be anything more than that. Just human contact, you know? Everyone deserves to be touched.”

Ryan’s words from ten months before reverberated in Cal’s head as though he’d just spoken them. At the time, Cal hadn’t wanted to get too close. He’d been convinced rescue was imminent and forming attachments was a bad idea—and he suspected that was what would happen with Ryan. Even knowing him for only two months, Cal had realized he wanted more than just casual. Gratitude at Ryan’s willingness to offer a stranger shelter had quickly transformed over those first months into genuine like and appreciation for Ryan’s caring nature. Friendship followed. And now...

“Not that offer, no.”

Ryan frowned. “Oh.”

“I’m not interested in no strings.”

“You’re not?” Ryan slowly lowered the beer bottle.

“No. I’m not.”

Ryan looked down, his fingers playing with the neck of the dark-brown bottle. It took him a minute to speak—a minute that might’ve been an age, as far as Cal was concerned. Had he waited too long? Had Ryan found someone else in the last year? His observation of the man said no, but maybe he’d missed something. He’d missed the fact that Dez was planning to kill him, after all. Cal had to admit he had blind spots the size of asteroids when it came to the people closest to him.

“Don’t—” Ryan’s voice cracked. “Don’t fuck with me. All right?”

Cal turned in his seat, hiking up one leg so he could face Ryan. “I’m not fucking with you.”

“Because you know this isn’t easy. I want it, but...”

Cal’s fingers itched to brush against Ryan’s temple, but he kept his hands relaxed, loose, in his lap.

Ryan sucked in a shaky breath. “I haven’t done more than casual since Garrett.”

“I know.”

“I still miss him.”

“I know.”

And Cal did. Once he'd demonstrated that he didn't mind Ryan talking about his husband, Ryan had shared so many stories of the man who'd taken him in as a sixteen-year-old who'd been abandoned by his family for being gay. Garrett had protected him and—eventually—grown to love him, something he wouldn't even consider until Ryan was over twenty-one. They'd been together romantically for ten years, married for four of those, when Garrett's car had hit a patch of black ice one winter night and slid into the path of an oncoming semi. It was clear with every word Ryan spoke about Garrett that the man was still a huge part of his day-to-day life.

“Moving on doesn't mean replacing him.” Cal gave into the urge to touch Ryan, a soft brush of fingertips against the other man's T-shirt covered shoulder.

“I know.”

“And I really need to get laid.”

Laughter snorted out of Ryan. “Laid. You need to get laid.”

No more holding back. Cal leaned in and took what he wanted, a hand cupping Ryan's jaw to bring his lips around to meet his own. He hovered there, only a breath separating them. How often had he imagined this over the last year? Lying in the dark, wanting, wishing he could just give in and say, okay, casual would be *okay*. He could've known well before now what Ryan's lips felt like, what they tasted like.

No more waiting.

He closed the last of the distance between them, all of his senses open and eager to connect. To *feel*. Skin whispered against skin, sending tingles cascading outward. Soft. Tentative.

Then Ryan gripped the back of his neck with a firm grasp and pulled him forward. Hard.

Their lips no longer whispered—they battled, their tongues joining the fray. Teeth clacked together, moans flavored the air. Tingles turned to flames, licking at Cal's skin. His hands scrambled to find bare flesh, digging under Ryan's T-shirt. Quivering muscles greeted his fingertips and an answering tremble cascaded through him.

They separated just long enough to divest their shirts—that was all they had the patience for. Cal's hands danced over Ryan's chest, shoulders, and back,

learning the landscape. Ryan was lean, the muscles in his arms well defined from daily lifting of boxes of liquor. His stomach was surprisingly soft—not pudgy, just not toned. Charming. Real.

Gods, so, so real.

Cal attacked Ryan's neck with teeth and tongue, sucking and biting. Something like panic rushed through him, a need to possess Ryan now—before they were interrupted. Before the emotions rolling off Cal were found out. He straddled Ryan, rubbing against him, his hard dick trapped behind jeans that used to be comfortable. Panting, almost hyperventilating.

“Hey.” Ryan brushed a hand along Cal's back, his other gripping the back of his neck to hold him still. “Hey. We've got all night.” *Gentle, calm, breathe*, said Ryan's touch. “You're staying, right?”

Air shuddered into Cal's lungs. “I'm staying.”

Ryan nudged him back and rose to his feet. “Then c'mon.”

Hand grasping Cal's, he pulled him down the short hall to the master bedroom with its massive bed. Cal stood still as Ryan unzipped his jeans and pulled them off along with his underwear, his movements slow, unhurried. It was so unlike anything Cal had ever experienced—not a rush to physical release, but a lovely, slow journey to *more*.

“How's your head?” Ryan asked.

Head? What head? Between the nanites and the hormones, he'd all but forgotten about his injury. “Good. Fine. I'm fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, Ryan, I'm—*gods!*” Cal gasped as Ryan swallowed him down, taking the cock he'd freed all the way back to his throat. It had been so long, so damned long since he'd felt this—not just the physical joy, but the desire and lust cascading from his partner.

Best aphrodisiac ever.

Cal's hands threaded through the soft, fluffy curls of Ryan's auburn hair. It wasn't a grip to force Ryan to take more—he didn't need any encouragement for that—but just a connection, a need to feel Ryan's head bobbing back and forth, up and down...

“Oh damn.” Cal grunted, trying like hell to hold back his release. “I'm gonna... Ryan, I'm gonna...”

His mouth opened on a soundless yell as his orgasm thundered through his nerve endings, eyes squeezed shut with the force of it. The world fell away, replaced by the sound of Ryan swallowing, by the gentling motion of his mouth and tongue, by the care the other man took in bringing Cal back down to Earth. Slowly, Ryan withdrew and gazed up at Cal, his pale-blue eyes darkened with desire.

“Good?”

So good Cal felt as if the slightest breeze would push him over. “I—” His throat worked and he shook his head. “No words.”

Ryan grinned, the curve of his lips rakishly crooked. Standing, he moved in close and flicked his tongue against Cal’s lips, then kissed him deeply. Cal moaned, inexplicably turned on to taste himself. His cock, sated only moments before, let him know that round two would be a possibility very soon.

Moving to press kisses to Cal’s neck, Ryan inhaled, long and slow. “You smell so good,” he said, his voice rough with need.

Something in the way Ryan’s voice shook triggered a need in Cal to take care of the other man. He wanted him to be just as undone as Cal was, just as gone—physically, emotionally. “Pants off,” he growled. “And get on the bed.”

Ryan shuddered but obeyed Cal’s orders without hesitation. Shucking off his pants, underwear, and socks, he scrambled onto the bed, flipping over so he could watch Cal’s approach. “How do you want me?”

Cal’s mouth went dry at the sight of that long, hard, beautiful cock, flush with need and ready, so ready to be touched. “Gorgeous,” he whispered.

Ryan gave himself a stroke, his hips bumping upward in an almost unconscious motion. “You want me like this or on my hands and knees?”

The motion of Ryan’s hand as it swept down and back up mesmerized Cal. “I...” For the first time since he’d touched Ryan a year ago and absorbed an understanding of English, the language failed him utterly. His thoughts flipped over to aryuhn and it took almost more concentration than he possessed, watching Ryan, to pull them back.

“You. Inside me,” he rumbled, joining Ryan on the bed.

Ryan’s hand stilled. “You want me to top?”

Cal frowned, trying to work out the meaning of that sentence. “You on top? Yes. Face to face, you moving inside me—”

He didn't get any further with his description. Ryan made an unidentifiable noise and plastered himself to Cal, shoving him onto his back, lips covering his, body moving sinuously—just as desperate and on the edge as Cal had been in the living room.

"God, I've dreamed of..." Ryan's voice drifted away as kisses trailed down the line of Cal's jaw. "Yes. Me inside you. *Fuck*, yes. Condoms. Lube."

Cal arched his neck, offering sensitive skin to Ryan's need. "Nightstand."

Condoms might be a foreign concept to Cal—his nanites made sure no diseases were ever transmitted to or from him—but after doing some research, he'd understood that Ryan wouldn't want to go without. Not at first, anyway. Maybe, eventually, he'd feel his lover's essence fill him—an erotic sensation he had experienced too few times in his life.

Ryan fumbled with the box of condoms, finally extracting a strip of packages. He sat back, straddling Cal's thighs, and struggled to separate one foil pack from the rest. "We'll go slow next time," he muttered, sliding the latex onto his cock and gripping himself around the base as he breathed deeply. "Damn, almost lost it."

"Am I that hot?" Cal teased.

"Christ." Ryan shoved the extra condoms off Cal's chest, onto the floor, and turned his attention to the lube. "You have no idea how much I've wanted this. How much I've wanted you. And now you're here, naked, and looking at me like... like..." He trailed off, his movements slowing as he caught Cal's gaze.

Yes, like that. Neither of them said the word, but Cal didn't need to read Ryan's emotions to know Ryan was feeling the same thing he was. This was more than physical release, and they both knew it.

"Yes," Cal said softly. When lube-coated fingers found his entrance, he said it again, whimpering. "Yes."

Preparing him took an eternity, and it was over too soon. He whined as Ryan's fingers left him feeling empty and unfulfilled—then groaned as the blunt tip of his cock pushed against him. It burned, but it was a welcome sensation, grounding him, pulling him back from the edge.

"Look at me."

Cal couldn't resist the order in Ryan's voice, even if he'd wanted to, and blinked his eyes open. Ryan's face hovered over his, brow furrowed in

concentration, skin flushed with need. Sweat dampened his auburn hair, darkening it to brown, and on impulse, Cal leaned up to draw his tongue along Ryan's cheek to capture a stray droplet.

Ryan groaned and thrust forward, filling Cal completely. Gasping, Cal fell back onto the bed and arched his back, welcoming Ryan in deeper, as deep as he could go. "Move, please. *Please.*"

Ryan did.

Cal couldn't stop the sounds that escaped him, the groans, the whimpers, the needy whines. Above him, Ryan growled, grunted. Their coupling was rushed, animalistic. Perfect. Next time they'd go slow, as Ryan had said. This time—the need was too much. Cal lifted his legs and held them up, giving Ryan more room to thrust harder, deeper. Curses left Ryan's lips as he did just that—then he changed his angle, pegging that spot deep inside Cal that turned *great* into *amazing*, and Cal fell into the sensations, opening his mind, dropping his shields, wanting all the emotions Ryan had to offer.

They surrounded him, intensifying everything he felt physically, turning him inside out. He *was* the emotions, his sense of self transcending the restrictions of flesh. He didn't have the chance to warn Ryan that he was close. One more thrust, one more perfect thrust, and Cal was coming, his thoughts obliterated by the sheer wonder of it. Ryan shuddered above him, crying out his name, and he knew that together they'd found something the rest of the galaxy would kill to have.

Saturday, June 27, 8:43 a.m.

Waking up beside someone was something Cal could get really used to. Still mostly asleep, he wrapped an arm around Ryan and snuggled close—because yeah, sex was awesome, but the gentle buzz of cozy, warm emotions sinking into his skin was almost better. Like a fuzzy, perfect blanket.

Oh yeah, he could so get used to this.

Tucking his nose against the nape of Ryan's neck, he pressed his lips to sleep-warmed skin in a vague kiss. Ryan sighed, a contented sound that reverberated deep into Cal's soul. He'd done that, made Ryan that happy. He knew there was no tally between them, no list of everything Ryan had given him over the past year—but still, it felt good to give something back.

He'd just about slipped back into sleep when Ryan's cell phone chirped. Unlike a lot of people, Ryan kept his ringtone relatively unobnoxious and not very loud, but the sound didn't mesh with the soft Saturday morning atmosphere. Ryan grunted and shifted—and for an instant, Cal's arms tightened around him, afraid to let him crawl out of the bed.

Which was a stupid reaction. It was just the phone.

Rubbing a palm over the back of Cal's hand, as though he knew Cal needed the reassurance, Ryan pushed himself out of bed and snatched up his phone. His shoulders stiffened as he looked at the display, but before Cal could ask why, he thumbed the answer button. "Hi, Kerr."

Kerr Westley, Garrett's younger brother.

Shit.

"No, it's fine. Just having a bit of a sleep in. What's up?"

It was stupid—irrational—to feel a surge of annoyance at being erased from the bed. What they'd shared last night had been private, between them, and Cal wasn't about to go telling everyone the details, either. And this was Ryan's brother-in-law. He didn't want to know what Ryan got up to in his private times.

Didn't keep Cal's stomach from curling in on itself.

"Yeah, tomorrow? Sure. It'd be good to see you. Call me when you get off the ferry. We'll barbeque. Nah, just bring yourself, I'll take care of the rest.

Cool. Take care.” Ryan hit the end call button and . . . just sat there, staring at the little device in his lap.

Cal didn’t know what to do. Touching Ryan’s skin would give him a clue, but he wasn’t sure he wanted it. Everything in Ryan’s posture said defeat, regret. Maybe shame. He didn’t want to feel that from his friend . . . his lover. That was the sort of thing he wouldn’t be able to scrub away.

“That was Garrett’s brother.”

Cal said nothing, just waited for Ryan to continue.

“He’s going to come over for a visit tomorrow. He lives in Antigonish.” He said the Nova Scotia town’s name quickly, as all Nova Scotia natives did, ignoring the T altogether. *Anna-guh-nish*. “So, you know, not all that far.”

Far enough, if Cal remembered his map right. An hour to the ferry, an hour or so on the ferry, then almost ninety minutes up here to the East Point. But from what Ryan had revealed in bits and pieces, Garrett’s family all but adopted him well before he and Garrett had made things official—so Kerr going out of his way for a visit wasn’t unusual. Cal couldn’t fathom how Ryan’s biological family had disowned him simply because he wanted men and not women—the gaeclae, his people, didn’t have ingrained gender restrictions on love and physical attraction. The person mattered, not the equipment.

It had to be a comfort that Kerr still kept in touch even now, years after Garrett’s death.

“He’s going to be here tomorrow around noon,” Ryan continued.

“Okay. I can run to the store today before we open. You mentioned barbeque?”

“Yeah . . . I . . .” Ryan’s head drooped. “I can’t do this.”

Cal’s gut clenched a little harder, but he reached for another *this* Ryan might be talking about. Not the *this* between them, not when they’d finally gotten here. “So call him back and say next weekend would be—”

“No. I mean—”

“Don’t say it.” Cal shoved the covers off, scrambling to get out of bed on his side rather than look at the man he’d thought could be *it*. He’d never dared to dream for an *it* before—not with the dangers of his job, and how attachments could be seen as weaknesses. But he’d wanted one. He wanted a place to belong, a family of his own, always had. Hadn’t he confessed that to Ryan last night? Or something along those lines, how he didn’t want casual.

Fucking stupid.

“Cal—” Ryan turned on the bed but didn’t make a move to stop Cal as he grabbed for the clothes they’d left strewn about the bedroom the night before. “It’s... complicated.”

“Not that complicated.” Where was his other sock? “I don’t expect you to tell him about me over the phone, but—”

“I can’t tell any of them about you. Garrett’s family. I mean...”

Cal froze. He didn’t look at Ryan, didn’t dare.

“They—” Ryan’s voice failed in a croak. “I promised Garrett. You know? I stood up beside him and *promised* and they all witnessed that, and now... now I...”

A rueful, humorless chuckle escaped Cal. “So last night was wishful thinking on both our parts, huh?”

“I didn’t think it was. I swear, Cal, I didn’t think—”

Cal shook his head, his teeth grinding together, then bent down to retrieve the wayward sock he spotted sticking out from beneath the bed. At least his head had stopped aching. One good thing. One really minor good thing.

He yanked on his underwear. “Where I’m from, you don’t open yourself up. You just don’t. Everything in me... I just... fuck. I decided to leave that all behind, to trust in our... in us.”

“So you’re not even going to give me time?”

“How much time do you need?” Cal threw his arms up, exasperated. “I’m not telling you how to grieve, and I’m not trying to be an asshole, Ryan, just... how much time? Is it going to be another five years? Are you going to turn around and be a coward then, too?”

Ryan jerked to his feet, making no move to cover up how naked he was. “Fuck you. You have no idea—”

“You’re scared.” He didn’t even have to touch Ryan to know that. Simple psychology. “Hell, you’re terrified. That phone call was just a convenient excuse to kick me to the ditch.” That saying didn’t quite sound right, but he didn’t care. He pulled on his jeans and T-shirt and stared Ryan down over the expanse of the huge, soft bed, noting that the other man had gotten suspiciously quiet. “You can’t even deny it.”

“I need time.”

“No, you don’t.”

“What, is this an ultimatum now?”

“I don’t play games like that.”

“I don’t know that. Fuck, Cal, I don’t even know you!” Ryan waved a hand at him, the movement sloppy with emotion. “I’ve told you everything. Everything. How my parents kicked me out. About Garrett. Every fucking thing about me, you know. And you... you give nothing back. Then, last night, you say you’re staying and you want more than just sex? How the fuck am I supposed to deal with that?”

Cal didn’t think his stomach could get any tighter. “So... you lied?” And he hadn’t even felt it. Too caught up in his own head, too caught up in his own wants and wishes.

“No,” Ryan said, vehement. Then some of the fire left his features. “Just... maybe I was premature in agreeing.”

Cal didn’t want to fault Ryan for his confusion. Gods, he’d give his left nut to feel an emotion like that—to be allowed to experience that depth of feeling. Even if it messed him up once it was gone. Just like it had messed up Ryan.

Lifting his hands in surrender, he made his way around the bed and out the door of the bedroom, ignoring Ryan as he called after him. Yeah, it was his cottage—but it wasn’t. Ryan owned it. It was here to house whatever stray Ryan happened to pick up. He was taking the good deed Garrett had done for him and showing someone else things could be better.

Was that all last night had been, then? A chance for karmic payback?

That idea hurt even more than Ryan’s rejection.

He needed to untangle his thoughts. Either Ryan understood that and had to do the same, or was happy to see the back of him—because other than that one call, he didn’t say a word when the door of the cottage slammed behind Cal.

Saturday, June 27, 9:02 p.m.

Twelve hours later, Cal's heart might not have forgotten the turbulence of the morning—but his dick had.

Every time Ryan smiled, every time he bent over, hell, every time he twisted his hips just so, Cal's cock perked up to say hello. It didn't matter that they'd hardly said five words to each other since opening the bar's doors, and all those words had been something to do with an order or other business. His penis remembered how those soft hands felt on his skin, how Ryan tasted like the sea, as though the salt had seeped into his very pores. It remembered the searing, moist warmth of Ryan's mouth.

And it wasn't listening when Cal told it none of that was happening again. Optimistic freak.

"Hey Cal."

Cal looked up at his name to see Janey leaning against the bar. "What's up, beautiful? Thanks for closing yesterday, by the way."

"No problem. Just glad you're all right. Guess it looked worse than it was." She leaned closer, her voice getting lower. "I'm a little worried about Drew." Her head tipped slightly toward her shoulder, and Cal followed the gesture to see a familiar figure hunched over a table in the back corner. Drew Douglas, one of the local Mounties, the regular whose presence Cal had missed last night. Even tucked into the shadows, he didn't look so good.

"How so?" Cal asked, turning his attention back to Janey.

She leaned closer. "Word is, he got some bad news yesterday. His brother's in the army, stationed out west. Alberta or something. Anyway, there was a training accident."

"Shit," Cal breathed. "Did his brother..."

Janey's pained look said it all. "Guess there was some bad blood between them, too. He's been asked not to attend the funeral."

"That's cold."

"Right?" Janey sighed. "Could you go over and talk to him, maybe? Just make sure he's not... you know."

Cal arched a brow. "'You know' ...what?"

“Gonna hurt himself?” It looked like it pained Janey to even suggest it.

He wouldn't be the first cop to contemplate it. Cal's training had been filled with warnings and guidelines on the need to master his emotions—he was gaeclae, descended-human, and weaker than the aryuhn who would serve as his partner. Only the best gaeclae were accepted into the ISSF and even then, they were constantly monitored, making sure their human minds could withstand to the rigors of training and duty. Every so often, news would filter through the ranks about a gaeclae whose emotional turmoil hadn't been picked up—usually after the individual had taken permanent, irreversible action.

Cal might not be a cop anymore, but he still felt the pull of brotherhood. “Sure, Janey. Thanks for the head's up.”

He took care of the next few drink orders, then caught Janey's eye. She went into the back office, presumably to get Ryan to watch the bar, while Cal headed over to Drew's table. He slid into the booth across from the cop who barely stirred at his intrusion.

“How you doing, man?”

Drew played with a ring of condensation on the scarred wood of the table. “You heard, huh.”

“Yeah.” What did they say on Earth to express condolence? “I'm sorry for your loss.”

Drew snorted, then shot Cal an apologetic look. “Thanks.”

“You gonna be okay?”

One shoulder hitched up—a less than enthusiastic statement about Drew's mental health, as far as Cal was concerned. “Yeah,” he muttered.

“You got someone to talk to? Your partner, maybe?”

Drew's gaze slid to the side.

Cal sighed. “C'mon, man, you gotta talk to him. Or her. That's part of the reason partners exist, to help you through stuff that would affect the job.”

“Lisa doesn't need to know the bullshit that's going on in my head,” Drew hissed. “I just need time. I don't want her looking at me like... like...”

“Like what?”

“Like I'm gonna break.”

“You don’t let this out, you will. Drinking away your grief isn’t going to work.”

Drew clenched his teeth, the muscle at the joint of his jaw flexing. “You don’t even know me.” His hard expression wilted, his eyes filling. “He didn’t know me, either. Never wanted to. Goddammit...”

The situation really wasn’t any of his business. Still, Drew was a fellow cop—even if he didn’t know it. “Can I call a cab? Someone to come get you?”

Drew slumped, the beer or whatever else he’d been drinking catching up to him. “There’s no one. Lisa’s home with her family. I just... my house was too quiet.”

It might not have been the same sort of circumstance, but Cal knew what Drew meant about a house being too quiet. His little cottage had echoed with the silence once he’d returned from his walk to find no sign that Ryan had ever spent the night. It... had hurt, surprisingly a lot, that reminder that he was alone. Lonely. Not enough.

No one else should have to feel that way.

“You can bunk at my place tonight,” Cal said.

Drew looked up, his eyes wide. Not with fear, with... something like hope. “N-no, I—”

“I’ve got a spare room and lots of coffee for the morning.”

The cop swallowed hard. One hand rose to swipe at his eyes, the movement imprecise. “I’m such a fucking mess.”

Cal slid out of the booth and stepped to Drew’s side, leaning down to help pull the other man out and up. “Yeah. We all are. At least you’ve got a good reason.”

He flagged down Janey, and told her to let Ryan know he was leaving early. Who was the coward now? With a glance and a quick toss of his head at Ryan behind the bar, he could’ve summoned him to his side to explain—but that would mean talking to him, something beyond a few bar-related words, and Cal wasn’t up for it.

Maybe that was a sign. Maybe he should just... leave. When Ryan was busy with Garrett’s brother tomorrow, maybe he should just take off. Find another job, another place. Find something that could be his.

Sunday, June 28, 1:53 a.m.

Pounding on the door woke Cal from a fitful doze on the couch. A glance at the clock on the microwave told him the time—and he knew exactly who was taking out his annoyance on the door. Grumbling, Cal pushed to his feet. If Ryan woke up Drew, he was going to be pissed. The guy needed a good night's sleep.

He whipped the door open and stepped out onto the small porch before Ryan could move across the threshold. The door clicked shut softly behind him as he met Ryan's glare. "What?"

"You bailed."

"Yeah, hours ago. If you had a problem with it, I told Janey—"

"You think it's okay to bail for a fuck?"

Cal didn't have to touch Ryan to feel his jealousy; the man's energy was a tsunami rushing over him. He gritted his teeth against it. "You think I'd do that?"

"Evidence says you would, yes."

How did they go from tender touches and kisses Friday night to... this? Cal almost wished Ryan would claw the skin from his arms instead—it'd hurt just as bad but at least it would heal. The damage Ryan wrought with his words might not.

"Drew's brother died," he growled. "I don't know the whole story, but he's not welcome at the—"

"So you thought you'd heal him with your magic dick?"

Cal looked over Ryan's shoulder at the still, dark bulk of the Vanishing Point. He didn't look at Ryan. Didn't dare. He wasn't sure he wouldn't hit the man if he did.

"He needed a friend. Someone to just be there. Someone to give a shit. I had a guest room I've never used and I thought I'd... what's the saying? Pay it back?"

Ryan said nothing for a time, only the ever-present sound of the ocean and the occasional rustle of leaves in the nearby copse of trees keeping it from

being utterly silent between them. He had to be thinking about how he'd taken Cal in. Been there for him. Given a shit about him, when no one else had.

"Paying it forward," Ryan said, finally, his voice soft. "Shit, Cal, I—"

"I used to be a cop." The tiny bit of truth slipped from him. Unbidden, but not unwelcome. Ryan was right, he'd shared too little. He couldn't share everything, but... a few facts couldn't hurt. Too little, too late, probably, but...

Ryan's mouth opened, then closed. He stared at Cal, frowning. "I don't even know what to say to that. Why has no one come looking for you? Why didn't you go back?"

"Everyone thinks I'm dead. I didn't go back because I couldn't."

"If you needed money—"

Cal shook his head, cutting off Ryan's words. "You gave me so much. Even if money would solve the problem—and it won't—I wouldn't ask." He leaned back against the cottage's door and sighed. "Look, I stepped over a line. I asked for more than you could give, and I'm sorry for that."

"Goddammit."

"Why are you swearing at me now?"

"Not at you. At me." Ryan took a step back to lean against the porch railing and folded his arms. "I'm sorry. For this morning, for... this." He waved a hand at Cal and his front door.

"I'm gonna be honest. I wish it would have worked out. This past year... it's been good." Peaceful. It had been what he'd needed—even if he hadn't known it.

"So we're done?" Ryan asked quietly.

"I was going to start looking into another job, yeah. Maybe down in Charlottetown. Maybe the mainland."

It was Ryan's turn to look away, turning his gaze toward the water. "Oh."

"I'm not trying to punish you. I don't do shit like that. I just... we both deserve more, right? You deserve not to be pressured by me being here, and I deserve..." Cal's voice trailed off rather than voicing the words that would hurt, even if he didn't mean them to. He deserved to be loved like Ryan had loved Garrett. It wasn't his main priority—making a life for himself, now that he'd decided to stop waiting for rescue, was. "I'll start poking around on Monday."

“You’re going to need ID.” Ryan’s voice was tight.

“Something else I need to figure out.”

Ryan’s chin dipped and he rubbed at his eyes. “I fucked this up so bad.”

Cal shrugged, as though it were no big deal. Except it was. It had been everything. “You weren’t ready and I asked for too much. It’s on me as much as you.”

“Doesn’t mean you need to leave.” Ryan looked up. “I don’t want you to.”

“Not like I’m taking off tomorrow. I’m just going to start the process.”

“Can I ask for some time? Give me a deadline. Let me get my head on straight.”

“You gonna tell Garrett’s brother you’re ready to move on when you see him tomorrow?”

Ryan’s wide, terrified eyes gave him his answer. “I... I can’t. What if Kerr decides he never wants to see me again? What if he tells his folks and they...” He turned his gaze to his feet. “They’re my family now, too. The only one I’ve got.”

Cal stepped forward, closing in on Ryan. His fingers danced over the side of Ryan’s face, then he leaned in and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Emotions flowed across the connection, a tangle of them, fear the most prominent. Cal understood—losing another family would all but break Ryan. Didn’t mean he agreed with giving into the fear, but that wasn’t his choice to make.

“Don’t worry about it,” he whispered, stepping back.

“Fuck that,” Ryan growled. He lunged forward and Cal’s back slammed into the door. He had no time to protest, hardly any time to breathe, before Ryan was on him, kissing him fiercely. Desperately.

Want. Need. Desire. It all thundered across the skin-to-skin connection, the emotions seeping into Cal’s body until he couldn’t tell the difference between Ryan’s feelings and his own. Ryan’s tongue swept inside his lips, more a sword strike than a dance, slicing through whatever breath he managed to steal. His knees weakened just as Ryan turned his attention to Cal’s jaw, nipping and biting along the rough surface.

“Can’t stop thinking about you. Can’t stop wanting you.”

The truth of the words slammed into Cal. He’d never doubted that Ryan felt something for him, something strong. Something that frightened him. That had been clear from that first kiss.

Ryan's hand slipped past the waistband of Cal's pajama pants, and Cal hissed as the cool palm encircled his more than half-hard cock. It was so good, the connection just as perfect as last night—if he ignored how it had all ended, or how accusing Ryan had been a few minutes before.

Cal failed to keep his hips still, pushing his dick through Ryan's firm grip. "I want more," he breathed. Not just sex. Not just getting off.

Ryan didn't pretend to misinterpret his words. "I know. God, I know." Ryan's frenzy slowed. He pressed a kiss to Cal's neck, just under his ear, then tucked his nose there. Cal's arms wrapped around him, loosely, and despite the turmoil flowing across the connection from Ryan, he never wanted to let him go.

Ryan's hand kept moving, chasing thoughts out of Cal's head, leaving only sensation behind. The climb to his peak was happening—hard, fast, undeniable—but he didn't want to go alone. Cal gathered enough brain power to fumble Ryan's jeans open and sneak a hand into the other man's boxer briefs.

Hot, searing silk. That's what Ryan felt like. His tip was already wet, leaking with need, and it spurred Cal's lust even higher. He tucked his face into Ryan's neck. Their hips drove together, their rhythm instinctive.

"Cal. Oh, God, Cal..."

Ryan lost it first, warmth exploding over Cal's hand. The scent of sweat and cum, the feel of it, was enough to push Cal over the edge. His teeth latched onto Ryan's neck as he battled back his urge to shout—Drew really didn't need to be woken up like this. After a few moments, his hips stilled, though his breath—and Ryan's—still sounded harsh in the quiet night, as though they'd been running a sprint together.

They had, in a way.

The embrace couldn't last, not with so much unsettled between them. Ryan straightened and stepped back, flushed, still panting. His gaze met Cal's—not that Ryan could see much in the faint light exuding from the security lamp near the bar. Even with Cal's enhanced vision, Ryan's eyes were dark and all but unfathomable.

"Come to lunch."

Cal blinked, sure he'd misheard. "What?"

"Come to lunch." Ryan smiled, a small, wavering thing.

“Are you sure?” Cal reached out with his clean hand, brushing fingertips along Ryan’s cheek. He felt his uncertainty—but also his determination.

“No. But...” Ryan leaned forward again, resting his head on Cal’s shoulder. He inhaled, the breath shuddering into his lungs with enough force to shake his body. “I’m not a coward. I need to remember that. Even if you and I don’t work—I need to remember that this isn’t the hardest fight I’ve had.”

He grew quiet, and Cal gave into the urge to tighten his arms around this man as he battled himself. The hardest battle of them all.

Sunday, June 28, 6:08 p.m.

Cal looked up as Drew returned to the living room, mop and bucket in his hands. “Bedrooms are officially done,” the cop reported, heading for the kitchen sink.

“Thanks, man. I—” Cal tried to hold in a sneeze, but it escaped.

“Bless you.”

That was a response Cal had never quite understood, but pondering it wouldn’t get the second guest cottage cleaned any quicker. He gave Drew a smile and turned back to the dusting. “Appreciate the help. I don’t think I would’ve been able to get this place ready in time without you.”

Drew shrugged. “Least I could do. Any word from Ryan?”

Cal shook his head and stowed the bag in the corner of the room. “Last I heard, they’d just left White Sands.”

He and Ryan had been waiting in the empty, echoing main room of the Vanishing Point for his brother-in-law to arrive—he’d been late enough that Ryan started getting antsy, pacing back and forth—when he’d received the text about Kerr’s car trouble. He’d had problems with it before he left, causing him to miss the midmorning ferry. Kerr had thought he’d fixed the issue, but it was a fix that lasted only long enough for the car to stagger off the ferry at the White Sands dock and promptly die. Nothing he did could resurrect it, and since it was Sunday, there were no garages open to help him out. Once he’d exhausted all avenues, Kerr had called Ryan for a ride, and Ryan had offered him use of the guest cottage for as long as he needed it.

Which hadn’t been cleaned since last summer. Cue frenzied, one-man scouring of dirt—until Drew had stuck his head past the front door to see what was up.

“So are you and Ryan...” Drew left the sentence hanging as he dumped the bucket of dirty water into the sink.

Cal waited for the splashing to subside before he answered. “I don’t know.”

“Complicated, huh.”

There was an understatement. “Yeah.”

“Cause of Garrett?”

“Yeah.” He dusted in silence for a few moments. “You don’t have a problem with—”

“No, man. Number one, what anyone does in their bedroom is no business of mine... as long as it’s between consenting adults, right? And two, I fly the rainbow flag myself.” He grinned, an expression that quickly faded. “Just, you know, quietly.”

Rainbow—Oh, right. The symbol of sexuality that fell outside heteronormative boundaries.

“So you’re in the—” What was the term? “Cupboard?”

“Cupboard? Oh, you mean closet. Yeah, no. I’m out. But I don’t flaunt it. My rights are protected by the law and the union, but there’s a fine line between other cops knowing I’m gay and me shoving it in their faces.”

“There is?”

“Sure. Easier to ignore when I’m quiet.”

Cal gave up all pretense of dusting. “But why does it need to be ignored? It’s who you are. It shouldn’t even be a topic, let alone an issue.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.”

Okay, he’d never heard that saying before. “What?”

Drew sighed. “Religion, eh? That’s why I’m here and not at Jeff’s—my brother’s—” He cleared his throat. “At his funeral. He was very religious, something he picked up from his wife’s family. Born-again.”

Before Cal could ask what that term meant—resurrected?—a car door slammed outside. The cop checked the window. “They’re here. Go ahead, I’ll finish up, put stuff away.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” Drew gave him a small smile. “Hey, Cal... thanks. For yesterday. I mean it.”

“Anytime.”

Cal stepped out of the cottage and jogged down the steps toward the parking area behind the bar. Shadows had lengthened as the sun dipped toward the horizon. The heat of the day had waned, giving way to cooler breezes coming off the water. It would be a pleasant night to sit outside with good barbequed food and a beer. If Ryan still wanted him to join them. Maybe—

Cal registered the silence, the utter lack of bird noises, an instant before his body reacted. He ducked sideways, and the shot that would've caught him in the head slammed into and through his left shoulder instead. The power of it tossed him to the ground like a broken reed. He lay there on his back, gasping, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

"What the fuck? Cal?"

Another shot pinged off the gravel path, jerking Cal back to himself. He lifted his head—which was much heavier than he remembered—and scowled at Ryan. "Get in the bar!"

The angle of Ryan's truck would make it difficult for the shooter to get a clear scope on him and Kerr. Not that he seemed all that interested in firing at the civilians. *Psh, civilians. You're a civilian too, you idiot.* If he could get back in the cottage... He started scooting back, only to have another bullet take a chunk out of the front porch.

"Holy shit!" Drew darted out of the cottage and ducked down beside Cal. He wasted no time in evaluating Cal's injury—stopping the bleeding could wait until they were out of the line of fire. He scooped Cal's good arm around his neck and started back for the cottage, only to have his process halted by another shot.

"Forward," Cal gasped. "Use the truck for cover. Go!"

He struggled to keep his feet under him as Drew ran forward. More shots ricocheted off the gravel walkway, but Drew kept them moving, never hesitating. They paused only when they were at the front fender of the truck.

"Still with me, Cal?"

The "sure" Cal meant to say came out as a groan. Blinking, he refocused. "Yeah."

"One more sprint." Turning to the bar, Drew shouted, "Ryan! Coming in!"

If Ryan didn't hear that shout, or if the door was locked, they were going to be squatting ducks. Wait. No. That saying wasn't quite—

"Let's go!"

Drew lurched forward. It was all Cal could do not to stumble. His legs didn't want to work, his brain was getting fuzzy, and the air seemed a lot colder than it had a few minutes ago. The closed door got closer, closer—then, at the last second, it opened. Drew rushed through, tugging Cal along with him.

“Get me towels!” Drew shouted. He laid Cal gently on the floor, then looked up. Cal watched, his vision fading out, then slowly fading back in as the nanites in his blood worked as hard as they could to stabilize his system.

“Cal! Cal!” Ryan was leaning over him now, too, bar towels in hand.

“Dizzy view,” Cal told him.

“You’re dizzy?”

“Yes. No... you know, when you’ve seen something before?”

“Déjà vu?” Ryan, pale, turned to Drew. “How much blood has he lost?”

“Enough.” Drew sounded grim as he pressed one of the towels to the back of Cal’s shoulder. “It’s a through-and-through. Need some scissors to get the shirt off. And a blanket for shock.”

Kerr scrambled to get what was needed. Cal caught a glimpse of the younger man’s pale face as he raced for the back room.

“And orange juice,” Cal called after him.

Drew shook his head. “No way. If you’re thirsty, water—”

“Need sugar.” Energy, calories. For small wounds, the nanites would use whatever energy his body already had stored. But for one like this? They’d eat through his fat and start cannibalizing his muscle.

“You don’t need sugar. Jesus.”

Drew kept pressure on both sides of his shoulder as Kerr returned with the scissors and blanket. Cal didn’t know why Ryan kept a blanket in the back room—maybe in case his office got chilly? Ryan draped the fabric over his lower body, then started cutting Cal’s shirt.

“Kerr, call nine-one-one,” Drew ordered. “Tell them—”

“*Cailad kar Natoth!*”

The voice emanated from Cal’s subdermal computer, waking up the holographic interface that hovered over the inside of his left wrist. Without the matching earpiece, which he’d lost somewhere after getting thrown into a life pod, the transmission boomed through the bar like the speaker was right there.

It was a bass line from Cal’s worst nightmares. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“What the hell kind of language is that?” Kerr demanded, his voice shaking.

“Mine.” Cal took a deep breath, and brushed his fingers across the holo. “*Fuck off, Dezoldii*,” he said, the aryuhn words foreign after so many months speaking English.

Rumbling chuckles reverberated through the connection. “*You were supposed to die, Cailad. You always were a pain in the ass.*”

Cal drew a breath to say something else, but a firm hand on his chest stalled his words. “Enough,” Drew said. “Don’t antagonize the person with a high-powered rifle. Did someone call—”

“What the hell?” Ryan had finally managed to get his shirt cut away, and froze, staring at Cal’s shoulder wound. Cal risked looking down, but couldn’t see much because of the angle. “This is... the bleeding’s stopped. Shit, lift him up.” Drew helped roll Cal to one side so Ryan could examine the exit wound—which he did, with trembling fingers. “Okay, I’m no doctor but... isn’t it supposed to look a lot worse than this?”

“Let me see.”

Cal let his eyes close as Drew leaned in to get a better look too.

“Damn,” Drew breathed. “What are you?”

Ryan hadn’t moved, his hands still touching Cal’s skin, gentle emotions flowing across the connection. Confusion, worry, and a bit of fear—but that last wasn’t directed at Cal. Drew, on the other hand, hovered, brows lowered, like he thought Cal was going to jump up and... do something. Something awful.

Gods, his brain was getting slower.

“I really do need sugar. Please.”

“Kerr, get him some orange juice.”

“Ryan—”

“Do it!”

Cal’s sigh was filled with gratitude. “Thanks. Drew, no cops. She’ll fire them.” No... wrong word. “Kill. Kill them.”

“Wait... that voice... that was female?”

Explaining that aryuhn displayed few external differences between male and female was beyond Cal at the moment. He couldn’t quite form the words—English was getting more difficult.

“Who is she?” Drew said, his expression grim.

“An asshole.”

“Cal...”

The appearance of a glass of orange juice delayed any answer Cal might have made. With Ryan’s help, he sat up, ignoring the burning pain in his shoulder, and sucked back the drink like it was the nectar of life. Might as well be. The gnawing in his gut that he’d barely been aware of under his shoulder’s agony eased after a couple of minutes, and he let out a shaky sigh. His brain started working again, too. Mostly. Though things still seemed slow.

“Her name is Dezoldii ni Hyratha. She was my partner.”

Ryan’s eyebrows rose. “As in—”

“I told you I was a cop.”

“Where?” Drew demanded. “What jurisdiction?”

“Nothing local,” Cal said, lips quirking. “Sergeant Cailad kar Natoth of the InterSystems Security Forces’ Tenth Platoon, at your service. I’d salute, but...”

Drew stared at him for a handful of heartbeats, then lurched back. “I’m calling for backup.”

“Don’t. Please.”

“You’re going to lie there and joke, while we’ve got an asshole with a high-powered rifle on the loose—”

“Stop! Both of you.” Ryan glared at Cal, then turned his glowering expression to Drew. “It looks like he was shot a week ago, and he’s got a fucking holographic *something* on his wrist. You saw it, Drew.”

“I—”

“Can we not argue about this?” Kerr said. The freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose stood out in stark relief against the pallor of his skin. “This... this De-Soldy is still out there!”

“Dezoldii,” Cal corrected. “And she won’t approach until it’s full dark. Her kind prefers the shadows.”

“H-her kind?” Kerr looked like he was about to piss himself.

“You expect me to believe you’re an alien?” Drew growled. “You look human!”

“Oh, I am human, though we call ourselves gaeclae. We’re from Earth, originally.” Cal smacked his lips. “I could use some more orange juice.”

Ryan waved at Kerr to refill the glass. “If you’re from Earth...”

“No. *I’m* not. My ancestors were. Short version of the story is that the aryuhn visited—you’d call them aliens—and my ancestors were among those humans who chose to leave with them. The first gaeclae.”

“So you’re human... but you’re not.” Ryan frowned, like he was trying to get it straight in his head.

“Essentially.”

“But you speak English,” Drew pointed out as Kerr returned and handed over a second glass of orange juice.

“Not perfectly,” Ryan said. “He messes up sayings all the time.”

“I think I’m doing pretty good for only speaking English for a year,” Cal grumbled.

Drew crossed his arms. “Out with it. Whole story.”

After drinking half the orange juice, Cal obliged. He told them about Dez’s corruption and betrayal and how he’d ended up in the ocean off the coast of PEI—leaving out the fear he’d felt, the panic and the terror as he’d woken up on his plummet to Earth. “I’ve been waiting for rescue, but as the months passed, I realized that Dez had probably told everyone I was dead—though gods knows what details she would’ve given. Doesn’t matter.” Cal downed the last of the juice. “I don’t know why she’d show up now—oh, fuck, yes I do.” He groaned.

“What?” Ryan asked, leaning closer. “Are you hurting?”

“No. I turned off the transponder. If she’d been monitoring it, having it turn off before it was supposed to would be a sign I wasn’t dead. Or that the life pod had been found. She’d have to check it out. And when she got close enough, it’d be easy to pick up my signal. Fuck!” Cal thunked his head back against the bar, where Ryan had helped him move as he’d told his story. “So stupid. I didn’t think anyone was listening.”

“I can’t even—” Drew pressed his fingers into his eyes. “So we’ve got until sundown?”

Cal shook his head. “Full dark.”

Ryan checked his phone. “That’ll be about nine. A couple of hours.” Idly, he brushed a strand of hair away from Cal’s forehead. “How are you doing?”

“Feel a little out of it,” Cal admitted. Not surprising, considering how hard his nanites were working to heal him.

A strangled chuckle escaped Ryan. “He gets shot, just about bleeds out all over my floor, and he ‘feels a little out of it.’”

“I’m sorry.” Cal’s eyelids felt like they each weighed ten pounds. Now that his story had come out, his body was eager to shut down.

“Dammit, you do *not* get to pass out until you tell me how the hell I’m going to protect the three of you!” Drew growled.

Cal blinked, each eye operating independently. Right. He couldn’t abandon them, no matter how desperately his body begged for rest. “Bright light. It’s hard on her eyes. Turn on all the interior and exterior lights, make sure the spotlights by the backdoor are on.”

Drew glanced up at Kerr, who nodded. “On it.”

“What else?”

Cal stared at Drew, wracking his brain. All the lights in the bar’s main room flickered to life. “I don’t know.”

Drew gritted his teeth, glaring. “There’s got to be something.”

If he had a weapon—if any of them did—Cal might be able to take Dez by surprise. His targeting enhancement was still functional, which would make a sniper shot easy, regardless of the weapon. But it was a moot point. So that left what? The lights would disorient Dez, maybe discourage her, but they wouldn’t stop her. She’d want up-close confirmation that Cal was dead this time. Come full dark, they’d have minutes before Dez stormed the bar.

Ryan would be in danger.

Unacceptable.

“Let me sleep. An hour. Then I’ll lure her away.”

“The *fuck* you will!” Ryan tucked the blanket more securely around Cal’s chest, studiously not looking at his face. “No.”

“Ryan—”

“I said no!”

Cal grabbed Ryan's wrist in his good hand and squeezed hard enough to get the other man's attention. "As soon as it's dark out, we're squatting ducks in here."

"Sitting. Sitting ducks."

Right. That was the saying. "My point is that she doesn't want any of you. She's just tidying up loose ends. If I run, she'll follow and leave all of you alone. You'll be safe."

"So you lure her away. Then what?" Ryan crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels.

Cal kept his mouth shut instead of admitting he didn't know. His thoughts continued to chug along at a glacial pace, but even if he wasn't wounded, he didn't know if he'd be able to come up with a solution. "Something will come to me."

"Not good enough!" Ryan's arms tightened, like he was hugging himself. "I can't... not again, do you understand?" Finally he lifted his gaze to meet Cal's.

Unbidden, Cal reached out, needing to feel the emotions in Ryan's eyes as well as see them. His fingers brushed over Ryan's hand and energy slammed into him. Pain. So much pain. Remembered pain, new pain, all emotional. Memories of old heartache, new heartache starting to blossom. Regret. *Regret-regret-regret.*

"You were right," Ryan whispered. "I'm such a fucking coward."

"It's okay."

"It's not. When I heard that shot, when I saw you fall—" His breath caught. "Garrett is gone. He's never coming back. But I'm here, and you're here, and we both deserve to live a complete life. Not this partial one, where I'm half living in the past and behind a shield of memories." He stopped. "If... if you still..."

If he still wanted. Gods, *yes*. He pulled one of Ryan's hands away from his chest, and wove their fingers together. Concentrating, he turned his emotion-sensing ability around, pushing his feelings at Ryan. The other man didn't react at first—then he gasped, his eyes widening.

"Is that... what *is* that?"

"Energy. All our thoughts, all our emotions, are just sparks of electricity. I can sense those. I can share them." He yawned, his eyes drifting shut again.

“You’re so tired.”

“Need sleep.”

Cal barely registered Ryan’s gentle hands guiding him to lie on the floor.
“Sleep. I’ll wake you.”

“An hour. No more.”

“I know.” Fingers stroked his brow.

“Kay.” Secure in the knowledge that Drew would watch out for Ryan and Kerr, Cal let himself drift away.

Sunday, June 28, 8:37 p.m.

About ninety minutes later, Cal stood at the bar's backdoor, Drew hovering at his side. Ryan watched them from the table where he sat with Kerr, trying to keep the younger man calm—until another almost-panic attack threatened to steal Kerr's breath. Dude was definitely not an adrenaline junkie.

Ryan, on the other hand, seemed to be handling the ups and downs pretty well. Though maybe the shock of finding out Cal wasn't technically fully human—and realizing he'd slept with him—was enough of an insulating blanket to keep reality at bay.

"You sure this is the best plan?" Drew asked, quietly enough that his voice didn't carry across the empty bar.

"Better than waiting."

"But your shoulder—"

Cal flexed it, grimacing. The nanites were still working hard, but it was an extensive wound. "It'll do."

It had to. Waiting for Dez to kick in the door wasn't an option.

"I hope you've got some freaky alien tricks up your sleeve."

Cal looked down at his bare arms, then realized it was a saying—another one he'd never quite understood. Not that it mattered now. "A few." Though Dez would know just about all of them.

As much as he tried to ignore it, there was a very good chance—an almost certain chance—that this was it. The last time he'd set foot in the Vanishing Point, the last time he'd see Drew. The last time he'd lay eyes on Ryan.

Ryan shoved his chair back as though that thought pulled him to his feet. Cal held his breath as the other man rushed over, his fluffy auburn hair catching the bright lights of the bar, his beard glinting, too, the worry in his light-blue eyes impossible to miss. Rather than stopping when he got close, Ryan just kept on coming, a force of nature—pausing only when his fingers were threaded through Cal's hair and their lips sealed together.

This. *This* was what Cal had wanted, always. A connection, an almost tangible connection with another person. Emotions, unfettered and true, skittering across his skin, echoing his own, making them stronger. This was what he'd hoped to find with Ryan.

And now that he had—

A whimper left him as he pulled back, separating his lips and tongue from Ryan's. Horror raced through him as it struck him, hard, what he was about to do. He didn't want to lose this, now that he'd found it.

Gods, why do you torture me so?

Ryan's thumbs and fingers gripped his skull as if they belonged there, and he leaned his forehead against Cal's, breathing heavily. "Come back," he said, his voice desperate and commanding at the same time.

Cal didn't say anything. Any assurance he might offer could be a lie, and he wouldn't do that to Ryan. Not again, not when all the lies between them had been obliterated. Instead, he offered the only thing he could, whispering, "I love you."

"I thought you wanted to leave?"

"I wanted to find *this*," Cal breathed. "Why would I leave if you're offering it?"

Ryan pressed a hard, fleeting kiss to Cal's lips, then pushed away. The contact wasn't much, but enough to know that Ryan felt the same. Cal knew too well that sometimes words wouldn't come, even if the foundation was there.

"Go. Do what you have to do."

Cal nodded, then caught Drew's eye. "You'll look after them?"

He grunted, as though Cal was stupid for even asking. Maybe he was.

Stomach clenched, shoulder burning, he opened up the door and ran.

Darkness gave the landscape a layer of obscurity, but Cal had learned the patterns of his surroundings long ago. The two cottages hunkered in the gloom a few dozen meters away; Ryan's house, a larger silhouette, was tucked back into the trees. Leaves rustled and the ocean grumbled gently, an old man who could be stirred into a roar with the slightest provocation. The tang of salt tickled Cal's nose—familiar, welcome. He could almost convince himself that he was jogging down to the shore for his nightly communion with the stars.

"Cailad!"

His name thundered through the darkness—no comms this time, only Dez's fury. Cal adopted a zigzag path, praying it would buy him a bit more time. A shot pinged off the gravel. Another hit the edge of the cottage as Cal angled around it.

Then, finally, he heard heavy feet pounding the ground behind him. Another familiar sound—how often had they played out a training scenario where the little gaeclae had to evade the aryuhn? His enhanced senses might mean Cal wasn't easy prey, but he wasn't an evolved predator like his partner, either. Those training exercises had been fun, challenging for both him and Dez, and afterwards, there had been celebrations and laughter—no matter who had succeeded.

They'd been *friends*.

Cal stumbled, the emotional pain ricocheting through his gut almost strong enough to mask the burn in his shoulder. He scrambled to recapture his balance, his arms flailing, but he went down hard, skidding to a stop in the grass. The impact jarred his shoulder, but his internal systems reported no further damage. He dug his fingers into the moist ground to find purchase to get back up—only to gasp when a large hand encircled the nape of his neck. He found himself hoisted up, shaken. Another hand repositioned him so he could look down at his former friend.

After being surrounded by humanity and only humanity for the past year, Dez looked *alien*. She stood easily half again as tall as Cal, and half again as broad, her arms as thick as some of the younger trees around Ryan's house. Sinewy muscle covered her thick, long neck, reaching upward to the ears that stood upright, constantly swiveling to take in all the odd sounds around her. The lips of her long snout pulled back, revealing sharp, predatory teeth that Cal had once been used to seeing and had once trusted would never be used to tear into his delicate skin.

He no longer had such delusions, not when Dez's hand grasped his throat with just this side of enough pressure to crush his larynx.

"Cailad." The name escaped on a snarl.

Cal didn't give his ex-partner the satisfaction of struggling against her. He wasn't about to give up, but resisting now would be a waste of energy. "Dez," he rasped.

Black eyes glittered at him. "Stubborn fool," she said in aryuhn.

"Do my best."

Dez shook him, eliciting a gasp from Cal. "Why didn't you keep your mouth shut?"

Because I wanted you to laugh at me and say I was ridiculous for even thinking such a thing. Because I didn't want to be right.

Saying that would just be ripping open old wounds, so he asked the question that had haunted him for a year. “Why didn’t you just kill me on the ship?”

Dez’s grip loosened slightly. “I couldn’t.”

“But you can hunt me down a year later and shoot me?”

“There’s noise about an official investigation. The ISSF has been asking questions about me.” Dez’s eyes narrowed. “And you. And then your transponder went silent early.”

“So you decided to come see if I’d been picked up and if I hadn’t—” Cal jerked in Dez’s hold, a movement he couldn’t stop even as he recognized its futility. “We were friends! Partners! Why didn’t you bring me in at the start? Why—”

The hand around Cal’s neck tightened as Dez leaned in. “Because you are *gaeclae*,” she spat. “Inferior. I had to be partnered with you—regulations. I made the best of it. But to invite your cooperation beyond work duties?”

The bottom fell out of Cal’s stomach. How could he have misread things so thoroughly? He’d known Dez had not been impressed with his physical capabilities—few aryuhn thought much of *gaeclae* in that respect—but he’d believed that he’d made up for any such weakness with his mind, his analytical capabilities, his emotional control. He’d been a damned good cop.

“Fuck you,” he rasped in English.

“Interesting language. This planet has changed you. Your emotional control is shredded. I could feel you almost from the moment I stepped off my ship.” Dez made a disapproving sound. “You would never have been accepted into the ISSF if they knew this sort of turmoil existed within you.”

This turmoil only exists because of what you did! Air was getting short, though, so he didn’t try to throw the accusation at Dez verbally.

“Hey, asshole!”

Cal barely had time to register the shout before Dez’s head jerked sideways. The aryuhn growled, a low, menacing sound, and turned toward her assailant.

Ryan. Reaching down for another rock.

Moron. Idiot. Why was he still here? Why hadn’t he run?

He needed to distract Dez from visiting retribution on the human who dared attack her. Drawing back his arm, Cal slammed it forward into the sensitive

spot at the end of Dez's snout, a weak spot all aryuhn had. Dez howled and let go, her hands reaching for her abused nose.

Cal sagged as his feet touched the ground again and waved a hand at Ryan. "Go!"

"I will tear your skin off in strips," Dez growled, her eyes watering.

"Got to catch me first."

Cal took off toward the water. He wasn't sure where Ryan, Drew, and Kerr had gone—or why the hell Drew had let Ryan come after him, something to discuss with the cop later—but he was pretty sure they wouldn't have sought any sort of refuge in the ocean. And maybe...

Maybe it would offer safety.

When he'd first landed on Earth, he hadn't been able to swim—it had been pure luck that he'd made it to shore. In the months since, Ryan had shown him the basics. He wasn't even close to being a strong swimmer, but he could keep his head above water.

That was more than Dez could do. Like Cal, she'd spent most of her life off-planet. She'd had no need to learn how to even dog paddle.

"Finally, a fucking plan," he muttered. He called up his subdermal computer with a dummy interface and pitched his voice loud enough that the aryuhn chasing him would pick it up. "Don't ask how I managed to connect with your phone, just listen! I'm going to head out to my life pod, grab the power source. I can rig it to be a bomb and take out her ship. Keep your distance and don't argue with me!"

Dez wouldn't understand the words, but she'd grasp the emotions Cal had concentrated beneath them: refuge, rescue, *bomb*.

Almost on cue, Dez roared behind him. Cal poured on more speed, thankful adrenaline was taking care of any pain in his shoulder or his neck. He needed to make it to the water. Dez needed to follow him in. And then—

The surf had just licked his toes when something slammed into his back. The sensation of getting shot was starting to be too damned familiar. Cal stumbled forward but caught himself, concentrating on staying in motion. Forward motion. He had an end goal in his line of sight—he wouldn't lose now. He'd barely taken three steps before another shot almost jolted him off his feet. Adrenaline surged. He'd known that this was a risk, that until his body was

covered by the water he was an easy target, but it didn't matter now. Deeper into the water he went, not feeling the chill inherent in the North Atlantic even with summer underway, not feeling any pain at all. He had a purpose and he'd be damned if he failed. When the water was deep enough for him to swim, he dove forward.

"Cailad!" Dez's cry was filled with frustration, but moments later, Cal heard the first heavy splashes of something large and ungainly pursuing him.

It took a lifetime for Dez to reach the deeper, darker water. Cal didn't know how far down the ocean's floor was, only that he couldn't feel it. He kept only his nose above the surface, sucking in air while presenting a tiny, unnoticeable target, and waited for Dez to come closer. Waited for his chance.

Dez flailed into his reach and he didn't hesitate. He leaped, pushing her under the water. All of his strength, all of his weight, went into shoving the aryhnn down as far as he could. Dez struggled, trying to push him off, but Cal planted his feet on Dez's shoulders, and speared his fingers into her upright ears, forcing her down. Down, down, down. He grabbed a breath when he could, when Dez managed to struggle upward, but at this point, air didn't matter. Air was secondary to his goal.

Finally, she just... stopped. Stopped struggling, stopped moving, just sagged. Cal's head spun. Pushing off her shoulders, he launched himself at the surface. Air caressed the top of his head and he sucked in a lungful before sinking again. Dez's body was long gone, invisible in the deep, no longer a convenient stepping stool. There was nothing under Cal but water, and he didn't have the strength to kick or move his arms. Moonlight twinkled through the waves only a foot or so above him—not far. Not far at all.

Might as well have been a light year.

Tuesday, June 30, 3:21 a.m.

Beeping. Beeping was never good in space.

“Alarm,” Cal said, struggling to work his way back to wakefulness. “Dez, alarm.”

No... he didn’t want Dez near him. He had to get away from Dez, he had to—

“Shh, I’ve got you.”

The hand that gripped his was not his partner’s. It was too small, too soft, the touch too full of emotion. The feelings swept over him in a wave, an indistinguishable rush—something that should have frightened him, because to show that much emotion could get both him and his unseen hand-holder into a lot of trouble. But, strangely, it felt right. Safe. And it gave him the strength to open his eyes.

Auburn hair that looked almost brown in the low light. Cal blinked at the man, trying to force his scattered thoughts into some pattern that made sense. He knew him. He knew he knew him, but his brain was so tired...

Pale-blue eyes darkened with concern and the lines around his mouth deepened. “Cal?”

“You hit her with a rock.” With that unbidden sentence, everything came flooding back. Everything. The beeping that had awoken him sped up as Cal stared at Ryan, memories and remembered fear swamping him. “Ryan. Gods, Ryan.”

He rose to press a kiss to Cal’s forehead. Cal didn’t realize he was trembling until Ryan’s arms tightened gently around him. “It’s okay. We’re all okay.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Ryan whispered in his ear. “You saved us.”

“I brought this on you.”

“And you saved us. Shh.” He brushed a strand of Cal’s hair off his forehead. “I’m just glad you’re back with us, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. Not a term he’d ever heard before, but he liked it.

“How?” He wanted to know, but his eyes were starting to close again. The beeping had calmed, settling into a soothing rhythm.

“Later.” Ryan started to ease away, but Cal’s fingers tightened. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’ll be right here when you wake up again.”

With that reassurance, Cal relaxed and let himself go.

Tuesday, June 30, 12:03 p.m.

Cal was entertaining Ryan with his efforts to spoon Jell-O to his mouth with shaky hands when Drew and Kerr walked in. He was sitting up and eating—both good signs of progress—but he felt as weak as a kitten, the spoon far heavier than it should be.

Still, according to the doctor who'd made his rounds earlier that morning, Cal should be thankful—and he was. He'd taken two shots to the back and, essentially, drowned. If Ryan hadn't seen the disturbance in the water where he'd been struggling with Dez, if he hadn't sprinted out into the ocean to drag him back to shore, and if he hadn't known CPR... if Cal hadn't had nanites struggling to keep him alive.

That was something the doctor didn't know, of course, given the undetectability of his onboard helpers. Though, given how slowly he was healing—for him—Cal was willing to bet most of his nanites had bled out of him.

"Look who's awake!" Drew smiled, the wide grin transforming his serious face. He wore his uniform, a light-grey button-down shirt with RCMP crests on the arms and black pants with a distinctive yellow stripe down each leg. His hat was tucked under one arm. "How are you doing?"

At the last second, Cal remembered not to shrug. It hurt like hell. "All right."

"He's grumpy," Ryan reported from his seat beside the bed. "No more super-healing."

"Ah." Drew hitched himself up onto the end of the bed and nodded at Kerr to close the door. "Did you tell him?" he asked Ryan.

Ryan shook his head.

"Tell me what?" Cal returned the spoon to the container. His arms were too tired to keep eating anyway.

"We found her ship."

"How the hell—" ISSF ships were coded for covert landings, which meant they camouflaged themselves, both electronically and visually. For someone to find it without ISSF tech to guide them...

Kerr shrugged. “I might not come visit much anymore, but I know my brother’s land. It was in the trees, behind the house.”

“Damn.”

“And get this—Mr. Brilliant here figured out how to work the ship’s computer-printer thing.” Drew handed over an envelope he’d been carrying. “Look, we *found*”—he made quote motions—“your health card, your driver’s licence, everything.”

Ryan took the envelope and upended it, spilling out the documentation onto Cal’s lap. Not only a provincial health card and driver’s licence, but a social insurance number, a passport, a birth certificate—everything he could possibly need to settle on Earth with few questions. Handy ISSF capability, counterfeiting documents—not that anyone would ever be able to tell the difference.

“They look just like the real thing,” Ryan whispered, holding up the passport so the holographic strip caught the light. “Shitty pictures and all.”

Yeah, the pictures sucked, but they couldn’t hold Cal’s attention. “Is the ship gone?”

Drew frowned. “Yeah, how’d you—”

“Standard procedure. After twenty-four hours with no contact with the pilot, it should have launched and headed home.” In fact, it shouldn’t have let either Drew or Kerr on board. Why had it? His gut clenched at the thought that maybe, just maybe, part of Dez had wondered if she wouldn’t survive their confrontation and kept the ship open as an apology. If Cal hadn’t been so injured, he could’ve found the ship himself and overridden the ship’s protocols. It could have been his way back to everything familiar—the job he loved, the society he knew.

Home. He slouched back against his pillows.

Drew grabbed his toe beneath the sheet, wiggling it. “We’ll get out of your hair. I’m taking Kerr to the ferry.”

Kerr stepped forward, looking less pale than he had when they’d been under siege, but still nervous. “Cal... I wanted to say thanks. You saved us.”

Cal nodded, not sure if he could speak.

“And Ryan told me... well, he didn’t have to tell me, I saw how he was looking at you. I’m... happy about that,” he said, his voice more determined

than joyous, as though he wanted to be happy about the development but wasn't quite there yet. Cal could understand it. "It's time for you to move on, Ryan. Mom and Dad won't fault you for that. We'll talk, okay?"

Ryan rose to enfold his brother-in-law into a hug. When he spoke, his voice sounded thick. "Definitely. Yes. And we'll make sure your next visit is less exciting."

A strangled chuckle left Kerr's throat. "Please." He pulled away and looked at Cal. "You get better."

It sounded almost like a threat. Cal smiled sleepily. "Planning on it."

Cal let his eyes close but tracked the movement in the room by sound—Drew and Kerr leaving, Ryan starting to fiddle with the bed tray table thing so Cal could lower the head of the bed and stretch out for his nap.

"Would you have left with it?" Ryan asked after a minute.

Cal pulled himself away from the brink of sleep and blinked at him. "What?"

"The ship. I saw your expression at the mention of it." Ryan focused on the very important task of straightening the remainder of Cal's not-quite-liquid, not-quite-solid lunch.

"Two weeks ago? Maybe. But not now."

Ryan paused, everything about him just rolling to a stop. "No?" he breathed.

"I made my decision. And it was the right decision. Doesn't matter if I had a ride off this rock or not." Cal sighed. "Seeing Dez, hearing the shit she had to say to me... kind of woke me up. Back home, no matter how hard I worked or how good I was at my job, I was never going to be equal. That's... it's hard to face that. Gaeclae—humans—are emotional. Being here for the past year has shown me that emotions are not a weakness, not always. They're something to celebrate and seek out, not something to fear or hide."

"Wait..." Ryan narrowed his eyes. "Is this where the love of chick flicks comes from?"

Cal's lips twitched. "Maybe."

Ryan settled back into his chair and manipulated the controls on Cal's bed to lower it slightly. "You don't ever have to hide your emotions from me. You don't ever have to hide anything from me."

Another sigh left Cal, a happy one this time. “I know.”

Ryan threaded their fingers together, his emotions gentle, cradling. “And I won’t hide from you. Not anymore.” He leaned forward, brushing a kiss to Cal’s knuckles. “I love you.”

He’d known it—he could feel it whenever they touched, especially since he’d woken up early that morning. But to hear the words spoken, words Cal had never dreamed he’d hear, made his heart beat faster and his stomach jump with joy.

He cleared his throat, trying to dislodge the lump stuck there. “Does this mean you want to keep me?”

For an instant, he saw himself though Ryan’s eyes as he’d been a year ago—bedraggled, soaked to the bone, shivering and pathetic, curled against the back door of the Vanishing Point. He’d looked up as footsteps had approached, miserable beyond words, and had almost hoped for a quick death. Instead, he’d been met with kindness, compassion. Ryan’s memory conveyed his surprise—and an instant connection Cal had felt but hadn’t wanted to trust. Until recently.

“I’ve wanted to keep you from the moment I first saw you,” Ryan whispered.

Cal tugged on Ryan’s hand. “C’mere.” Shifting over, trying to muffle his grunts of pain, he made room on the bed. Ryan didn’t protest, just climbed up and stretched out. As Ryan’s arms surrounded him in a gentle embrace, Cal let down all his shields, allowing his emotions free rein. He knew when Ryan gasped softly that he felt them—and he didn’t pull away. He didn’t reject them. *Love you too*, he thought, pushing that energy at Ryan with all his might.

Ryan hugged him closer and Cal relaxed against him.

Home. He’d finally found it.

The End

Author Bio

Jenn's always been drawn to weird and wonderful stories, particularly those set between the stars, or juxtaposed with our normal, boring world, or... well, just about any of them, really. Her love of the written word prompted her to get a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of Ottawa, and she's spent the years since working in corporate and web communications—and dreaming up weird and wonderful stories of her own. A self-confessed geek, Jenn loves spending time in the worlds of video games, surfing her favorite websites, reading all the romance novels she can get her hands on, and accumulating an impressive collection of nerdy T-shirts. She currently lives outside of Ottawa, Ontario, with her husband, two kids, and her writing helper, Alenko the husky.

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